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"IN THE BLANK OF MERE POSSIBILITY":
LIMINAL TRANSFORMATIONS
IN THE POETRY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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Abstract

This thesis offers a new reading of Christina Rossetti's poetic texts which situates them within the context of liminality. I define liminality here as a site of ambiguity, change and unfulfilment between two states, whilst emphasising its potential for transformation and transgression. I examine multiple narratives – personal and communal, linear and cyclical, spatial and temporal – which emerge from Rossetti's complex texts, and highlight two major approaches used: layering and silencing. The range of works I analyse includes both famous and lesser known poems, secular and spiritual writing, from "Winter: My Secret" (1857) and "Goblin Market" (1859) to "The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children" (1865) and "Resurgam" (1883). With this wide range, I demonstrate that similar approaches are used throughout Rossetti's writing from her earliest poems to her later work.

I begin the thesis with a focus on the fragmentation of the poetic self into observer and observed and examine the power acquired by the speakers/protagonists through the distance and seclusion of the liminal space. This enables the liminal space to shape a new identity for the speakers/protagonists. In Rossetti's poetry, the liminal personae become defined by the space they inhabit, or are trapped in, on visual, physical, psychological and sound levels. This positioning helps them to acquire (or re-gain) personal history, memory and a voice.

I proceed to explore the conflict between the seen and the unseen, revelation and illusion, in Rossetti's work, paralleling this with photographic experiments by Lady Hawarden. This enables me to trace the use of the threshold in both poetic and visual languages. Rossetti's speakers are unable to cross this threshold yet they still struggle to gain control over the outside world.

From visual explorations I move on to consideration of sound and suggest that rhythm and rhyme function in the same way as Rossetti's use of tropes of sight/deprivation of sight. Rossetti introduces rhythmical lapses and repetitive constructions as a means of

controlling and shaping reality. Sound repetition subverts our expectations, while sound disruptions create negative spaces which serve as markers of the apocalyptic and the threshold. This idea of negative space is closely linked to the ideas of absence and unfulfilment and is pivotal in understanding Rossetti's poetry. I argue that Rossetti's theology is based on negation and that this is extended to her secular poems as well.

Christina Rossetti's poems are characterised by oppositions of absence and exuberant presence on all textual levels. In the final part of my thesis, I examine the transformation of the speaker's/narrator's self. I read the ideas of unfulfilment against the self-recognition of the speakers and show their inner splits and subsequent alienation. In this way, unnaming and silencing work as ways of defining the boundaries of the self through negation.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Westminster or any other institution.

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Introduction

Recognizing the affinity that exists between the notion of liminality as developed in the twentieth century, and Christina Rossetti's poetic practices, my thesis traces the various ways through which the poet creates the spaces of continuous transference, ambiguity and possibility characterized by unnaming and unfulfillment, from structural and organizational thresholds, to cognitive (walking/sleeping, seeing/ blindness) and imaginary (self and other, self and world). As a spatial and temporal construct, liminality is defined by two major characteristics: negation of previous order and repetition of the life cycle in the temporal and special setting that stands apart from reality (in rite of passage, an imaginary birth, death and rebirth). On the textual level, they are translated into silencing (conscious gaps, omissions or direct negations) and layering (exuberant repetitions). The liminal personae are characterised by silence and passivity that will be overcome once they are out of the liminal stage. Yet in Rossetti's texts liminality is the culmination point and the desired outcome rather a rite of passage. Her speakers are teetering on the margins, unwilling to cross it and addressing the reader from the threshold of their (un)homely space of enclosure. It leads to their fragmentation and unfulfillment, two key moments that define my reading of Rossetti's poetics.

The basic notion of liminality as a spiritual experience of an individual taken out from familiar setting and transferred onto the space devoid of structural or social characteristic comes from anthropology, where it refers to a specific passage through a transition state from separation to incorporation. It was first coined by the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in *The Rites of Passage* (1909), who described a universal tripartite rite of passage, widely used in any society. The three stages of each rite include the preliminal (rites of separation from the familiar world and loss of the old identity), the liminal (rites of transitional/marginal identity when the person undergoing the rite is not covered by any of the previous definitions) and the postliminal (rites of reincorporation). Van Gennep defines the liminal as a space in-between two socially accepted categories : "having crossed the threshold beyond one status or identity while not yet having crossed into another one, the initiate was neither here nor there; beyond

normal, everyday sociocultural categories, beyond normal conceptions of routine identity, and also the conceptions of behaviour, rule, time and space that accompanied identity.”¹

The fascination the term was met with was mostly due to its ambiguity and universality. It is both social and personal, familiar and escaping definitions that it can be useful in describing various experiences. But it wasn’t before Victor Turner published his own work that the term was accepted beyond the field of anthropology. Building upon the work of van Gennep, Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process* (1969) reworks and expands the definition of liminality and suggests that it is characterised by both transition and potentiality.² He describes in detail the processes that neophytes have to undergo in the liminal space, in particular how they lose all connections to their previous identity and status and reduced to *materia prima*. They find themselves shut out in the liminal space, where a spiritual transformation is initiated.. Their previous knowledge of the world is deconstructed into basic symbols to be reassembled again in order to reflect their new status .³ For the initiands liminality is a site of reflection and reconstruction where communicators of the new knowledge, often presented as monsters, startle them into re-thinking their relationships with the world and re-defining objects and persons around them. Another important term introduced by Turner deals with social bonding among the threshold personae. Having severed their ties with the real world, they form *communitas* through the shared experience in the liminal space, a bond that “has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.”⁴ Turner’s explanation stresses the sense of homogeneity and belonging among the threshold personae that stretches beyond social obligation and is strengthened through the ritual. This concept is useful in analysing the (re)construction of self in the liminal environment, and Rossetti’s theological ideas of unity of all Christians and the

¹Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 263.

²Although in his initial study of liminality Turner never approaches Christianity directly, one of his later works, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (1978), focuses on Christian pilgrimage as a liminoid phenomenon.

³See Victor Turner, *From Ritual to the Theatre: The Human Seriousness of the Play* (PAJ Publications, 1982).

⁴Ibid, p. 96.

Communion of Saints that “flows in one continuous stream from the one Fountain Head.”⁵

Popularized by Turner, the idea of liminality was quickly adopted into other fields of research. Relevant to any space in-between, it expresses the hesitation and the uncertainty, and thus, “creates a borderline experience that <...> breaks down the stereotomy of inside/outside” and “provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity”.⁶ It becomes useful whenever margins, boundaries or borders are implied to assess the changes imposed by them. As Bjorn Thomassen puts it, liminality organizes all systems that do not fit into the structure, “dissolving any fixity of position, dissolving the modern into permanent hybridity” and yet expresses “on one hand, a fear of liminal experiences as truly personality transforming events, on the other hand, a celebratory stance towards any kind of liminality.”⁷

A number of theories related to liminality provide a useful reference within the framework of this study, and here I summarize the main fields I engaged with. In psychology, psychiatry and related disciplines liminality is relevant to borderline mental states, be it personality disorder such as schizophrenia or Alzheimer’s disease or forms of self-identity or self-acceptance. The mechanism of a neurological disorder is similar to the liminal passage – it involves dissolution of social ties, fragmentation of perception, partial loss of memory and subsequent reconstruction of identity as I am going to discuss later. The state of altered consciousness, akin to liminal stage, is often induced by traumatic experiences and involves disruption of continuity of mental/physical abilities.

While trauma/ neurology deal with deconstruction of the Self and disruption of social ties (entrance into the liminal), psychoanalysis is often concerned with the mechanisms

⁵ Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*, second edition (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1893), pp. 209-210.

⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 294-206,

⁷ Bjorn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 6-7.

of (re)constructing one's identity. I decided not to include strictly Freudian readings as they have already been examined in detail by other critics, notably Jan Marsh (1995), but I use Lacan's theories as a starting point for my reading. Jacques Lacan explores the process of becoming human and constructs the fluid concept of an hommelette, a figure of self recognition and self-misrecognition that arises the moment a baby sees itself in the mirror.⁸ The concept explores the infantile oscillation between self, image and self-image in the mirroring process, and questions the stability and wholeness of self-identity, an approach similar to Rossetti's poetic deconstruction of self. I also address Lacan's explanation of 'fort-da' game⁹ as an instance of a split and objectification of self: it creates a space in-between here and there, possession and loss, useful in analyzing Rossetti's texts where the self is often objectified. If Lacan is concerned with self-acceptance, then Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, building upon Lacanian psychoanalysis, relates the experience of self-alienation, both processes being useful in my discussion of Rossetti's texts. The idea of the abject, transgressing and/or corrupting prohibitions and laws,¹⁰ explains the violent coexistence of the dead and the living in Rossetti's seasonal and apocalyptic texts.

The same violence is brought up in social studies related to gender, minority or marginality. Liminality is disclosed as a space of exclusion and silencing, and is notably used as a reference point in feminism and postcolonialism. For Homi Bhabha it is an expression of cultural hybridity, raising the discourse of borders and boundaries separating or joining races, genders and nationalities.¹¹ The colonizer and the colonized find themselves in the process of constant transgression of each other's boundaries, and new identities emerge on the borderline between the two zones. In this sense, Rossetti's speakers are in the state of cultural negotiation with the supernatural others in their quest of reversing the power balance between the watching and the watched and gaining control over their own gaze.

⁸ Jacques Lacan "The Mirror Stage" in Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman (eds), *Identity: A Reader* (London: Sage, 2000), pp. 44-50.

⁹ First mentioned by Sigmund Freud, it refers a game of throwing a reel played by his one-and-a-half-year-old grandson. The "fort" refers to throwing the reel away, the "da" to the act of bringing it back

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror: An Essay On Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 15.

¹¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, opus cit., p. 2.

The idea of liminality has also been applied to literary texts. It has been used as a methodological tool in post-colonial, modernist and fantasy studies.¹² Those texts seek to link liminality to modernist and postmodernist persona and fragmented perception of time that was able to emerge by breaking up with their perceived Victorian heritage and experimenting with new styles of writing. I suggest that Victorian poets, and Christina Rossetti in particular, embraced experiments with fragmentation of perception long before the modernists. There exist multiple ways to read Victorian poetry, with an emphasis on political or theological studies, gender or colonial, or even through the prism post-colonialism/ imperialism/ orientalism, post-Marxism and post-structuralism, or any other –ism that the researcher can come up with. Having said that, I must stress that the concept of liminality has never been applied to studying Christina Rossetti's texts, a gap that I want to map with my study.

In my research I will mainly relate to the idea of liminality as mapped out by Victor Turner, as I believe that he already gives us the necessary vocabulary and connections to address all the main issues of the state of in-betweenness. Turner's explanation of liminality as any space "betwixt and between" offers the simplest definition of the liminal space without overburdening it with critical allegiances that would be inappropriate in relation to nineteenth-century texts. It opens the ground for possible uses of the concept even beyond ideas, envisioned by Turner himself, and in this sense is more appropriate for my analysis.

My analysis is based on Turner's model of liminality in its anthropological and theological aspects, which provide a good starting point for bringing together various aspects of Rossetti's writing. I pay special attention to her devotional writing, that has recently become in the centre of attention of a number of critics who reclaim Rossetti's

¹² See, for example, Wanagari wa Nyateta-Waigwa, *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone-African Novel as Bildungsroman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996); Sandor Klapcsik, *Liminality in Fantastic Fiction: A Poststructuralist Approach* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2012); Hein Viljoen and Chris N. van der Merwe (eds), *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Subha Mukherji (ed), *Thinking on Thresholds: the Poetics of Transitive Spaces* (London: Anthem Press, 2011), Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: the Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

connections to Tractarian teachings.¹³ Meanwhile I would like to offer a new reading of her Christianity in the light of the concept of liminality. As John Schad writes in *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (2004), the nineteenth century offers a unique shift in the history of Christianity. Pushed aside and questioned by scientific discoveries, Christianity becomes “in some senses and in some instances, marginal and othered.”¹⁴ Its inherent possibilities of fantasy, unreason and eccentricity are highlighted as religion becomes the Other of secular modernity. This marginalizing of the spiritual allows us to bring together two sides of Rossetti’s work, the fancy of “Goblin Market” and the faith of *Faces of the Deep*.

Tracing apocalyptic motifs in Rossetti’s poetry, I approach the liminality of her texts as a space of non-identity and non-existence. Speakers of Rossetti’s poems lose their perception of Self and become beings that have no proper belonging. In this context they are similar to Homi Bhabha’s “the unhomely,” thus so many revenants in Rossetti’s poems look back or return “home” only to find it occupied or shut out from them. In this way, Christina Rossetti’s narrators can bear the characteristics of proto-modern subjectivity and, to use Gerald Figal’s apt phrase, “dramatize a ceaseless interrogation of modern categories of identity in a form of fantastic fiction that seems fitting in an era of fantastic change.”¹⁵ Thus, concept of liminality seems to explain many peculiarities of Christina Rossetti’s style which have not been explored in full in previous studies.

Liminality is at once “destructured and prestructured” and is often aimed at bringing the participants of the liminal passage into close contact with supernatural power, “the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless.” The neophytes, as Turner calls people undergoing the liminal period, are viewed as both socially if not physically invisible

¹³ Notably Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014); Lynda Palazzo. *Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti’s Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (Basingstoke – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁴ John Schad, *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), p. 2.

¹⁵ Gerald Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 2.

and polluting, and most of the time they are shut out in “another place,” thus having a separate reality set up for them. As such, liminality fuses together processes of “undoing, dissolution, decomposition” and “growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns.” As Turner suggests, “this coincidence of opposite processes and notions in a single representation characterizes the peculiar unity of the liminal: that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both.”¹⁶ This ambiguity and fusion of opposites is well known to any reader of Rossetti; thus, liminality provides a useful tool to find an answer to seemingly innumerable lists of Rossetti’s similes and possibilities.

Recognising the affinity that exists between this twentieth-century concept and key themes in Rossetti’s writing, I bring together her devotional and non-devotional work to show how she generates layers of meanings through creating lists of definitions, and at the same time avoids naming it properly. My thesis affirms that liminality is central to Christina Rossetti’s writing as a performance of the uncertain, where the main actor is shut out of the world with the promise of the encounter with that which is ultimately other, unnameable and unnamed. Building on the work of other critics who suggest that her writing is a product of her faith – for example, Rosenblum (1982, 1986), Ludlow (1993, 2013), Hassett (2005), - I introduce new ways of reading her engagement with theology and emphasise the characteristics shared between her secular poems and her spiritual writing. I argue that although Rossetti follows the rules of the Christian liminal performance where the faithful are transformed through an encounter with the divine, her position often shifts in favour of the alternative of unfulfillment.

Christina Rossetti herself can be viewed as a liminal figure both during her lifetime and in the light of critical attention she has received.¹⁷ Considered a major poet in her times,

¹⁶ Victor W. Turner, Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1979), p.237.

¹⁷ For early responses, see *Christina Rossetti: A Reference Guide*, ed. R.W.Crump (Boston: G.K.Hall, 1976) and Jane Addison, ‘Christina Rossetti Studies, 1974-1991: A Checklist and Synthesis’, *Bulletin of Bibliography* 52.1 (1995): 73-93. To name just a few relatively recent publications, see: Kathryn Burlinson. *Christina Rossetti* (Plymouth : Northcote House in association with the British Council, 1998), Cynthia Manson. *The Fairy-tale Literature of Charles Dickens, Christina Rossetti, and George*

she fell into oblivion and was mostly ignored or referred to as strictly a minor poet in the first sixty years after her death. She came back into critical focus in the late 1970s with second-wave feminist studies, but for the next ten years most critics analysed her work through predominantly psychoanalytical or biographical perspectives. As Alison Chapman remarks, in the majority of works Rossetti is too often taken not as a living being but as a literary trope, “a disembodied and fetishized commodity in the literary and critical marketplace.”¹⁸ A new wave of appraisal began in the mid-1980s, with more critics developing a multidisciplinary approach. The variety of critical response to her work is also quite substantial though not without certain favourite common elements. Currently the variety of critical responses to Rossetti’s work is substantial, although this tends to cluster around particular concerns. Major trends of Christina Rossetti’s criticism include, but are not limited to, her connections to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Belsey 1988) that place her within the context of her intermediate circle of family and closest friends, her devotional writing and Tractarian influences (Tennyson 1981, Stanwood 1987, Arseneau 1993, Palazzo 2000, Armond 2010, Ludlow 2014), gender/feminist studies (Gilber and Gubar 1979, Armstrong 1987, Montefiore 1987, Shurbutt 1992, Bristow 1995) that frame her in the patriarchal Victorian gaze and its reversal, Rossetti’s supposed critique of Victorian capitalism (Morrill 1990, Holt 1990, Campbell 1990, Menke 1994, Helsinger 1995) and others.

I will engage with each of those theories in due place, as in my reading of Rossetti’s writings, I am building on this work undertaken by previous scholars, but I also introduce new elements and new readings by juxtaposing lesser-known texts with a wide array of theories. By breaking down the categories in which Rossetti has been put before (be it ‘grotesque’, ‘gothic’, ‘devotional’, ‘secular’), I read her poetic and prose texts as raising complex questions of visibility and power, doubling and displacement and re-read Victorian poetry through the lens of the twentieth-century theories of

MacDonald: antidotes to the Victorian Spiritual Crisis (Lewiston ; Lampeter : Edwin Mellen Press, c2008), Alison Chapman. *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 2000), Lynda Palazzo. *Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology* (Basingstoke : Palgrave, 2002), and Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti’s Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (Basingstoke – New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁸ Alison Chapman. *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (Basingstoke : Macmillan, 2000), p.2.

liminality and negative space. Reading across and between a variety of theories and cultural myths, I want to show how Rossetti is easily accommodated within a wider cultural context.

The structural division of my research follows the tri-partite rite of passage as defined by both van Gennep and Turner. In the first part of my research, which corresponds to the preliminal (rites of separation from the familiar world and loss of the old identity), I discuss how new theories of vision and perspective shaped new perceptions of space, and how this space in the nineteenth century, as constructed through new materials, allowed for even further temporal and spatial ambiguity. Those new perspectives, if applied to Rossetti's poetry, produce an unexpected reading. It is arguable whether Christina Rossetti was indeed in that artistic avant-garde who questioned and experimented with the means by which vision is made possible. But she was definitely one of those artists who were not satisfied with the dominant and generally accepted dogmas about sensory experience. She was equally concerned with visibility and performance on one hand, and invisibility and falseness of human perception on the other, as well as the nuanced interplay between those two poles.

In the first chapter, "Entrapped in Optics: Rossetti's Ideas of Spiritual Vision," I explore how Rossetti constructs a certain liminal space in her texts that can best be defined through the discourse of visuality/visibility and absence/presence. By creating spaces of intersecting gazes between the human and the supernatural, the poet reconfigures conventional power relations between the subject and the object of the gaze. Although the movement between the worlds is strictly one-dimensional (all contact should be initiated by the supernatural), I show how the traumatic experience caused by this encounter becomes the point of entrance into liminality allows Rossetti's speakers to transform. To illustrate this point, I will consider "Goblin Market" (1859), "The Dead City" (1847), "Shut-Out" (1856/1862), "At Home" (1858) and "The Covent Threshold" (1862). All these poems present an encounter with the supernatural that proves life-changing to the speaker as they become willingly shut out in the liminal space. I analyse the toponymy of Rossetti's places of entrapment and suggest that they are usually linked to gardens. I address the duality of garden imagery in Rossetti's poems that implies both the enclosed garden of paradise and the medieval garden of temptation and sin. To conclude, I draw from Bachelard's ideas of home as an inhabited

space which is both a shelter and a trap, a chrysalis that invites death and transformation. I argue that Rossetti's attitude towards isolation is complex and her speakers willingly grow into the space of their entrapment, turning it into a vantage point from where they can speak back to the living.

In chapter 2, "Mirrors and Mirrored Gazes" I am primarily concerned with the relationship between the subject and the object of the gaze. The introduction of the liminal space prompts a metanarrative about control of space. In "From House to Home" (1858), I consider the double structure of the narrative to show how the narrator is displaced to the margins of the text. In "The Prince's Progress" (1861,1865) I show the reversed process, as the marginal and silent character of the passive Bride becomes the focus of my reading. Even though the speakers of Rossetti's poems gain the power of watching, this reversal offers no happy ending. In my readings of the poems, I suggest that there is no stable power balance between the subject and the object of the gaze. Although in general Rossetti seems to prefer the reversed structure, where the marginal and objectified stare back at the viewer, she is dubious about whether this gaze is invested with power. By suggesting a link to Lady Hawarden photography, I analyse the ways through which Rossetti creates a mirror space where the self meets its double and thus switches from the status of speaker to the status of observer. Lady Hawarden is as much a photographer of secrecy, as Rossetti is a poet of secrecy. Both artists are interested in thresholds and margins, transitions and shadows that allow multiple reflections to stare at each other. In this way Rossetti's protagonists become a space of defragmentation and multiplication, where the moment of meeting self becomes a point of loss of self. Those mirror meetings become personal histories about acquiring or denouncing voice and power.

The second part of my research corresponds to the second stage of the rite of passage when the neophyte is stripped of all possessions and definitions. Applying this principle to Rossetti's poems, I focus on the technical side of the structural patterns she employs and concentrate on the formal close reading of the texts. I suggest that by using conscious shifts and slips in the rhythm paired with repetitious structures, Rossetti establishes a multi-layered temporality. The space of her liminality becomes regulated by textual omissions and repetitive rhyming structures that give the reader a sense of action caught midway. Rossetti's preference for a repetitious framing system on the

formal grammar and sound level contributes to the “secret” hidden in the poem (which in my reading is usually related to emptiness and non-fulfillment), creating an atmosphere of delayed and subverted expectations.

Chapter three, “Checks and Balances of Layered Realities”, focuses on the often superfluous presence of repetition and conflicting rhythmic sequences in a number of poems: a seasonal lyrical poem “Spring” (1859), an apocalyptic poem “Sleep at Sea” (1853) and three devotional poems (“A Better Resurrection” (1857), “Whither the Tribes Go Up, even the Tribes of the Lord” (circa 1877) and “Advent” (1886)). By engaging with other critics who have explored Rossetti’s use of repetition (Esh 1994, Prins 2000, Billone 2007) I argue that Rossetti is constantly in search of a new poetic technique that could bring forward dense emotional and spiritual meaning. In my opinion, it is through rhythmical lapses and slips and irregularly repeated formal structures that Rossetti orchestrates sophisticated inner polyphony in her texts. I read the layeredness of her texts along Lyell’s ideas about geology, and suggest that, if for Lyell, geology is the archive of the earth and its past, for Rossetti it preserves not only the history of the land, but also the spiritual development of the human being, bringing together the living and the dead. The relationship between the dead and the yet-to-be living is that of interdependence and confrontation, as reflected in the aggressive language describing their cohabitation when the language itself becomes a battlefield. Repetitions become one of the means to support this violent assault. At the same time they create a certain void in the text as their hesitant and inexact echo allows for multiple misreadings and parallel narratives.

In the fourth chapter, “Negative Spaces and Unfulfillment in the Poetics of Layering”, I focus on the concepts of absence and unfulfillment as prevalent in Rossetti’s poetry. I trace how she uses negative constructions to disintegrate the reference system and cancel out the development of the story, suppressing or silencing the narrator’s experience. I outline difference between incompleteness of the goblins and uncompleteness of the humans as redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice and sustain that Rossetti seems to be opposed to the idea of fulfillment. To illustrate this point, I offer a close reading of “Somewhere or Other” (1863), where I come back to the problems of reverted gazes and revisit the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, showing that the female figure there is that of absence and is present only liminally. Yet her lingering absence is

read as presence, and the unfulfillment becomes the real object of the poem. In other texts, addressed in this chapter - “Hollow-Sounding and Mysterious” (1882), “Where never tempest heaveth” (1893), “A Castle-Builders World” (1886), “Life and Death” (1863), “Easter Day” (1886) and “If I Had Words” (1864), supported by discussion of two better known poems, “Cobwebs” (1855) and “May” (1855) – I continue with close readings of metric irregularities and sound redundancy, to illustrate how surplus can lead to absence. In this connection, I address Roland Barthes’ theory of punctum – a shock we experience looking at some photographs triggered by our memories or impressions. I explain how punctum becomes a liminal trigger, and how it is similar to Rossetti’s unexpected rhythmical patterns or omissions and transfers the idea of unfulfillment. I close the chapter with the idea of non-spaces and Rossetti’s rhetoric of negation, as I see her as a poet consciously engaged in producing silences and gaps in the text that open an apocalyptic dimension in her texts. I appeal to Derrida’s definition of an apocalyptic tone in literature and suggest that focusing on the layering technique allows us to come closer to understanding her unwillingness to uncover the speaker. For Rossetti, secrecy is a blessing.

In the third section of my thesis, which follows the stage of reintegration into society, I approach Rossetti’s patterns in constructing the self of her speakers. I continue with my analysis of liminality as punctuated by Rossetti’s technique of layering, and deal more closely with the way she works with the liminal to re-define the self. I analyse Rossetti’s fractured selves and hybrid/monstrous creatures through close reading of a number of her self-reflective poems. The poet’s frequent use of unfulfillment and absence as a driving force for her works creates a complex poetic mode. In the context of her religious writing, it creates a space where unity with God is desirable but unattainable, hence the overall apophatic mode that I have previously discussed. I suggest that it also creates a diffused feeling of self which is being reconstructed through negation and subsequent meeting with the Other.

In chapter 5, “Layers of I: Rossetti’s Secret Selves,” I introduce two different approaches in alienating the self: objectification of the self and projection of the self onto the monstrous. In this chapter I show how the ‘I’ of Rossetti’s speaker is stripped of its subjectivity, objectified and equated to an unidentifiable ‘it.’ The essence of this ‘it’ is veiled by layers of definitions, as Rossetti throws innumerable hints at the reader

and involves them in a guessing game as to what the heart of the ‘I’ is. This game is reminiscent of Lacan’s interpretation of the ‘fort-da’ game and offers a curious glimpse into the understanding of split in the self. I show how the liminal subject, lost in the space of unfulfillment, demands a presence of an unfulfilled subject. Among the poems I consider in this chapter, two - “What” (1853) and “Winter: My Secret” (1857) - are examples of layering guesses and disguising the seemingly empty “secret” in a pile of definitions. I discuss the violence of intrusion into the speaker’s secret and its implications for the disclosure of the answer. In “Another Spring” (1853), the ‘I’ of the speaker is lost in the contradictory temporal layers, denying her past and her future and locking up her present in a temporal loop. My reading of “The Inquiry of the Fathers Upon the Children” (1865), a poem with a secret of identity disclosed from the beginning, raises the question of narratorial layers displacing the truth. The last poem, “The Thread of Life” (1882) stands apart as here I objectify the ‘I’ of the poem and show how it can be perceived as a restricting non-thing. It might be the only poem where layering is not immediately evident, but I show how it follows familiar patterns through repetition and overlapping narrative spaces. Rossetti often refers to an object, an ‘it’ residing in the speaker’s soul as a solidified memory of something she would rather have forgotten; through repetition, she creates a liminal space within herself and keeps it in-between life and death, memory and oblivion.

In chapter 6, “Sacred Monsters and Liminal Masks,” I focus on the ways Rossetti re-defines the limits of self through encounters with the liminal Other, be it in the form of the goblins, the revenants or the saints. Encounters in the liminal space are usually linked to transformation of the neophyte through understanding (or at least, questioning) new knowledge about the world. In relation to Rossetti’s poetry I set out two different patterns of communication: direct interaction with “the heart of the liminal matter” (objectification) and the encounter with the supernatural communicators of this knowledge usually presented as monsters. In “A Pause for Thought” (1848, two other parts of the triptych 1849, 1854) and “Memory” (1857, 1865) I follow the first pattern and the objectified essence of selfhood as opposed to Rossetti’s emerging communal sense. The other option of alienating self would be to project it onto the outside into a figure of a monster which I address in my reading of “So I Grew Half-Delirious and Quite Sick” (1849) and “Who Shall Deliver Me” (1864). I also return to Rossetti’s use of the narratorial plural I have previously noted and discuss in more detail her ideas of

unity with God and the saints and tackle the question of memory as one of the ways to regulate the relationship with the Other through objectifying a part of one's Self. I outline the functions of the monstrous in Rossetti's poem and question her uneasy mirroring of the Christ figure to show that it bears a strong resemblance to the dark figure of a fairy lover or a gothic double. Rossetti not only projects the mundane, if elevated, idea of love onto Christ - her narrators and protagonists also take upon themselves the role of Christ which leads to the ultimate unfulfillment of the Self.

In the conclusion I re-introduce the notion of poetics of unfulfillment as one of the major characteristics of Christina Rossetti's poetry. Her speakers are shut out in their liminality, hesitating on the threshold and never being able to cross the boundary and either return to the real world or be reunited with the divine. In the liminal space they have no limitations, but they construct them on their own. This experience is strengthened by Rossetti's claim that no unity with God is ever possible. Yet the poet is unwilling to pronounce a definite judgement. The impossibility of fulfilment is neither an achievement, nor a failure. In advancing my hypothesis I suggest that her texts should be read in the context of her embrace of the void and the unfulfillment, up to the possibility that her theology can be seen as apophatic to a certain extent. To consolidate my arguments, I offer a close reading of "Resurgam" (1883), one of Rossetti's later devotional poems which uses the metaphor of climbing to articulate the rite of passage for a true believer and at the same time dwells upon the liminal side of this process.

In conclusion, I would like to turn again to the threshold imagery. It stands for both layering and unfulfillment as it, on one hand, multiplies openings and possibilities for us and, on the other, fails to bring the worlds together, or, as Anna Maria Manzanas Calvo puts it, "lacks the ability to separate a legitimate space from what is deemed as an alien territory."¹⁹ I hope this thesis will act in a similar way: instead of defining new spaces it will open boundaries for new readings of Rossetti's texts.

¹⁹ Anna Maria Manzanas Calvo, "Circles and Crosses: Reconsidering Lines of Demarkation" in Anna Maria Manzanas Calvo (ed), *Border Transits: Literature and Culture Across the Line*, (Amsterdam ; New York, NY : Rodopi, 2007), p. 22.

As liminal paradigms permeate Rossetti's texts, she repeatedly addresses the idea that identity must be sacrificed for a promise of reunion with the supernatural. At the same time - and this is where Christian (and Rossetti's) projection varies from van Gennep's and Turner's archetypal model of passage - the re-emergence from liminality is never fulfilled. Rosemary Elizabeth Beckham, in discussing liminality in apocalyptic literature, suggests that "Jesus Christ, as the living mediator between humanity and God, holds in tension the reality of loss, promise and fulfillment which sacrifice epitomises,"²⁰ thus embodying the threshold between the divine and the human and emphasizing the inadequacy of human experience to accomplish the transformation. Rossetti, who plays with the idea of projecting her split speakers onto the figure of Christ, stresses the ultimate unfulfillment of a human being. Our life, her speakers argue, is lost "in the blank of mere possibility:"²¹ as our past is "momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated and the future has not yet begun;" we live in "an instant of pure potentiality, where everything as it were trembles in the balance."²² We are, in the end, threshold dwellers.

²⁰ Rosemary Elizabeth Beckham, 'Worlds at War: Liminality, Revelation, and Representation in Apocalyptic Literature,' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2008).

²¹ Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 23 December 1864, in Anthony H. Harrison (ed.), *The Letters of Christina Rossetti* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997-2004), vol. 1, 1843-1873; 1:233.

²² Victor Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage: A Study in Comparative Symbology* (New Delhi: Concept, 1979), p. 41.

Chapter 1. Entrapped in Optics: Rossetti's Ideas of Spiritual Vision

The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world
is to see something...

To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion, - all in one.

John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Volume III, part IV, chapter XVI

The first part of this thesis is concerned with the multiplicity of understanding of vision in Victorian cultural discourse, and the various optics and their directions and intersections in Christina Rossetti's poetics. I focus on the physical experience of liminality through the conflict between the seen and the unseen and analyse how the deprivation of sight and space is used to invoke a new kind of perception in both the speaker and the reader. By suggesting that Rossetti's speakers are similar to Victor Turner's participants of the liminal rite through their lack of social and physical integration I address the reversal of power between the observers and the observed through gaining control over the field of vision. Given the nature of the liminal space, vision in this context also implies things that stay on the margins of being seeable, if seen at all; as Catherine Maxwell puts it in her study of male Victorian poetry, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne* (2001), this is the kind of vision that "inhabits, teases or strains the borders of 'normal looking.'"²³ The experience of such vision, as well the experience of waiting to see/ to be seen triggers a transformation in a human being. Yet no transformation can be completed in the liminal space, so instead of a process fulfilled it becomes a prolonged moment of hesitation, a pause, a myriad of possibilities in-between the two definite states. In this sense, unfulfilled transformation becomes a moment of transfiguration. In her study of Rossetti's devotional writing, Dolores Rosenblum evokes the idea of the watching speaker and notes that the poet's personal myth is rooted "in the inflexibility of the speaker's stance".²⁴ Influenced by

²³ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 1.

²⁴ Dolores Rosenblum, "Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry: Watching, Looking, Keeping Vigil", *Victorian Poetry* 20.1 (Spring): 33-49, p.34.

Tractarian doctrine, the poet on one hand undergoes the fragmentation of her poetic self into an observer and an observed and, on the other, acquires power through being a witness to both loss and future restitution. The passivity of the “self-displaying watcher” offers a promise of encounter with the divine and a more active interaction. Victor Turner also suggests that the Christian vigil is similar to the initiation into liminality, as he shows the power comes from seclusion and humility.²⁵

I want to extend this idea and argue that this state of “watch and vigil”, to use Rosenblum’s title wording, is defined by overlaying perspectives and multiple visions. Following Victor Turner’s ideas, I argue that the liminal state is characterised by passivity of the participant/ speaker and the disruption of linear physical vision introduced by the (supernatural) transmitters of knowledge. . Turner suggests that the aim of a rite of passage is to reduce its participants “into some kind of human *materia prima*, divested of specific form and reduced to a condition that, although it is still social, is without or beneath all accepted forms of status.”²⁶ He associates weakness and passivity with ritual powers and undifferentiated status in the liminal state. In a similar way, Rossetti’s speakers are shown as deprived of their social (dead or sleeping) and physical (sight) integration. Rosenblum observes their repetitive and limited experiences and suggests that Rossetti subverts both the traditional vision of divine face-to-face encounter and the image of the woman seeing herself observed:

although the woman who, transfixed in art or immobilized by social roles, cannot move may appear feeble, more dead than alive, the woman who will not move is persevering, even obstinate. The fixed position, like the fixed language, gives her a vantage point from which she can look out for the source of her deliverance.²⁷

This observation places Rossetti’s speakers above and detached from the society as “self-displaying watchers” – the same as Turner’s participants of the passage rite “stand

²⁵ See, for example Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 103-104.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 170.

²⁷ Rosenblum, “Christina Rossetti’s Religious Poetry,” opus cit., p. 39.

outside the totality of structural positions one normally occupies in a social system,”²⁸ thus standing witness to their own suffering, survival and social rise.

Extending this idea to non-devotional poetry, I suggest that Rossetti’s gaze offers a reflection on scientific, religious and dialogic discourse and becomes a means of disfiguration (breaking the habitual pattern) and transfiguration, in the sense that it both dissolves the existing definitions of things and reconstructs them as new possibilities. It is the same kind of vision that Catherine Maxwell explores in *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne*, albeit Christina Rossetti’s case is a curious reversal of the gender pattern suggested by Maxwell. This vision not only defines the space that the poet and/or his speaker function in, with its dominant or recurrent symbols; it also refers to the unseen and unseeable; or as Maxwell puts it, “the optical visible versus interior knowledge.”²⁹ Indeed, this poetic space for Christina Rossetti is marked by conscious shifts of spatio-temporal perception, and defines both knowledge and power. The gaze becomes an instrument of self-construction as well as a tool for defining reality; it both objectifies the experience and proves the speaker a spectacle to unknown yet powerful forces, similar to Turner’s neophytes who are shaped by “the powers... felt... to be more than human powers, though they are invoked and channelled by the representatives of the community.”³⁰ It is not only, as Rosenblum suggests, “an ever-watchful self” that offers herself to “an all-seeing God” through all the disguises; it is also an all-seeing self that faces the ever-watchful other, overcoming the liminal loss of identity and re-surging transformed and transcendent. Further in this thesis I show the connection between the fragmentation or partial loss of vision and fragmented speech and truncated sentences characteristic of Rossetti’s poetry. I suggest that by juggling those fragments by meticulous repetition on both sound and grammar levels, the poet makes her speakers rise to a new level of self-awareness. By veiling and/or probing her speakers’ material representation, Rossetti reconfigures their identities and questions their relationship with the world.

²⁸ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 138.

²⁹ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne*, opus cit., p. 1.

³⁰ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 104.

In this chapter, then, I explore how Christina Rossetti constructs a certain liminal space in her texts that can be best defined through the discourse of visuality/visibility and absence/presence, categories that will be further explored in the second part of the thesis. My reading of Rossetti's verse is concerned with the teasing and disturbing images which both inhabit the margins of textual and visual perception and constitute one of the most alluring secrets of her poetry. By creating spaces of intersecting gazes between the human and the supernatural, Rossetti reconfigures conventional power relations between the subject and the object of the gaze. I further suggest that Rossetti consciously constructs her poems so that a certain visual/ perceptual distortion is inherent in them. Her pervasive and inquisitive probing of the borders of the spiritual unseen leads her to reassess and challenge the boundaries of the seen, similar to Turner's neophytes who are "alternately forced and encouraged to think about their society, their cosmos, and the powers that generate and sustain them."³¹ Liminality is, to a certain extent, a stage of reflection. In Turner's work, the deconstructive and reassembling forces of the liminal space are directly manifested through the participants' visual experiences, from the use of masks and monsters to the ultimate experience of invisibility. As Turner puts it, "[a]s members of society, most of us see only what we expect to see, and what we expect to see is what we are conditioned to see when we have learned the definitions and classifications of our culture."³² With those classifications disrupted, our visual system also comes to be tested.

The nineteenth century offers a rich contextual field for any study related to vision. New scientific developments and the popularisation of all sorts of optical instruments, from the microscope to the kaleidoscope, broadened the boundaries of human understanding regarding the sense of sight. Although there is little evidence of Rossetti's engagement with scientific writing, we know that she was interested at least in astronomy and even integrated this knowledge in her devotional writing.³³ Linda E. Marshall argues that she sought in it proof of scriptural parables and analogues. A wide

³¹ Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," opus cit., p. 241.

³² Ibid., p. 235.

³³ See Linda E. Marshall, "Astronomy of the Invisible: Contexts for Christina Rossetti's Heavenly Parables" in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, ed. Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999), pp. 194-211.

range of critics, including Gillian Beer, Daniel Brown and Anna Henchman, emphasize the similarities between the poetic and the scientific imagery of the times, especially as Faraday's and Maxwell's revisions of atomistic Newtonian views challenged the ideas of physicality and physical boundaries. Hidden layers of the Earth's past described by Lyell become an important point in my discussion of rhythm and form in the second part of this thesis, while the idea of vacuum as space devoid of matter is central to the third part. Meanwhile in this chapter I focus on the exploration of the visible versus the invisible, and its role in Christina Rossetti's imagery.

In Christina Rossetti's writing references to scientific discoveries run parallel to Biblical allusions, as illustrated in this passage from *Seek and Find* (1879):

Wonderful and awful are these forces which launch, arrest, guide, compact, dissolve, the members of the material universe. Yet more wonderful, more awful are those intellectual faculties which shrined within mortal man, gauge height and depth, deduce cause from effect, and track out the invisible by clue of the visible: thus a certain mastermind by the aberration of one celestial body from the line of its independent orbit, argued the influential neighbourhood of a second luminary till then undiscerned.³⁴

The opening line of this paragraph could be as good a description of contemporary cosmography, especially as far as dark matter is concerned, as it seems to reference Victorian astronomical advances and state the supremacy of the human mind. Rossetti claims the human mind capable of bringing to light the hidden secrets of the world, and at the same time reconciles the material universe with the belief in the Divine presence through joined images. In her view, the deeper the human understanding of the world around us, the deeper our faith.

Rossetti was equally concerned with visibility and performance (in the sense of public projection) on one hand, and invisibility and the falseness of human perception on the other. Her verses are permeated with the nuanced interplay between those two poles.

³⁴ Christina Rossetti, *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedictine* (London: Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1879), p. 27.

Her speakers, poised in-between life and death, similar to Turner's neophytes, are both a spectacle along the lines of Elizabeth Bronfen's argument about the Victorian fascination with dead female bodies,³⁵ and the controlling force through the disturbing look-back that I will explore further. As Dolores Rosenblum puts it, Rossetti's poetry is "pervaded with references to faces, masks, eyes, spectacles and displays, and to the acts of seeing, looking, staring, gazing and watching."³⁶

With new optical instruments prompting new approaches to visual experiences, shifting traditional foci and questioning representation and "whole-ness" of the world, nineteenth-century artists had a much broader spectrum of experience at hand than previous generations. The progress of vision-related theories in physics, optics, mathematics, light studies and non-Euclidean geometries literally brought visible things into a sharper focus. As new optics prompted new languages, so in literary criticism of the era optical terms were used to describe new poetic language. Lindsay Smith in *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry* demonstrates this using the example of William Morris's *The Defence of Guinevere and Other Poems* (1858), emphasising how photography invited a new appreciation (and a new disapprobation) of poetic vision.³⁷ Thus, in his review of the book in *The New Englander* (1871), Robert K. Weeks praised Morris for being "devoted to things visible" and not being distracted by the obscure and the uncertain: "He cannot help seeing and feeling that there are secrets, but he cannot and will not attempt to discover and possess them...where he can not see, he will not venture far."³⁸ The passage celebrates the focus of vision achieved through photographic control over the visual field. This conscious choice of limitation, this ability to entrap one's eye out of the limits of the unknown is a sign of supreme mastery for the critic.

³⁵ Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York and Manchester: Routledge, 1992).

³⁶ Dolores Rosenblum, "Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry: Watching, Looking, Keeping Vigil", opus cit., p. 33.

³⁷ For an analysis of visual metaphors in reviews of Morris and Swinburne, see Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Carol T. Christ, *The Finer Optic: The Aesthetic of Particularity in Victorian Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

³⁸ Quoted in Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry*, opus cit., p. 133.

At the same time, it is precisely the preoccupation with the liminal boundaries between the visible and the invisible that makes Victorian art so innovative. With the rise of photography, optical illusions and distortions of the physical space become more and more common. Thus early-Victorian photographers experimented with spatial representation in ways that painters were unable to. Moreover, the appeal to conscious distortion and displacement in photography was voiced by Ruskin, who advises amateur photographers in the preface to the second edition of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) to put the camera “in any position that will command the sculpture wholly, without any regard to the resultant distortions of the vertical lines; such distortion can always be allowed for, if once the details are completely obtained.”³⁹

This photographic power of displacement was viewed as not only physical, but almost being able to capture spiritual ties between people and their surrounding landscape. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, for example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning compared photography to “mesmeric disembodiment of spirits”, “not merely the likeness... but the association, and the sense of nearness involved in the thing.”⁴⁰ Photography, in her reading, gives the viewer not only a visual likeness, but a trace of emotional or spiritual closeness as well. New optical developments prompted belief in the invisible world of spirits as an extension of the three-dimensional natural world and, on a larger scale, challenged the assumption that physical vision determines the scope of things existing. Thus what Thomas Carlyle termed a “spiritual optics”⁴¹ and John Ruskin termed “the soul of the eye”⁴² involved a different approach to thinking about seeing. In Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus* (1833-1834), Teufeldrockh’s acceptance of spiritual vision is permeated with optical references and stands perfectly in agreement with the scientific

³⁹ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Second edition (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1855), p. 13.

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Mary Russell Mitford, December 7, 1843 and quoted in Patrick Maynard, *The Engine of Visualization: Thinking Through Photography* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1997), p.232.

⁴¹ Thomas Carlyle, “Spiritual Optics” in James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life, 1795-1835*, 2 vols (London: Longmans, Green, 1882), vol. II, p. 8-15.

⁴² John Ruskin, “The Relation to Art of the Science of Light” in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903-12), vol. XXII, p.192-207.

discourse of the times, as Carlyle claims the supremacy of “the effects of optics in this strange camera obscura of an existence” through placing emphasis on man’s reasoning faculty. He appeals to scientific discoveries by Galileo as challenging the visual perception of the world to the illusions and challenges of the inner eyesight, and proclaims:

Oh my friend I advise thee awake to that fact, now discovered of the inner eyesight as it was long since of the outer, that not the sun and the stars are so rapidly dashing round, nor the woods and distant steeples and country-mansions are deliriously dancing and walzing round accidental centres; that it is thyself and thy little doghole of a planet or dwelling place that are doing it merely.⁴³

This passage in its adamant focus on man reminds us of Rossetti’s praise of human intellectual faculties in *Seek and Find* as quoted earlier. As if anticipating Rossetti’s spiritual quest, Carlyle further notes, “one day the spiritual astronomers will find that this [the ‘Grand Unintelligible… that the earth turns, not the sun and heavenly spheres] is the infinitely greater miracle.”⁴⁴ And Rossetti echoes the tone in *Seek and Find*: “we can ponder reverently over interstellar spaces so vast as to exhaust the attractive force of the suns and more than suns” only to “make of what we know and what we know not stepping-stones toward heaven.”⁴⁵

Ruskin’s theories of seeing develop similar ideas: there is a superficial way of visual perception, but true understanding comes from moral insight. Thus, the spectator who wants to get a proper idea of the world has to exercise “double vision” by switching back and forth between the “mechanical vision” to the “soul of the eye.” Both suggested that in addition to purely physical experience, there is a kind of spiritually and morally imbued inner vision that defies the limits of the mechanical approach and holds supremacy over it. Following their lead, in her 1848 *The Night Side of Nature* Catherine Crowe suggests that seeing “is merely the function of an organ” attuned to

⁴³ Carlyle, “Spiritual Optics,” opus cit., p.14.

⁴⁴ Quoted in J.P. Vijn, *Carlyle and Jean Paul: Their Spiritual Optics* (John Benjamins Publishing, 1982), p. 128.

⁴⁵ *Seek and Find*, p. 37.

the external world and thus limited. There are many other things “which we can not see without the aid of artificial appliances and many other things which we can not see even with them.”⁴⁶ Rossetti herself would support this idea, remarking upon the emptiness and superficiality of vision by appealing to Ecclesiastes 1:8, as in “The eye and ear/ Cannot be filled with what they see and hear” (“One Certainty,” 1849, 2:3)⁴⁷ or almost forty years later in a commentary upon Ecclesiastes 6:10: ‘Eye hath not seen: - yet man hath known and weighed/ A hundred thousand marvels that have been: / What is it which (the Word of Truth hath said)/ Eye hath not seen? (1886, 1:4). While this passage in Ecclesiastes is usually explained as referring to the predetermined nature of man, it also makes a comparison between the true vision of God and the limited vision of men. “The soul of the eye” should disclose all those marvels that are invisible to “mechanical vision.” At the same time, things we see with our eyes serve as a hint and an opening towards the real state of the world:

In this world we observe no more than a large or a smaller section of rainbow. Thus even at its widest it overarches no wider area than the eye can compass, and where it seems to touch earth or sea we know it touches them not. We discern enough to feel convinced that we see a portion only, not the whole; yet is that portion so far complete in itself that it certifies to us that whole which we see not: the part declares the unbroken, continuous, unvaried whole.⁴⁸

This passage reinstates the importance of material vision as outlining the real scope of things to be seen with inner vision. And yet it is mechanical vision which, being true to the physical appearance of things, leads us into fallacy and might make us revolt against God’s plans. Another early poem, “Symbols” (1849), does not engage in discussing vision directly, nevertheless, its speaker observes various objects and, failing to see their true meaning, breaks them in a fit of rage. In the first stanza the speaker “watched a rosebud very long” (1) hoping to see a perfect flower, but instead witnessed it bloom

⁴⁶ Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature; or, Ghosts and Ghost-Seers* (London: T.C. Newby, 1848), vol. 1, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁷ A similar line also in “A Testimony,” 1849, 42-44.

⁴⁸ Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*, second edition (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1893), p. 152.

and fall. The frustration is reconstructed in the second stanza as she “watched a nest” from where the old birds fly away when the nestlings “should have hatched.” (10) Annoyed with the failure of nature, she gives way to her disappointment and breaks the bough and crushes the eggs “not heeding how/ Their ancient promise had been fair” (16-17). The fourth stanza reads as a warning of unfulfillment: the speaker twice ruins the natural order of things and produces unfulfillment of God’s design, and thus is unfulfilled herself. “What if God, / Who waiteth for thy fruites in vain, / Should also take the rod?” (22-24) I will return to the idea of unfulfillment as one of the key elements of Rossetti’s poetry at a later stage. Here I am more interested in the failure of seeing. Although the speaker is not blind, her spiritual blindness clouds her vision. Her inability to understand God’s will leads to destruction and potential punishment, and she is called to answer by a dead voice of an inanimate bough, thus displacing the boundaries of her reality into spiritual liminality.

This juxtaposition of vision and spiritual sight is further developed in Rossetti’s religious prose. In *Seek and Find* she comments,

It is merely to our sight that the sun obliterates the stars ... yet by reason of its nearness to our eyes it fairly puts them all out, until only an act of recollection can ... summon before our consciousness the ever-present ... lights of the sky. When the glare of this world dazzles the eyes of our soul, such an act of recollection is what we need.⁴⁹

This act of recollection is important in understanding Rossetti’s nostalgia triggered by visual experiences. It seems to bring us back to material vision, internalized by reason. In this sense, her true vision is always layered over the “reality” – not as through its physical presence, but through additional experience of recollection, a faint memory, a post-factum that is similar to Roland Barthes’ shock triggered by a photograph (I will discuss it later in my thesis). Visual theories contemporary with Rossetti’s writings examined the physiology of vision and the psycho-physical effects of visual manipulation in a way which emphasizes perceptual aberration. Experiments in this field offered a certain liminal experience of the world, hence the links between visual

⁴⁹ *Seek and Find*, p. 33.

experimentation, spiritualism and ghost-seeing – and the wide-spread belief that ghosts can be photographed even while remaining unseen.⁵⁰

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of vision as "a gaze at grips with a visible world"⁵¹ has a certain resonance with Rossetti's poetry. While her speakers and protagonists often struggle to come to grips with "reality", their visual and visionary experience is often newly conceptualized. Rossetti was following the lead of the century, as there seems to be a certain connection between multiple narratives and interchangeable speakers and multifocal perspectives produced by the new technologies. As Linda M. Shires suggests in her study of nineteenth-century vision, both visual and textual works of the period demonstrate a "shift from a single, seemingly objective, universal perspective to an increasing preoccupation with the processes of perception" which "produced an experimentation with flattening, dissolution, and combination in the visual arts, and multiplicity of perspective in the verbal arts."⁵² One particular example would be the popularity of kaleidoscope - I parallel Rossetti's overlaying voices and spaces with this visual technique. Garrod Bush's ideas of thinking and imagining kaleidoscopically on the abstract level⁵³ strengthen my point about the double focus on spirituality. Kaleidoscope, as a hand-operated device, is "enacted simultaneously by the user's manipulation and within the kaleidoscope's viewfinder" with the emphasis on perceptual interaction. In a similar way, Rossetti creates a kaleidoscopic projection of time and space that retains its structured composition of geometric (or, as I will be exploring in the second part, rhythmic) forms with the focus still laying within the speaker's power of perception, a method that allows her to bring together different layers of visuality and existence and facilitate the encounter with the spiritual. Rossetti's layered texts follow closely Turner's definition of the liminal initiation as governed by the laws of dissociation, where the communication of sacral

⁵⁰ See, for example, Srdjan Smajic, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁵¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Donald Landes (Oxford: Routledge, 2012) p. 315.

⁵² Linda M. Shires, *Perspectives: Modes of Viewing and Knowing in Nineteenth-Century England*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 5.

⁵³ Nicole Garrod Bush, "Kaleidoscopism: The Circulation of a Mid-Century Metaphor and Motif" in *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20:4 (2015): 509-530.

knowledge is made through fragmentation of reality and re-combination of its constituent elements in a totally unique and grotesque configuration.⁵⁴ The disturbance and multiplicity of perception is one of the key elements of initiation: the clashing perspectives “are not permanently reconciled or blended... [b]ut, instead of coming against one another in the blind antagonism of material interest, ‘seeing nothing but themselves’... they are reinstated against one another in the transcendent, conscious, recognizant unity.”⁵⁵ Thus, Rossetti’s multiperspective narratives are deployed in the liminal space.

Although Christina Rossetti, unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning, was no attendant of séances, she was aware of spiritualist ideas, at least through her brothers. Dante Gabriel and William Michael Rossetti both showed an interest in spiritualism as evidenced by their diaries and correspondence, but Christina remained generally indifferent, if not hostile to the idea. In the earlier years, she admitted, “to me the whole subject is awful and mysterious; though, in spite my inability to conceive a clue to the source of sundry manifestations, I still hope simple imposture may be the missing key.”⁵⁶ In later years she expresses her disdain quite flatly:

PLEASE GOD, I will have nothing to do with spiritualism, whether it is an imposture or a black art, or with mesmerism, lest I clog my free will; or with hypnotism, lest willful self-surrender become my road to evil choice, imagination, conduct, voluntarily or involuntarily.⁵⁷

This loss of control over the mind was a key anxiety around spiritualism and mesmerism, and Rossetti’s repeated references to her conscious choice (as opposed to the unlikely surrender to a whim or caprice) seem to ascertain the impossibility of any spiritual encounter initiated by charlatans.

⁵⁴ See Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p. 240.

⁵⁵ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 84.

⁵⁶ Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, December 23, 1864, quoted in ed. William Michael Rossetti, *Rossetti Papers 1862 to 1870* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903) p. 69.

⁵⁷ *The Face of the Deep*, p. 271.

At the same time, Rossetti's protagonists find themselves in a far more ambiguous situation. They cannot initiate their transformation on their own – they have to be forced out into the liminal to use this experience for their transformation. Here, again, the situation they find themselves in is similar to Turner's neophytes. The latter are always passive, with the change in them being triggered by external forces – “as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.”⁵⁸ Before they acquire this new status and subsequent new powers, they are acted upon and objectified through complete authority of transmitters of the liminal sacra (knowledge).

Indeed, it is often forbidden for Rossetti's human speakers to look for the supernatural and call it into their lives: as the bored maiden in “Repining” (1847) finds out, we cannot be sure as to who or what is going to answer our call. Nevertheless, the supernatural can reach out for the human for good or for ill, and no walls or doors will hold it - Rossetti's thresholds are consistently permeable from the other world.⁵⁹ Such encounters are often reenacted in her secular poems, as in “A Bird Song” (before 1873) where the transformative power of the in-between experience is literally laid bare when the speaker imagines seeing a swallow and then being transformed into one “to build this weather one nest together” (9), thus acquiring creative and transgressive powers. Curiously enough, the poem starts with a reference to blindness (inability to see), followed by dreamlike experience and potentiality. Moreover, there is a certain ambiguity of the subject and the object – neither the “I” nor the invisible “her” are properly introduced, a displacement I explore in detail in part three of this thesis. As such, it offers a schematical rite of passage whether the speaker is shut out alone in the liminal (“It's a year almost that I have not seen her” (1)) remembering how “green things were greener” (2). I have already mentioned the importance of recollection as internalization of vision; here the speaker reconstructs her experience of the previous summer as a blissful paradise-like setting. At the same time, “all things green” for Rossetti bears a reference to the transiency of our human experience, and thus bears a

⁵⁸ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 95.

⁵⁹ See also Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti's Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp 45-46.

parallel to the stage of liminality, as she explains in the corresponding part of *Seek and Find*: contemplation of vegetation “turns our eyes inward upon our own selves... This present temporal stage of our existence is a stage of possibilities, alternatives, hope, fear.”⁶⁰ Yet the swallow arrives as a messenger to wake us from this contemplative passivity by heralding further changes.

The sound reference to emptiness in “hollow” in “Oh happy swallow whose mate will follow / O’er height, O’er hollow” (7-8), stressed by the mid-line rhymes and alliterated [h], is also significant in communicating the liminal and its ambiguous characteristics. Although the nature of the speaker is still unexplained, we are aware that his existence is parallel to that of birds, and mirrors their seasonal migration. The whole world is turned upside down by the break-through of the swallows: “The bird-race quicken” (5), and the liberated speaker is vested with powers of creation, awakening to new space and new self – “I’d be a swallow/ To build this weather one nest together.” (8-9) Not only vision is potentially restored, but the sense of social belonging as well as he is follows a mate; the speaker echoes (if not in reality, then in dreams) the fate of the messenger that awakened him to life.

This outward movement is strictly one-directional, as spiritual messengers (be they the dead or birds and angels) on the brink of human existence in such poems as “At Home” (1858), and “After Death” (1849) make their way into human life. Dolores Rosenblum makes an important point in discussing Christina Rossetti’s spiritual poems, that while most nineteenth-century writers resort at times to the idea of a face-to-face encounter with God, Rossetti “is unique in her pervasive use... of this imagery.”⁶¹ She suggests a certain reversal of the secular gendered tradition of looking into the face of a female lover through turning this female lover into the watcher of God. John Schad makes it one of the key points of reference when reading Rossetti’s poems in parallel with the feminist work of Luce Irigaray. In his analysis of “Despised and Rejected” (1868), “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (1851), “The Convent Threshold” (1858) and “Shut Out” (1856/1862), he mentions the moment when supernatural messengers

⁶⁰ *Seek and Find*, p. 102.

⁶¹ Rosenblum, “Christina Rossetti’s Religious Poetry”, opus cit, p. 36.

declare: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock.” (Revelation 3.20)⁶² He also notes a curious displacement: although these poems definitely project a Christ-like figure, overall ambiguity and a sense of danger challenge ideas of orthodox Christianity. In “Despised and Rejected”, for example, the figure that voices Christ’s words is presented as disembodied and hollow and covered in darkness and blood: “On the morrow/ I saw upon … /… my door/ The mark of blood for evermore” (55-58). In a similar way, the guest in “Repining” bears a dark resemblance to the romantic/ folk figure of a fairy lover or a vampire. Thus the spiritual and the ghostly often go together in Rossetti’s texts, an idea which I will develop in the third part of the thesis.

The encounter with the supernatural embodies a carefully balanced power structure. The human figure is mostly unaware of the supernatural presence, since the supernatural is keeping its presence unbeknown to the human - “angels see us though we see them not,” as Rossetti puts it in *The Face of the Deep* (1892).⁶³ When this balance is broken by either side (as in “Goblin Market” (1859), “From House to Home” (1858) or “Repining”), punishment follows. This punishment usually affects human sight – either by effective blindness as in “Shut Out” (1856) where the speaker is barred out of the world with “no loophole great or small/ Through which my straining eyes might look” and consequently sits there “blinded with tears” (19-20; 22), or by seeing the previously unknown/ unseen, as in “Repining” or “From House to Home” where the speaker is faced with gruesome apocalyptic images. This haunting but invisible presence of the spiritual other, the suppressed longing for companionship and grotesque visions that have nothing to do with “reality”, are the main characteristics of Rossetti’s liminality that deny wholeness and self-sufficiency to human experience.

In the “real” world, the withdrawal similar to the state explored by Rossetti is mostly triggered by traumatic experience and thus is closely associated with the architecture of the mind – interaction of memory and forgetting, and the ability to project the image of self through inner vision. A trauma, which is primarily a bodily experience, can be extended to conceptualize injuries, inflicted on the mind, or self. In this framework a

⁶² John Schad, *Victorians in Theory: From Derrida to Browning* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 8-9.

⁶³ *The Face of the Deep*, p. 221.

person, having survived a traumatic experience, might create a version of oneself, one that has no connections to the accident (in other worlds, shut oneself out). Thus, multiple personality is always “an idiom of distress,”⁶⁴ a disconnection from bodily traumatic experience and a disruption of the memory continuity. A similar mechanism is triggered by a number of neurological disorders, such as Alzheimer, when the person’s self becomes “petrified” (using the sharp description of Daniel Mograbi), in the moment before his ability to form new episodic memories is impaired.⁶⁵ Lingering effects of any traumatic experience or neurological disorder include hallucinations, memory erasure, confusion of time and space – in this sense traumatic experience becomes a compressed liminal passage. The connection is strengthened by the fact that the neophytes in the liminal rite were often subjected to painful/ traumatic initiation. The vocabulary of neurological shock and liminality has other parallels as well. It includes purification, an important point in Turner’s liminality (which I will discuss at a later stage) and in medical texts, where the mechanisms of mental self-defence after a traumatic experience include cleansing, often expressed through partial loss of memories. Another point of intersection lies with the idea of absence. Liminal personae are not considered present in the real world. At the same time trauma often induces in the victims a state of altered consciousness or unconsciousness when they either believe to be elsewhere or are delirious. Another shared characteristic is that of emptiness and depletion – as an aftermath of a powerful emotion in trauma, and as the process of stripping of social and symbolic significance in the process of liminal rite. So if we translate liminality from the mythopoetic language of symbols into the language of body functioning, the definition will focus on disrupted continuity of physical and psychological activities.

Both examples of malfunctionment (traumatic/ triggered by mental illness) illustrate how a person becomes trapped in the in-between state, having first severed the links to the previous experiences and being unable to reconnect to them. The inability of change

⁶⁴ See: ed. Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory* (New-York; London: Routledge, 1996).

⁶⁵ Anil Ananthaswamy, *The Man Who Wasn’t There: Investigations into the Strange New Science of the Self* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), p. 55. Daniel Mograbi, quoted here, is one of the research students mentioned in the book.

denies liminality, which is, by nature, transitional; here transition has become a permanent condition. Rossetti's liminality though bears a certain resemblance with this petrification of self – her liminality, as we will see, is never fulfilled, as her speakers pause on the threshold of final transformation/ acquisition of power.

A similar example of trauma-induced blindness, accompanied by physical paralysis and mental fragmentation,⁶⁶ would be Laura's initiation into the goblin world in "Goblin Market." Few critics would disagree that Laura is traumatized by her encounter with the goblins. Tim Armstrong argues in his analysis of the pre-Freudian discourse of shock that "[t]here is a wound attached to the traumatic situation; a wound which is at first neurological, then fantastic, and finally located somewhere between the two."⁶⁷ Laura's experience can be seen as following this pattern. Medical studies suggest that a reaction to a tense emotional and physical experience would involve her trying to act normally. At the same time it would initiate a disruption of temporal and physical continuity. While she repeats the same actions as usual - "Fetch'd in honey, milk'd the cows,/ Air'd and set to rights the house" (203-204), - she seems to be more and more withdrawn from the world. Indeed, her whole reaction seems to be out of tune with the world: she is "in an absent dream" and "sick in part." This sickness that produces an absence is a key element of Rossetti's poetics. Moreover, she is depicted as being deprived of her sight and hearing. This gradual exhaustion of physicality, which is caused by her meeting the goblins and tasting their fruit, is similar to her being ousted from the familiar world. Now, Laura "no more swept the house,.../ But sat down listless in the chimney-nook/ And would not eat" (293-298). There are no positive verbs in this list – all the actions are given through their absence. I will come back to this idea of negative lists later; at this stage I am mostly concerned with Rossetti's haunting duplication of vision: on one hand, we are tempted to imagine Laura as re-enacting her

⁶⁶ For the study of the cultural formation of trauma theory in the Victorian period, see Jill L. Maltus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶⁷ Tim Armstrong, "Two Types of Shock in Modernity", *Critical Quarterly* 42:1 (2000): 60-73, p. 64. I must admit I do not necessarily support Armstrong's distinction between pre-Freudian shock and post-Freudian trauma. Though the neurasthenic description of shock as producing torpor and arrested reaction corresponds to Rossetti's description of Laura's state, I believe there is a deeper psychological reaction to it.

daily activities, yet on the other, through negation, this image is overlayed by her non-and un-doing her former self.

Jill L. Matus, citing Herbert Page's article "Shock from Fright," compares the state of unconsciousness that follows the shock to the deprivation of free will as incurred by hypnosis. Both are "altered states of consciousness", interfering with "memory and self-possession" and bringing about "a model of the mind as capable of a range of states of consciousness, each of which may have their own memory strands – a series of discontinuous selves."⁶⁸ I read Laura's metamorphosis as an example of self-denial and argue that Laura becomes a kind of layered persona, memories of her goblin encounter competing with her denial of the fact as evidenced in her becoming deaf and blind to the merchants. Similarly to Alzheimer mechanism, described earlier, Laura is shut out in the narrative that existed before her traumatic loss. Different Lauras co-exist in the same body: the Laura that is torn by the "passionate yearning" and "baulk'd desire," and the Laura who is ousting her memories by shutting herself out of the world, "[i]n sullen silence of exceeding pain." Laura's (sub)conscious desire to see the goblins and eat their fruit is blocked by her desire not to see them given that it is unacceptable by society, as in the case of Jeanie who seemingly violated all the conventions by meeting the goblins and taking gifts from them, which resulted in her dwindling away during the day.

We know that in the liminal space the usual characteristics of objects are deconstructed and reassigned to ensure that initiands reflect on the ideas and sentiments that were taken for granted before. This de- and re-construction produces a certain displacement of understanding and Rossetti, by using trance-like imagery, shows Laura's shifts in conscious memory constructions. It is evident that Laura strives to forget the goblin fruit: while in the continuous temporal reality her sister inhabits, the goblin merchants still come every day and promote their fruit, yet Laura neither sees them nor hears them. At the same time, her behaviour shows that she cannot accept this fact as she "kept watch in vain" and dreams "of melons, as a traveller sees/ False waves in desert drouth/ With shade of leaf-crowned trees" (289-291). Her oblivion to the goblins is opposed both to reality and memory in a double way: as the looming presence of death and then,

⁶⁸ Maltus, opus cit., p. 69.

as “an erasure of what once was thought to be known,”⁶⁹ shutting her out of the world of the living by denying her the access to memory and the world of language. Once again, visual perception is linked to the power of recollection – neither being able to recollect, nor to see, she is denied both physical and spiritual vision.

Visually, at least, Lizzie’s adventure also leads her to a limited life-in-death experience when encountering the goblins. If Laura, as we have seen, is described through non-actions, the goblins are depicted through their motions: first they are described as “hobbling,/ Flying, running, leaping/ Puffing and blowing,/ Chuckling, clapping, crowing,/ Clucking and gobbling” (331-335). In their interaction with Lizzie, they “trod and hustled her,/ Elbowed and jostled her,/ Clawed with their nails,/ Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking” (399-402). And even Lizzie, with her few slow moves towards them, seems almost motionless under their attacking gaze. As Lorraine Jansen Kooistra puts it,

[v]enturing into the outside world means that Lizzie becomes a spectacle as well as a spectator: the goblins “spy” her at the very moment that she begins her furtive “peeping” ... [Lizzie] has the power to be both spectator and spectacle without forfeiting her individual subjectivity ... The dynamics of looking in “Goblin Market” radically challenge the binary opposition between active male “se-er” and passive female “seen”.⁷⁰

Indeed, Lizzie is both watching the goblins and being watched, she is “spied” upon while “peeping.” Kooistra comes to the conclusion that a middle-class woman in the Victorian period is always in the centre of intersecting gazes and cannot live in the world without looking and being looked at. I suggest that the opposition of sight and blindness in “Goblin Market” is even more complex. True, it is Laura who experiences a catatonic loss of sight, and Lizzie keeps the ability to see the goblins. But initially

⁶⁹ William E. Engel, ‘The decay of memory’, in Christopher Ivic and Grant Williams, eds. *Forgetting in Early Modern English Literature and Culture: Lethe’s Legacies*. (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 21-40, p.26.

⁷⁰ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, “Visualizing the Fantastic Subject” in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, ed. Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 137-169, p.140.

Lizzie is unable to “see” the allure of the fruit. It is her encounter with the goblins that opens a different type of vision for her (“for the first time in her life / Began to listen and look” (327-328)), and even that is half-fulfilled. The goblins “vanish” without “leaving root or stone or shoot” (441), and the trauma of temptation and the sight of the supernatural disappear with them. Lizzie is not initiated into a different world – she is shut out of it, for good or for bad. Her personality stays whole, and does not undergo a liminal split in a way her sister’s did. She is able to walk away from the space of the conflict, and does not look back. In this sense, if Laura experiences a liminal transformation (isolated, deprived of all previous characteristics and ties, passive and finally acquiring new powers), Lizzie is not a part of the liminal process. Thus the difference between Laura’s and Lizzie’s transgressions can be read through terms of looking back at the temptation and thus disrupting the safety of home. In addressing the idea of home in Rossetti’s poetry in relation to Anglican sisterhoods, Scott Rogers shows how easy it is to transform a home into a prison.⁷¹ With this continuously imposed protection from (often imaginary) threats, the home indeed becomes a site of entrapment, and the opposition between Lizzie and Laura can be read as a failed attempt to break the imprisonment from the outside.

But Laura does look back (thus transgressing an old taboo): in a way, her eating the goblin fruit twice is a kind of a looking back, and hence the punishment. I would suggest that her second consumption was as painful and threatening as the first, although by Biblical convention rescue should come at a price. Laura’s awakening is described more in the tortured, convulsive language of large-scale destruction and mortal combat with self ending in ambiguity: “Sense failed in the mortal strife:/ .../ Pleasure past and anguish past,/ Is it death or is it life?” (512; 521-523) This passage can be read in a traditionally religious context as a case of exorcism, with Laura being possessed by the goblins and evil spirits escaping her body after a complex and painful ritual; or even purification which includes purification of uncleanness and guilt. This reading provides yet another link to Turner’s liminality as liminal personae are regarded as both polluted and polluting to those “who have never been... ‘inoculated’ against

⁷¹ Scott Rogers, “Re-reading sisterhood in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Noble Sisters’ and ‘Sister Maude’”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500 – 1900*, 43. 4 (2003): 859-875.

them, through having been themselves initiated into the same state,”⁷² and hence secluded, partially or completely, from the social structure. This seclusion is metaphorically expressed through Laura’s deaf and blind body. Her deafness and blindness to the fruit is of a different kind. In *The Face of the Deep* Rossetti writes that “blindness or deafness seals up eye or ear against pollution,”⁷³ thus preventing from sin, yet closing the way to transfiguration and liminal resurgence. At the same time, Lizzie is closed to her sister’s pollution – and her inner sight is not to be restored through transformation.

Still, in the moment of extreme stress and impending transgression, the ability of (inner) sight can be restored. This process of sight-restoration is similar to that of seeing accidental colours, widely researched and referred to in the Victorian period.⁷⁴ The gaze directed at the sun is usually blinded, but at the same time it produces accidental chimeras. When the change of illumination is sudden or rapid, our visual system’s adaptive mechanisms respond too sluggishly to keep up with the change, thus rendering us temporarily “blind” until the adjustment process has been completed. This temporal displacement affects our colour perception, so it depends not on the actual qualities of the object, but on the failure of our perception “Thus, after looking at the bright sun, all objects appear dark; that dark colour is the accidental colour of the bright sun.”⁷⁵

⁷² Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p. 236.

⁷³ *The Face of the Deep*, p. 118.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Sir David Brewster, *A Treatise on New Philosophical Instruments for Various Purposes in the Arts and Sciences with Experiments on Light and Colours* (London: John Murray; Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1813); Sir David Brewster, *On the Action of Transparent Bodies Upon the Differently Coloured Rays of Light, from the Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Neill & Co; 1815); Sir David Brewster, *A Treatise on Optics* (London: John Taylor, 1831); John Fearn, *An Appeal to Philosophers, By Name, on the Demonstration of Vision in the Brain, and against the Attack by Sir David Brewster, on the Rationale of Cerebral Vision* (London: Messrs. Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1837); James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1869), in two vols, vol. 2. About colours in poetry of various poets see: Allan C. Christensen, “Newtonian and Goethean colours in the Poetry of Keats” in ed. C.C. Barfoot, *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods* (Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1999), pp. 53-78;

⁷⁵ Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable: Giving the Derivation, Source, or Origin of Common Phrases, Allusions, and Words that Have a Tale to Tell* (Henry Altemus Company, 1898).

Brewster in his treatise on optics describes Sir Isaac Newton's experiments seeing "phantom of light and color," after looking at the sun in the mirror and then turning his eye to the dark corner of the room. It is curious to note that as a result of the experiment he had to shut himself up in a completely dark room to recover his sight.⁷⁶ On a similar note, Rossetti starts her "Christmas Eve" (before 1886) with an almost oxymoronic "Christmas hath a darkness/ Brighter than the blazing noon," – a description that could suit Brewster's argument about two lights cancelling each other out and producing darkness.⁷⁷

An encounter with the supernatural blinds us as if we were gazing at the sun, which, according to Rosenblum, is the watcher's final fulfillment, the ultimate bid for completeness. At the same time, this completeness is never fulfilled, a paradox I will address later in this thesis. On one hand, "the speaker of the devotional poems offers herself as spectacle and a witness, a figure carved in stone"⁷⁸ to the gaze she is supposed to meet face to face. On the other, the encounter is one-directional, so her own looking is prohibited. Thus I argue that myths about taboos and crises of looking, reflections and blindness are useful in approaching Christina Rossetti's texts. In the carefully stated encounters with the supernatural, her protagonists reenact these taboos of seeing, but not as Orpheus or Tiresias, figures that Catherine Maxwell reclaims for Victorian male poets; but rather as Medusa and Eurydice, both victim and cause, object and tool of perception. Although Maxwell places both poets at the origin of the poet's feminine identification, still their stories are shaped, or at least caused by their actions. The transformations of both Medusa and Eurydice were not caused by their actions, but by them being acted upon (Medusa is turned into a monster because she was raped by a god, and into a deathly weapon because she was killed by a hero. Eurydice was called back to earth because she was missed by a human lover, and dismissed into the deadlands because this lover could not keep his promise not to look at her). We know nothing about their desires, as whatever happens to them is the direct result of desires of others (as Julia Walker writes about Medusa, "she metaphorically reflects the desires of

⁷⁶ Sir David Brewster, *Treatise on Optics* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845), p.256.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 115.

⁷⁸ Rosenblum, "Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry," opus cit., p. 40.

the other figures in the story").⁷⁹ In a similar way, Rossetti's speakers are not the ones who inflict the taboo upon them, but rather they are put under the circumstances when the taboo is inflicted upon them by supernatural forces.

In one of her earliest poems, "The Dead City" (1847), Rossetti's protagonist embarks on a "careless" journey through the "tangled" (3) woods filled with "labyrinths"(4). Despite those hints at its ambiguous nature, the landscape reads almost like a paradise where "the life and joy eternal, / Without Death's or Sorrow's test" (39-40). However, the landscape changes drastically at the moment when the speaker seems to be entering a distinctly different type of space – the birds disappear, and "the pale sun/ shone with a strange lurid sheen" (64-65), as the darkness enwraps her: "I saw nought, I heard no sound;/ Solid darkness overhead,/ With a trembling cautious tread/ Passed I o'er the unseen ground" (67-70). The moment of blindness and the moment of crossing – the unseeing and the unseen - mark the passage through the threshold. As Diane d'Amico notes in relation to another Rossetti poem, "From Sunset to Star Rise" (1865), the darkness with no stars or other sources of light implies a loss of Christian hope;⁸⁰ at the same time, Rossetti writes in *The Face of the Deep* that "though his eyes be sealed against Sun and moon, he is not blind who sees Christ ... The veiled and downcast eyes discern fairer objects."⁸¹

The place the speaker is entering belongs to no Christian world. This crossing is repeated when a glimmering beam of light brings her to a gate that marks the entrance to "a city of white stone." All the carefully described and catalogued beauties of the city (ll. 121-125) make it even more menacing. It is not that life is completely absent from the city, but rather that human life is neither visible nor heard: "Yet I heard no human sound;/ All was still and silent round/ As a city of the dead (93-95)". At the same time Rossetti is keen to note that "[e]very tree was fresh and green; /... / Strong and sapful

⁷⁹ Julia M. Walker, *Medusa's Mirrors: Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and the Metamorphosis of the Female Self* (London and Cranbury and Mississauga, Ontario: Associated University Presses, 1998), p. 46.

⁸⁰ Diane d'Amico. "Christina Rossetti's "From Sunset to Star Rise": A New Reading", *Victorian Poetry* 27.1 (1989): 95-100.

⁸¹ *The Face of the Deep*, p. 513.

were the root" (141-145).⁸² The same is true of the description of fruit varieties, which is similar to the description of the orchard in a *paradys d'amours*, where this mouth-watering enumeration stresses "their fragrance and the production of food without human effort":

Sun-red apples, streaked, and fair;
Here the nectarine and peach
And ripe plums lay...

...
And the lemon wan and fair.
And unnumbered others too... (182-184; 193-196) ⁸³

For Rossetti, who was well-versed in medieval texts, this garden imagery also helps to establish and play with a constellation of possible meanings. Her garden description here produces a palimpsest of inherited landscapes familiar to the reader: not only biblical *hortus conclusus*, but also a pleasure garden, a garden of sinful delights where all the pleasant qualities of plants revert to their tempting side. The place itself becomes the temptation, as a site of erotic intrigue and attraction for the Dreamer/Lover, which is later exposed as a trap, a false paradise that can only lead the Lover to sin, imagery to which I return later in this chapter.

On entering the city the speaker experiences a temporary loss of her ability to hear and see. This subsequently causes a disruption in the physical reality of the place and a reversal of subject/object roles. She never re-gains hearing within the liminal space of

⁸² These "sapful roots" prefigure those in "Spring" (1859) - "What shall make their sap ascend/ That they may put forth shoots" (3-4) and "seeds, and roots, and stones of fruits,/ Swollen with sap put forth their shoots" (15-16)) – in "Goblin Market," a reference to which I will return.

⁸³ See also Roger Wiehe, "Sacred and Profane Gardens: Self-Reflection and Desire in Pre-Raphaelite Painting and the Poetry of the Rossettis" in *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*, ed. Liane De Girolami Cheney (New York: Lewinston), pp. 110-121, specifically pp. 113-118. For example, in *Romance of the Rose*, the garden "bearing quinces, peaches, nuts, chestnuts, apples, and pears, medlars, white and black plums, fresh red cherries, sorb-apples, service-berries, and haselnuts" could well have served as the place where the goblins got their stock. The quote is taken from Laura L. Howes, *Chaucer's Gardens and the Language of Convention* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), p. 20.

the city, but at the same time becomes both the spectator watching the empty city and its dead inhabitants and a spectacle who is subjected to their gaze. The speaker's reaction to the setting can be read in parallel to Laura's experience when she goes deaf to goblin sounds. However, on the margins of the story, instead of the liminal goblins – monstrous communicators of the sacred knowledge - there are petrified humans, cold and silent with "life-like look and smile." Although one must assume that statues are blind, Rossetti seems to grant them the ability to gaze (if not to see): "And methought that silently/ Many seemed to look on me/ With strange steadfast eyes that shone" (258-260). Serena Trowbridge reads this poem in parallel with Ruskin's theory of the grotesque, which brings the statues and the goblins even closer. She evokes Ruskin's idea that the human image should not be malformed or turned into a grotesque due to its theological significance; thus both goblins, keeping both animal and human creatures, and the statues, humans petrified in their sin, represent the low kind of grotesque that should be banned.⁸⁴ Is the protagonist to petrify as well, or could she avoid this fate having tasted the fruit of the moral? Trowbridge rightfully notes that the cause of petrification is never disclosed – both unexplained and unfulfilled, two major tropes of Rossetti's poetics and main characteristics of the space of the liminal.

The petrification of the inhabitants of the city is reminiscent of the multiple speakers of Rossetti's devotional poetry, lamenting their frozen and stone-like experience of life. Trowbridge mentions the protagonist of "A Better Resurrection", whose heart is "like a stone" (II, 1-2) and whose life is "like a frozen thing" (I, 13) and redeems him through his address to Christ. A similar idea is found in "What Would I Give," a poem written in 1864 and celebrating absence and unfulfillment. The speaker wishes for a warm heart of flesh "[i]nstead of this heart of stone ice-cold whatever I do; /Hard and cold and small, of all hearts the worst of all" (1-3). Partially petrified (and hence grotesque), the speaker laments her lack of words and inability to communicate, resulting in parting with her friends. Both characteristics (passivity and silence) suit Turner's liminal neophyte; moreover, the mention of the stain in the third stanza ("to wash the black mark clean.../ To wash the stain ingrain" (8-9)) brings us to the idea of the pollution. The reference to tears having the power to clean (repentance and atonement) hints that this petrification comes from past transgressions, yet the poems give us no indication as

⁸⁴ Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti's Gothic*, opus cit., p. 173.

to whether the supplication and transformation are granted (the transformation, in compliance with the liminal law, shall bring upon the neophyte new, superhuman powers). In a similar way, Laura is slowly being petrified after her experience of the goblin world (“Laura turned cold as stone/To find her sister heard that cry alone” (252-253)). At the moment she faces the goblins, Lizzie is also compared to a rock (“White and golden Lizzie stood, / Like a lily in a flood, - / Like a rock of blue-veined stone/ … / Like a beacon left alone/ In a hoary roaring sea” (408-410, 411-12)). Although in the case of Lizzie we should also mention the religious connotations of spiritual security, both instances are related to the moment of temptation.

The same idea of petrification when facing a temptation, at least initially, can be seen in Rossetti’s “Shut Out” (1856). One way to read this poem is to emphasize that the speaker is being shut in at the same time as being shut out. Literally speaking, the protagonist is not petrified, but surrounded by a stone wall which deprives her of the interaction with the world and of vision. The description of the garden is reminiscent both of the goblin’s “mossy glen” and the pastoral landscape of “The Dead City”, and the speaker, being deprived of her ability to see it, is at the same time physically guarded from the encounter with the tempting and dangerous beauty. Not to be able to see, then, is to be protected from it, unless you’re Laura who has tasted the fruits and can no longer see or hear temptation (again, blindness and deafness seal up against sin). It might be argued whether there is a difference between knowing the fruit there but not seeing (Lizzy) as in intuitive or reasoning sight, and seeing materially (Laura) – looking full-on. Rossetti answers this question in *The Face of the Deep*: “Whether natural or spiritual, eyes that look are the eyes likely to see. Meditation fixes the spiritual eye on matters worthy of insight: it sees something; it may gradually perceive more and more.”⁸⁵ The shut-out state both favours meditation over true spiritual beauty and offers protection against the dangers of the physical lure.

In the Victorian age that itself was “caught between a Romanticism it no longer trusted and a Classicism it could no longer attain,” gardens were often seen as “places of isolation, imprisonment and withdrawal” identified with the feminine persona displaced

⁸⁵ *The Face of the Deep*, p. 272.

from the social world into the tower in the garden.⁸⁶ This idea is linked to the quest of “the lover outside” breaking into the enclosure, where the garden becomes a neutral zone with the male hero lingering on the borderline and encouraging the feminine persona to break the social barrier, as in Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855). Rossetti seems to be oblivious of the social transgression of the coming-through-the-garden moment. Her gardens present a dichotomy of their own. As Terry Comito puts it in his *The Idea of the Garden in the Renaissance*, gardens serve as revelatory spaces due to the “the peculiar way their forms make visible an area in which art and life, mind and nature, finally intersect”, as “models of the way in which the mind conceives its relation to the world external to itself.”⁸⁷

Wiehle suggests that gardens in Rossetti overlay spiritual zeal and emotional instability to represent “a tormenting and seemingly unconscious impasse … between sexuality and moral aspiration.”⁸⁸ I suggest a reading different from Wiehle’s highly psychosexual sublimated landscapes. On one hand, Rossetti’s gardens evoke imagery of the Virgin as being shut in a paradise on earth.⁸⁹ Chastity as one of the primal female virtues was transcribed into text through the image of an enclosed garden, a sealed space spiritually and temporarily connected with the primeval garden of Eden and whose symbolical eco-system is not disrupted by any outside influence. Another meaning of a garden is that of the place of reunion with Christ: as Rossetti tells the story of Mary Magdalen, “she ministered to the Lord of her substance, she stood by the Cross, she sat over against the Sepulchre, she sought Christ in the empty grave, and

⁸⁶ See, for example, Pauline Fletcher, “Romantic and Anti-Romantic Gardens in Tennyson and Swinburne” in *Romanticism* 18:1 (Spring 1979): 81-97, specifically p. 81 or for an analysis of gardens in Christina Rossetti; and Roger Wiehe, “Sacred and Profane Gardens,” opus cit., pp. 110-121.

⁸⁷ Terry Comito. *The Idea of the Garden in the Renaissance* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978), p. xii.

⁸⁸ Wiehe, “Sacred and Profane Gardens”, pp. 114-115.

⁸⁹ One of the earliest sources to connect the Virgin with the Bride of the Song of Songs was Paschasius Radbertus as early as the 9th century; while in the 12th century Ruper of Deutz explicitly links the *hortus conclusus* to the earthly paradise and further emphasized that Mary was “conclusa”, closed, both when she conceived, and at the moment of the birth of Jesus. This positive vision of enclosure is important in analyzing Rossetti’s poetry.

found Him and was found of Him in the contiguous garden.”⁹⁰ This opposition (sought in the empty grave and found in the garden) invites various readings in a Rossetti context. In *Time Flies* she would mention that a garden is a place of surveillance and crowd where the angels are watched and watching, plural and yet alone: “A garden full of silence and of dew, / .../ Surely a garden full of Angels too, / Wondering, on watch, alone.”⁹¹ Moreover, in “The Chiefest Among Ten Thousand” (1856) she equates Christ with the Garden (and the fruit): “Thyself the Vines with living Fruit, / The twelvefold fruited Tree of Life” (9:10) – thus establishing a dangerous link with “Goblin Market.”

At the same time there is also a darker side of the place – that of a pleasure garden of sinful delights where all the pleasant qualities of plants revert to their tempting side. In a similar way, in “Shut-Out” the speaker was in the garden, but now is found behind the walls (in the grave?) looking at “my garden, mine, beneath the sky, / ... / With all its nest and stately trees / It had been mine and it was lost” (3; 6:7). Katja Brandt offers a close parallel reading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” to follow the transformation of the garden from a place of bliss into a place of temptation,⁹² with a reference to the plot of Jean de Meun’s continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*.

The garden is an anti-temporal marker as it denies the seasonal flow of time (there seems to be no threat of winter but eternal spring/ summer with its blooming greenery and autumn with its fruits). At the same time it is a place of unfulfillment, where the characters are devoid of any characteristic or development; an important characteristic of Rossetti’s poetry that I analyse in the second part of the thesis. But it is the positive impact of passage through unfulfillment that I emphasize in my reading of “Shut Out.” What readers usually perceive as punishment – the spirit who is both shadowless (immaterial/ having no reflection) and silent (having no voice) builds a wall around the speaker – can equally be seen as salvation. The stone wall without loopholes to peep through also serves as the necessary means to construct the speaker’s identity. In his

⁹⁰ *Time Flies*, p. 139.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 264

⁹² Katja Brandt, *Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”: Milton Revised or Revived?*, (Abo: Abo Akademi University Press, 2006).

Poetics of Space (1994), Gaston Bachelard explores the notion of home as an inhabited space where “the imagination builds ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows”. At home people “comfort... [themselves] with the illusion of protection – or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls... the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter.”⁹³ Hence the possible duality of any house-place: it can be both a shelter and a trap, an inhabited and a haunted site. Any closed space has the potential to become a consolidation of fears and memories, thus being entrapped and being protected within the same walls conveys the same layered feeling of suspension, de-socialization and solitude. Bachelard further explains that we both suffer from and enjoy solitude, and our imaginary walls are always present within us strictly because we want them to remain there. A shell, a garret, an attic, - they can be read as a “hear-warming space... that does not seek to become extended, but would like above all still to be possessed”⁹⁴ – thus presenting a double logic of possession that challenges the ideas of negative side of isolation. Most critics overemphasize Rossetti’s “aesthetics of endurance” to the extent of saying that she should “bury herself alive in a coffin of renunciation.”⁹⁵ But I believe her attitude towards isolation is far more complex and involves a fair assessment of the duality of her position.

Indeed, Rossetti’s speakers’ solitude is both imposed on them by outer forces and welcomed by them. Their state is similar to a chrysalis – they are shut out in their sleep before their future transfiguration, thus the link to the liminal transformation is strengthened even further. Bachelard mentions the chrysalis as one of the necessary characteristics of a perfect house, and this shut-outness, the tower-like (as it imposes an all-round isolation) wall around Self can also be read as an empty, discarded shell of the physical world. At the same time the imagery of the chrysalis retraces the idea of embodied selfhood, the background of our social interaction. The breaking down of this system ousts the person from the human world (as I have mentioned in relation to

⁹³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 5.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.10.

⁹⁵See Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*, opus cit; Kathleen Blake, *Love and the Woman Question: The Art of Self-Postponement* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1983); Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbott, *The Language of Exclusion: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987); and others.

trauma and psychological breakdown) into a liminal catatonic state where all connections with reality are lost.

The price for this transformation might be high – “nought is left worth looking at/ Since my delightful land is gone” (23-24). At the same time, however, we may assume that this loss is temporary (“And bid my home remember me/ Until I come to it again” (15-16)), and that the changes in the perception of the speaker have already started: “And good they are, but not the best;/ And dear they are, but not so dear” (27-28). Rosenblum makes a parallel between “Goblin Market” and “Shut-Out” as projections of gardens of the self (“the garden remains whole and stands for the ideal self, while exile stands for thwarted potential”)⁹⁶ where either the garden should be ruined or the soul dispossessed of it. Thus the place of entrapment becomes a mould which will save the soul from temptation/ perversion, a place of transformation.

The process of transfiguration is undoubtedly painful. Rossetti’s interest in this shut-out space can be traced back to a conversation with Theodore Watt. They were discussing Chinese children “who are imprisoned from their infancy in some fantastic mould, such as vase, and compelled to grow into its shape” to which Rossetti remarks, “a new horror for my imagination.”⁹⁷ Indeed, many a character in her poems seems to be trapped in the limiting and liminal space, seemingly shaped by its contours into a new – purified - Self. This is resonant with Ruskin’s idea that “[a]s soon as you are shut off from the rest of the universe into a Self, you begin to be alive”⁹⁸ – an opinion that he voices in discussion of the female role in *The Ethics of Dust* (1866). The immutability and impenetrability within a certain given pattern was generally perceived as a positive thing in the closed domestic space of Victorian middle-class women. Men were expected to change and to grow; women had to be petrified in their goodness and

⁹⁶ Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 85-86.

⁹⁷ Theodore Watts in *The Nineteenth century: a monthly review* 37.216 (March 1877-December 1900 (Feb 1895)): 355-366, p. 364.

⁹⁸ John Ruskin, *The Ethics of the Dust. Ten Lectures to Little Housewives on the Elements of Crystallisation* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1867), p. 46. This argument was also put forward by Anna Krugovoy Silver in *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 59-63, but she focuses on the bodily restrictions and self-control rather than other aspects.

innocence – in other words, to grow into a given space. The guardian of “Shut-Out” could have mentored the protagonist in a very Ruskinian voice: “the best—out and out the best—way of understanding the thing, is to crystallize yourselves.”⁹⁹ Losing sight of the tempting world, they had all the expectations of acquiring a new, spiritual vision, no matter whether it brought them power or misery. The only strength that awaits them, is to look up; the only weakness, to look back.

“The Convent Threshold”, a poem about looking back on the borderline of transgression, also deals with the idea of punishment. The female figure is about to be shut out of this world, a punishment that she seems to be embracing as she repents her transgression. Rossetti employs her peculiar pattern of splitting and mirroring the same situation; a pattern that invokes the principle of kaleidoscopism I have mentioned above, where different perspectives compensate for a lack of agency, as looking might replace moving. It also reiterates Turner’s ideas of deconstruction and reintegration of the liminal sacra, as different stories are brought together in a complex narrative. There is the framing story - the speaker saying goodbye to her lover as she says goodbye to the world, repenting a crime. There are her visions of the future for both of them. There is her over-seeing of his present (from this passage we guess that they are not in the same temporal or spatial reality) and the retelling of their past. Finally, there are her two dreams. One is a nightmarish vision of “a spirit with transfigured face,” whose story can be read as symbolising redemption of sin (as the spirit can be a visionary projection not only of Satan, but also of the female or her lover). The other is a dream-within-a-dream: the speaker imagines herself talking through sleep to her lover and refusing his advances; as she mentions that “my pillow is damp, my sheets are red” (117), there is a hint of her dying/ being dead. This feeling is further emphasized as she is “like lead, /Crushed downwards through the sodden earth” (122-123) in a possible image of burial. When the morning comes, she is transformed again – and again, Rossetti stresses her similarity with a dead person.

This complexity of narratives is further emphasised by repetitive reversals of roles. On one hand, the female protagonist is being punished for a possible illicit love affair and possible murder of her relatives (“There’s blood between us, love, my love” (1)), a

⁹⁹ Ruskin, *The Ethics of the Dust*, p. 42.

threshold that she cannot trespass. On the other, she is the punishing spirit for her lover on whom she imposes a taboo of not-seeing and repentance (there is no indication as to whether this punishment is deserved). This doubling and reversal is re-enacted on a different level: it is her own image that makes her lover tarry and linger on his way to redemption (thus we assume that she is beautiful and tempting), but in the closing dream she is dead and ugly, as if her crimes are re-inscribed onto her body.

Susan Conley offers a variety of parallels for this female protagonist in her analysis, ranging from Beatrice (who in her turn bears a link to the myth about Orpheus and Euridice's violation of the taboo of looking back) to the Medusa.¹⁰⁰ I would add that this transformation is telling – there is no single woman, as there is no single narrative. Her dreams mark her liminal passage to her transformation ending in death-like experience; it is doubled (once in a dream with transformation into a dead-like figure, and once – projected – in Paradise where she is to meet her lover). Throughout her transformation, the woman herself becomes the threshold - the temptation and the impediment to the return to pastoral and erotic bliss.

The speaker's unique position is stressed by her acquiring the ability to look simultaneously in various directions – to occupy multiple points in the same spatial and temporal reality. Her position is explicitly marginalised, creating a liminal space of alterity. As Nicola Rollock suggests in relation to racial minorities, “[t]hose excluded from the centre can experience a ‘perspective advantage’ as their experiences become informed by a panoramic dialectic offering a wider lens.”¹⁰¹ Lindsay Smith in her comparison of Morris' “Rapunzel” and Tennyson's “The Lady of Shalott”, emphasizes the difference in their optical agency: while Rapunzel “is allowed to look directly out of, and down from, the tower, the Lady in Tennyson's poem has for her visual field merely the circumscribed site of a mirror, that which might be linked... with the projected

¹⁰⁰Susan Conley, “Burying the Medusa: Romantic Bloodlines in Christina Rossetti's Gothic Epistle”, in *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth Century Women's Poetry*, ed. Barbara Garlick, (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 97-115.

¹⁰¹ Nicola Rollock, “The Invisibility of Race: Intersectional Reflections on the Liminal Space of Alterity” in *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 15.1 (2012): 65-84, p. 65.

image of a camera obscura.”¹⁰² Compared to those, Rossetti’s speaker acquires a 360-degree vision, similar to second sight or Ruskin’s double vision. At one point, she and her lover are looking in the opposite directions (“Your eyes look earthward, mine look up” (17)), yet she is able to tell him what he sees as if seeing with his eyes instead of him (and *she* sees an earthly Paradise in the natural harmony of exuberant plenitude). This Paradise is reminiscent of gardens in other texts of Rossetti, and it has to be renounced. Only through this separation in the earthly Paradise can they be reunited in the real Paradise in Heaven. If, for Smith, Tennyson’s ‘Lady’ is shut out “within the agency of ‘old’ mediums (mirror and Claude glass) … Rapunzel is entitled to a ‘natural’ binocular view of the world.” Rossetti’s speaker has kaleidoscopic vision – as fragmented as it is, it constructs known geometrical patterns, confirming spiritual truth already known to the speaker. The balance of power between the speaker and her lover lies with vision: it seems that while the latter is urged to “kneel, wrestle, knock, do violence, pray” (48) – all verbs of (inter)action, - he stays oblivious of it; the shut-out speaker is the only one who can see both the world and the dreamscape.

The two dreams can be read as a switch from the changeable position of the male spirit in the first dream to the petrified female in the second, from the subject to the object. At the same time, there is a curious fusion of subject and object in the gaze. In the first dream, she describes the rise of “a spirit with transfigured face”, seeking light and learning the price of the true love. In the second dream, she describes herself dreaming in a grave-like place and her male friend coming to her and asking whether she dreams of him. The polyphony of subjects is fused into one: we are almost tempted to believe that the male spirit of the first dream is her idealized vision of the friend she wants to repent, and that his grief in the second dream is displaced temporally but actually precedes the second dream. Then the proper temporal structure for this encounter would be: the male friend, desperate to lose his female companion (“You smote your hands but not in mirth,/ And reeled but were not drunk with wine” (124-125)) would succumb to her plea, repent, seek light and meet her in Paradise (“we shall meet as once we met,/ And love with old familiar love” (147-148)).

¹⁰² Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry*, opus cit, p. 136., p. 143.

Conley reads the female in the second dream as a reference to the deadly Medusa with her “plenteous hair” (112) and the deadly face she refuses to show. The Medusa myth presents a curious parallel with the taboo of gazing and the reversal of desires. The myth presents a mirrored structure of the gaze since, as Julia Walker reminds us, “Medusa is both victim and monster and becomes both by being the object of a gaze.”¹⁰³ Whatever happens to her is the direct result of desires of others, and she acts as a reflection, a threshold for others to transgress. Rossetti reverses this structure: her speaker is unfulfilled and fragmented in order to repent and transcend. The lethal optics of the Medusa in Rossetti’s poem are veiled, and the curse is to be lifted by the repentance of the male speaker. When he seeks to see her face, she explains that “It tarries veiled in paradise” (140) and promises that this veil will be lifted when they meet in Heaven. There is also an implicit reference to the threshold - “we stand safe within the door” (142) - which emphasizes the liminal position of the speaker.

Both the threshold position of the female speaker and her power of seeing the unseen hint at her being a supernatural messenger, thus, already a revenant. Indeed, the second dream she relates to her beloved takes place in a very unsettling environment. It is neither dark nor light, and the reference to the cold reaching to her beautiful hair “through clay” suggests a place not dissimilar to a burial mound or a grave. Framed in this dream-death, she is shut out from the world twice: on one hand, she is framed in her dream sequence, whilst on the other her death-approaching state continues well into the morning: “When this morning broke,/ My face was pinched, my hair was grey,/ And frozen blood was on the sill/ Where stifling in my struggle I lay” (133-136). This stillness and disarray is similar to that of Laura’s in “Goblin Market”, and reminiscent of the deathlike trials of the neophytes who “can be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of customary burial, may be stained black, or may be forced to live ... in the company of masked ... mummers representing ... the dead or ... the undead.”¹⁰⁴ Her gaze here can also be read, in John Freccero’s phasing, as “a representation of the temporality of retrospection” against “the traditional threat of nostalgia, a retrospective glance that evades the imperative to accept an authentically

¹⁰³ Julia M. Walker, *Medusa’s Mirrors*, opus cit., p. 50.

¹⁰⁴ Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” p. 236.

temporal destiny.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Rossetti’s speaker turns away from her lover (“I turn from you my cheeks and eyes,/ My hair which you shall see no more” (61-62)) and yet asks for a permission to look back (“Should I not turn with yearning eyes, /Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang?” (75-76)) when she is saved (and dead).

The speaker of “The Convent Threshold” is not dead, yet she describes herself as watching over the living when she is dead. This ability of the dead to look back at the living is frequent in Rossetti’s poems. In “At Home” (1858), Rossetti describes the return of a dead person: “When I was dead, my spirit turned/ To seek the much-frequented house” (1-2). The living friends in the poem are almost entirely sound-oriented and thus by definition cannot notice the silent dead. In the same way as the goblins in “Goblin Market”, they rely on gibberish and alliteration and rather childish language: “Tomorrow we shall be/ Plod plod along the featureless sands” (10-11). This fragmentation of speech is a marker of their liminality; they are presented as not fully human. It seems that at the same time as the dead speaker gains the ability to observe and speak, the living friends are ousted into the liminality as their links with the ordinary physical world are severed by the presence of the speaker. The roles of the liminal personae are mirrored. We are no longer confident as to who is entrapped between the living and the dead: the revenant, consciously inhabiting today, or the friends, fragmented between tomorrow and yesterday.

The dead speaker has no other physical experience than that of vision. It watches its friends while not being exposed to their gaze, avoiding being fixed in their schema of perception. Anne Jamison reads this poem as a departure “from the static, dry and perfect female corpse” to “an ungendered, androgynous language that allows more freedom of movement, performativity and sensuality in language.”¹⁰⁶ At the same time, the blind ones are the living, and although Rossetti’s dead might envy the living their indulgence in sensual experiences (eating, drinking, talking), they do enjoy a clarity of vision and temporal and spatial independence incomparable with that of the living. The same goes for the speaker in “Paradise: In a Dream” who boldly states: “I want to see these things again, / But not as once, in dreams by night;/ To see them with my very

¹⁰⁵ John Freccero, *Dante. The Poetics of Conversion* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 128.

¹⁰⁶ Anne Jamison, *Poetics En Passant* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 135.

sight” (41-43), implying that true sight opens only after death. Through the eyes of the revenant, we see living friends chatting and feasting (in a way reminiscent of “Goblin Market” and “The Dead City”), singing, jesting and laughing. They “sucked the pulp of plum and peach” (6) in the same way as Laura sucked upon the goblin fruit, and it is tempting to read this self-indulgence as a sign of their deficiency, as a warning that something will go wrong: after all, as Paul Cohen and Richard Menke have shown, Rossetti reverts to food-related taboos more than once.¹⁰⁷ But whereas the revenant of “The Covent’s Threshold” is passionate in her compassion and implores the living to repent, the ghost of “At Home” is passive in its ominous presence, and the intonation is different.

As death in Rossetti’s poetry never seals off the self from the world, but more likely produces a split within the self, there is always a possibility of communication. Moreover, in the corpus of her earlier so-called Gothic texts Rossetti deploys the same structural twist – the dead being ousted to the margins of the text, yet by their presence alone demonstrating a commentary on the living they left behind. In a way similar to medieval marginalia, they tell more by their presence than by their actual words. What is curious in Rossetti’s treatment of the topic is that her dead are liminal both in the sense of their life-in-death existence and their passive function of being “signs to express symbolic truth.” They are optical illusions – as ghosts, and as commentators – and are there to mark the moment of liminality.

There is nothing sensational in Rossetti’s treatment of the subject. She would not be pleased with the idea of taking her revenants as merely a sign of exaltation of senses and sentimentality. As she once stated in a letter to her brother, “you will feel how <more than ever> intolerable it would <now> be to have my verses regarded as

¹⁰⁷ For food-related readings, see Rebecca F. Stern, “‘Adulteration Detected’: Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’” in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 57.4 (March 2003): 477-511; Richard Menke, “The Political Economy of Fruit: Goblin Market”, in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, opus cit., 105-106; Paula Maranz Cohen, “Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’: A Paradigm for Nineteenth-Century Anorexia Nervosa,” *University of Hartford Studies in Literature* 17 (1985): 1-18.

outpourings of a wounded spirit.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, despite the predictable setting of an unreciprocated love or a lover revenant, her lines lack the sentimentality of a gothic drama. By silencing her dead and making them taciturn observers of the living, she denies them the possibility (and even the will) of revenge, and mocks the entourage of spiritual séance. And while Rossetti might have been engaged in “tracing out this ... Gothic spirit within us”¹⁰⁹ by deploying the predictable patterns of ghost romance, her treatment of it is much more unorthodox than is it generally believed. On the other hand, by creating the living dead through shutting the living out of this world, she creates a similar displacement of the gaze – a gaze which remains marginal and unfocused and strengthens the liminal sense of passivity and isolation.

In the next chapter I explore in more detail how Rossetti deals with spatial and temporal borderlines and those enclosed spaces where dead and sleeping women dream and observe the human world. Their dream-watching is deeply rooted in medieval visionary tradition, but scientific debates of the Victorian period also made Rossetti take a step back from Romantic assumptions and change the emphasis from the power to see (as in evoking dreams) to the ability to see. The will to see no longer implies the veracity of the seen - the notion of the veracity of the seen is challenged. In *The Face of the Deep* she states it directly: “Lord I believe Thy word that the eye is not satisfied with seeing”¹¹⁰ - a position that was common in the Victorian times. As Susan Horton notes, the Victorians were increasingly “uncertain ... of the visual as a ground for truth.”¹¹¹ Indeed, Rossetti seems to be less preoccupied with the control over the visible, than with the veracity of the seen and the unseen. Her protagonists are either rendered blind by a trauma of the encounter with the supernatural or are able to see despite being visually impaired (or despite being put under conditions where they supposedly cannot

¹⁰⁸ Christina Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti on 28 April 1849, in Anthony H. Harrison (ed.), *The Letters of Christina Rossetti* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997-2004), vol. 1, 1843-1873.

¹⁰⁹ John Ruskin, *On the Nature of Gothic Architecture: and Herein of the True Functions of the Workman in Art* (London: Smith, Elder, & co, 1854), p. 3.

¹¹⁰ *The Face of the Deep*, p. 140.

¹¹¹ Susan R. Horton, “Were They Having Fun Yet? Victorian Optical Gadgetry, Modernist Selves”, in Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (eds), *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination* (Berkley: California University Press, 1996), p. 3.

see). It is easy to trace the Romantic image of the blind seer as a metaphor for visionary power in Rossetti's early poetry,¹¹² and her engagement in theological debates of (not) being able to see the true light in her later prose. I do not want to diminish the importance of this reading. Yet as it is also possible to stress a different aspect to Rossetti's optics. "The peacock has a score of eyes,/ With which he cannot see", she writes in *Sing-Song* (1872) with ironic bitterness. And in another line, "Needles have eyes, but they cannot see" in a carefully staged pun. Here we see a certain paradox – it seems that while being equipped with the agency of seeing, it is still not necessarily possible to be able to see. Following Ruskin and Carlyle, she makes a distinction between physical and spiritual seeing: "I lift my eyes up to the hills, / Eyes of my heart that truly see" ("The Chiefest Among Ten Thousand"). Those are the eyes of the heart that can see the 'real' picture of the world, but Rossetti goes even further. By layering scenes of seeing and unseeing, as we have seen in "Goblin Market" and other poems examined in this chapter, she recreates the complex multifocal trauma of the encounter with the supernatural and the subsequent fragmentation of self.

¹¹² Catherine Maxwell also explored Victorian ideas of blindness in relation to poetry and visionary powers in *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

Chapter 2: Mirrors and Mirrored Gazes

As for Death, we never die – we could not if we would: a
sleep of about twenty minutes seems all that intervenes
between physical and spiritual life.

Barone Kirkup to William Michael Rossetti, 19 January 1866

In May 1855, John Ruskin wrote to Elizabeth Siddall a letter that seems to be resonant with his criticism of Christina Rossetti's fancy rhymes: "Dear Miss Siddal, you are a very good girl to say you will break off those disagreeable ghostly connections of yours."¹¹³ Miss Siddall seems to share with Christina Rossetti the same awkward position of a female artist on the margins of the male-dominated artistic society, yet neither breaking up with it nor yielding the control over their creative power to men. The difference lies with the power structures they are inscribed in. Siddall "had to die so that she could fulfil the role he [Dante Gabriel Rossetti] had designed for her in his imagination"¹¹⁴ and remained locked within the gaze of Rossetti the artist and Rossetti the husband, a paradigm also explored by Christina Rossetti in "An Artist's Studio" (1856). Christina, on the other hand, criticized by Ruskin for her "quaintnesses and other offences,"¹¹⁵ neither broke off her "ghostly connections," nor stayed framed by male ideas.

This quiet refusal to be inscribed into the patriarchal power framework is projected onto Rossetti's poetry. In this chapter I explore the relationship between the subject and the object of the gaze in Rossetti's poetry and consider how its reversal is reminiscent of the reversal of roles in Turner's liminal stage. I read Rossetti's poems alongside the doctrine of "Soul Sleep" and the well-known fairy-tale of the Sleeping Beauty in order to show that the object of the gaze can look back and subvert the power structure,

¹¹³ John Ruskin to Miss Siddal, May 1855 in William Michael Rossetti (ed), *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism: Papers 1854 to 1862* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1899), p. 82.

¹¹⁴ Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York and Manchester: Routledge, 1992), p. 171.

¹¹⁵ Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 10 February 1865, in William Michael Rossetti (ed), *Rossetti Papers: 1862 to 1870* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 77.

thereby producing a parallel with Turner's ritual process as a performance act. To advance my ideas, in this chapter I address a number of key texts. In "From House to Home" I examine the double structure of the narrative to show how the narrator is displaced to the margins of the text, and in "The Prince's Progress" the marginal and silent character of the passive Bride becomes the focus of my reading. I suggest that Rossetti's poems can be read by constant re-tuning of our focus from the central to the marginal, thus embodying Ruskin's idea of doubled vision which I discussed in the previous chapter. Two further concepts of liminality theory of relevance in this chapter demand clarification here – pilgrimage, as the outer manifestation of an inner journey, often referred to as an allegory of the soul's journey to God, and *communitas*, as the unstructured community based on equality and sharing of the experience, often in connection with rituals, or, as Edith Turner puts it, "inspiring fellowship."¹¹⁶

In Turner's perception of liminality, the characteristics of the liminal, or threshold, people include ambiguity, passivity and ability to present multiple narratives. Due to their threshold position outside assigned paradigm of law, custom and convention, they acquire symbolic meaning and thus "liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon."¹¹⁷ The range of personae I approach in the first chapter fits into this definition in a variety of ways – through experiencing seasonal changes within their bodies, speaking from the other side of the grave, being shut out, deprived of sight and voice, or approaching madness. At the same time, being excluded from the accepted structures, Rossetti's speakers enter into a different symbolic relationship with the world around them and are supposed to reconfigure the balance of power. Exploring this reversal of the power structure, in this chapter I focus on passivity and multiplicity as two major characteristics of the transformation Rossetti's characters are faced with.

Both passivity and multiplicity are important markers of liminality. On one hand, passivity is imposed upon liminal personae as they are stripped of all characteristics of

¹¹⁶ Edith Turner, *Communitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. xi.

¹¹⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 95.

their previous social position and levelled down “to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers.”¹¹⁸ There are two types of reversal. Those vested with power are released of their burden through dissolution of their previous obligations. Their social underlings have a different type of release – that of their powerlessness: for Turner, liminality implies a qualitative change in the position of vulnerability and weakness as it acquires sacred powers. The liminality of the strong is weakness, the liminality of the weak is strength.¹¹⁹ On the other, the multiplicity of the liminal personae comes from their position “in and out of time.” Their severed bonds with the previous environment are transformed into a new type of relationship. However undefined, this new relationship is still a social bond that “has ceased to be and has simultaneously yet to be fragmented into a multiplicity of structural ties.”¹²⁰ In other words, the liminal transformation implies denial of all characteristics of pre-liminal stage, including reversal of pre-liminal status, reconfiguration of the constituent elements of social position/ understanding in the liminal stage, and subsequent re-emergence of the participants vested with new powers they gained in the liminal stage. Yet the peculiarity of Rossetti’s poetry is that the vast majority of her speakers do not finish their liminal transformation. They are forever paused at the threshold, hesitant to move on, as if frozen mid-way. This “frozen” state enables us to look at the mechanics of the power reversal.

To show how Rossetti’s work can be put into the context of Victorian material culture, I juxtapose Rossetti’s poems with photographs of Lady Hawarden and explore how the reflection can oust the main character into the margins. I analyse the ways by which Rossetti creates a mirror space where the self meets its double and thus switches from the status of speaker to the status of observer. In this way Rossetti’s characters are inscribed into a space of defragmentation and multiplication, where the moment of meeting self becomes a point of loss of self. Those mirror meetings become personal histories about acquiring or denouncing voice and power. The reflectory surface of glass shatters the image of the onlooker into dissonant images, conflicting with her perception of herself as a whole. Moreover, by being constantly exposed to the intrusive

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 200.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 95-96.

gaze through transparent surfaces, they are all objectified: “since no one owns reflections, we do not know *what stranger* might see our own reflection, nor does the object of a gaze know that it has fallen on him or her.”¹²¹ Thus, an intricate power structure of intersecting gazes is established.

This idea of losing control of one’s reflection would become a major preoccupation in mid-century fantasies. As Rossetti writes in the first part of *Speaking Likenesses*, “[t]he only uncomfortable point in the room, that is, as to furniture, was that both ceiling and walls were lined through with looking-glasses: but at first this did not strike Flora as any disadvantage; indeed she thought it quite delightful, and took a long look at her little self full length.” But this delight is fast to disappear: “[t]he birthday Queen, reflected over and over again in five hundred mirrors, looked frightful.”¹²² This fear can be read from various critical points, as disintegration of the domestic and the gendered self, or as a split in the psychological wholeness, or the opposition of the spirit and the flesh. Like the Lacanian “hommelette”, Flora misrecognizes herself in scattered bits of reflections of self, and is unable to choose the one to relate to. After all, “in such a number of mirrors there were not merely simple reflections, but reflections of reflections, and reflections of reflections of reflections, and so on and on and on, over and over again.”¹²³ This moment is not dissimilar to the mirror-like scene in the second part of “From House to Home” which I discuss later in this chapter, when the desperate, split and lost between its own projections speaker is faced with the transfiguration ritual of a female spirit which she recognizes as her soul/ her double.

The ‘I’ in the mirror and the ‘I’ outside it, reflecting subjects and reflected others, face each other in a sort of rivalry, which results in the mirror cracking and selves multiplying further. Or, as Laurence Talairach-Vielmas argues about *Speaking Likenesses*, “the self, the construction of the self and the reflection of the self through mirror images (likenesses) frame the fantasy territory as a land of alienation” caused by female changeability. This point of alienation marks the entrance into the liminal stage

¹²¹ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 100.

¹²² *Speaking Likenesses* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1875), pp. 19, 21, 26.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 26.

where the initiate is denied all social and physical markers. To emphasize this simultaneously destructive and creative space, Rossetti multiplies the reflections to excess as “two-dimensional images of the self are projected everywhere, imprisoning the self into a multiplicity of identical reflections.”¹²⁴ I have demonstrated in the previous chapter how the self can be shut out in a developmental chrysalis. Here, this chrysalis presents a layered glass-like space, where the self is projected as a performance of possibilities, in accordance with Turner’s description of liminality as a space of potential. The idea of chrysalis is not that strange for Turner – he compares the state of transformation to “a pupa changing from grub to moth”¹²⁵ as he expounds the difference in cultural properties of a state (fulfilment) and transition (unfulfillment), a difference that I will come back in the second part of my thesis.

In an essay on *The Nibelungen Lied*, Thomas Carlyle likens the poet’s activity to projecting “primeval truths” with new forms which results in creating

a Hall of Mirrors, where in pale light each mirror reflects, convexly or concavely, not only some real Object, but the Shadows of this in other mirrors; which again do the like for it: till in such reflection and rereflection the whole immensity is filled with dimmer and dimmer shapes; and no firm scene lies round us, but a dislocated, distorted chaos, fading away on all hands, in the distance, into utter night.¹²⁶

This “hall of mirrors” is curiously repetitive to Turner’s description of the basics of performativity in his “Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting,” where he states that performance is similar to

a hall of mirrors, or better magic mirrors ... in which social problems, issues and

¹²⁴ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels* (Ashgate Publishing Ltd: 2013), p. 73. A similar argument is made by Anna Krugovoy Silver in *Victorian Literature and Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 175-176.

¹²⁵ Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in *Reader in Comparative Religion*, ed. William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1979), p. 234.

¹²⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The Nibelung Lied*, XXVII, p. 220.

crises ... are reflected as diverse images, transformed, evaluated ... In this hall of mirrors the reflections are multiple, some magnifying, some diminishing, some distorting the faces peeping into them, but in such a way as to provoke not merely thought, but also powerful feelings...¹²⁷

In this sense one of the primary functions of a poet is to conduct a ritualistic performance – the more so when we are talking about the poets who, similar to Christina Rossetti, are writing from the margins of social, gender, or any other framework. Within the space of this performance that mirrors reality while distorting reflections of the real world the swift progression of images is discontinued to create new senses and new identities. There is no different correlation, only a vague recognition which allows a certain expansion of definition (by refitting all the fragments into new imagines). In Rossetti's "A Royal Princess" (1863), there is a similar moment of one's self-awareness being diluted by the mirror: "All my walls are lost in mirrors, whereupon I trace/ Self to right hand, self to left hand, self in every place,/ Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face" (10-12).

The mirrored discontinuity fits well with Rossetti's split reflections - the world is seen in the glass darkly, and the narrator is only captured by the play of light and shadow in a deadly reflective surface. This re-focusing of the gaze on the threshold of transfigurative experience was widely used in nineteenth-century photography, and is reminiscent of photographs created by Lady Clementina Hawarden (1822-1865), Rossetti's contemporary, who explored spatial disjunctions in a similar way through the interplay of surfaces and depths, exteriors and interiors, "manipulation of light, shadow and doubling, inviting fractured, dual, and multiple perspectives."¹²⁸ Her models are so constricted by the space they occupy as if they were prisoners in this closed and private setting subjected by the gaze of their mirrored reflections. There is a certain defiance in the composition of her photographs – with its introduction of the female in control of

¹²⁷ Victor Turner, "Acting in Everyday Life and Everyday Life in Acting," in Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ publishing, 1982), p. 104.

¹²⁸ Linda M. Shires, *Perspectives: Modes of Viewing and Knowing in Nineteenth-Century England*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 14.

the domestic space¹²⁹ and the insistence on the figure of a woman being locked in a female gaze, even if this gaze is a reflection in a mirror. There's no male observer to stabilize the female self-image – Lady Hawarden's lookers, together with Christina Rossetti's speakers, are locked onto themselves. And there is a curious defiance to the dominant perception of Victorian women being objectified through a portrait. In Pre-Raphaelite paintings in particular, women are depicted as beautiful objects. There is no violent intrusion into their world as their passivity implies a certain separation from the world, with stylized backgrounds almost removing them from the world. Even when those women are shown looking into a mirror, it is often read as a symbol of their weakness and withdrawal as opposed to active intrusion of the observer into their world.

But the tense engagement of Hawarden's female figures with their reflection creates a reversal of this power balance. If in Rossetti's poems the narrator can sometimes be “posed as a voyeuristic spectator who intrudes upon a spectacle,”¹³⁰ Lady Hawarden's pictures make us pry into a private scene of a self-study. The subject and the object of the gaze are merged. If a gaze can be perceived as an excess of seeing, then here there is a certain deficiency of seeing, especially as the setting of the photographs is unfocused. The real gaze is within the picture, not outside of it, and it is not addressed to the observer.

When Hawarden challenges the viewer by fusing her models with the background, drowning them in the light or dematerializing of them into the lines of the drapes, her “women are both there as women and not there at all.”¹³¹ This strikes me as particularly similar to Rossetti's liminal speakers who also manifest their absence through their declared presence and fuse into the background. As Hawarden's models become entrapped in their own reflections, so Rossetti's speakers are separated from their true/socialized selves and shut out within their mirrored selves, a point I come back to in the last section of my thesis.

¹²⁹ See, for example, Lindsay Smith, *The Politics of Focus: Women, Children, and Nineteenth Century Photography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 51. In Victorian paternalistic society social identity of women was dependent on men. See, for example, Elizabeth Bronfen,

¹³⁰ Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p.96.

¹³¹ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 106.

By juxtaposing visual and textual materials of the era, I am using the same methodology as Alison Chapman in *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (2000) where she uses photographs by Lewis Carroll and Margaret Cameron to discuss the complex movement between absence and presence in relation to the construction of the image of Christina Rossetti.¹³² She specifies how both Rossetti's and Cameron's feminine figures frustrate and unsettle the masculine gaze and have the ability to return the look.

In this chapter I am mostly interested in reconstructing the image of Rossetti's speakers and in studying the ways of visualising liminal figures. And here Lady Hawarden and Christina Rossetti have a certain similarity – not only they are interested in figures that are on the brink of fading away and fusing with their setting, but they are so self-sufficient that no gaze from the outside can break their glass confinement. They are in-between seeing and being seen, almost excluded from the process. Hawarden seems to be constructing a similar balance of absence, presence and threshold, therefore her visual work can be useful in presenting a parallel to some issues that I raise in connection to Rossetti's works. For example, one of Hawarden's photographs shows her daughter Clementina Maude¹³³ poised in-between a mirror and a window. Despite this reflection-inviting position, the girl's features remain dim. As her back is turned to the window of light, her face is covered in shadow. Her reflection in the mirror does not show her in full; only the bare outline of her figure is visible. The brightest spot – and the centre of the photograph – is the empty surface of the mirror reflecting the glass of the window – a door to a different, ghostly dimension. In a different set of photographs,¹³⁴ Clementina Maude's double from the looking glass comes out of the periphery to occupy the centre. We never see the girl's face, and she seems oblivious of our presence. Instead, we are faced with her reflection, gazing at us with the challenge of a lover facing a rival. With this image displaced, the threshold between the reflection and the person becomes ambiguous. This reversed power gaze is the image that could

¹³² Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*, opus cit., p. 19-22.

¹³³ ca.1862-3. Museum no. PH.457:230-1968, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Here a curious coincidence can be noted: Lady Hawarden's daughter shares the name with the main character of Rossetti's half-mocking, half-autobiographical story.

¹³⁴ Clementina Maude, ca. 1863-1864; PH.291-1947.

have opened to Lancelot – had he had the power to look up and meet the dreamy gaze of the lady of Shallot. It is also the image of Lizzie watching over Laura lost in the reverie induced by the goblin fruit – or Laura watching over the goblins in her dream while in reality she is deprived of seeing them.

In her analysis of Hawarden's work, Carol Mavor constructs her argument around the idea how this “mirror image... in pursuit of itself” emphasizes “the homoerotics of doubling women, the queerness of the medium of photography, but also the queerness of seeing,”¹³⁵ especially seeing through the looking-glass. She claims that girl twins represent one of the most popular Victorian male fantasies and reads the privacy of Hawarden's photographs through the lens of nineteenth-century pornographic stereograms that were so popular in the 1850s. It is worth following the link between twin liminal processes in Turner's rites, and the ambiguous positioning of the sister images in Rossetti and Hawarden. For Turner, twins represent the deficiency of surplus, and in this sense stand for the liminal multiplication I have previously discussed. In this function they have the “mediating function between animality and deity: they are at once more than human and less than human”.¹³⁶ Although we cannot be sure whether Laura and Lizzie are twins, at the symbolic order they definitely act as reflections of each other, and represent the dual process of fusion and bifurcation. Two here represents “the Many as opposed to the One, as derived from it, or as fused with it again,”¹³⁷ and in this way equals to unfulfillment through its own indeterminacy. At the same time two can stand for a pair of similars, or a pair of opposites; and Rossetti skilfully leaves both options open. Her doubled characters are different in nature and demeanour, yet strangely alike – to the extent that can be taken for a reflection, repetition, and not independent individuals.

The homoeroticism of facing one's reflection can be traced in Rossetti's poetry as well, especially in her sister poems, which often, as Winston Weathers notes, suggest the

¹³⁵ Carol Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Duke University Press, 1999) pp. 102, 107.

¹³⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 47.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

dichotomy of personality into differing, if not antithetical, forces.”¹³⁸ Rossetti’s sister-doubles Laura and Lizzie become a self-repeating homoeroticized image, as visualised in Dante Gabriel’s illustrations.

Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest

...
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,
Like two wands of ivory
Tipp’d with gold for awful kings. (184-185, 198-190)

The sisters are joined in a sibling symbiosis similar to the mirror doubling on Hawarden’s photographs. Moreover, the parallel of twins and birds adds a different layer of understanding in the context of Turner’s ritual. He notes in *The Ritual Process* that likening twins to birds is characteristic of primitive societies, not only on the account of the multiple hatching of eggs and the dual birth of birds, but also by their special relation to God. Birds are closer to the sacred due to their being in the air; in a similar way twins are believed to be children of God.

The same double-focused picture is repeated in “Song” (before 1863). If in the first chapter I mentioned “double vision,” here it becomes almost binocular:

Two doves upon the selfsame branch,
Two lilies on a single stem,
Two butterflies upon one flower (1-3).

¹³⁸ Winston Weathers, “Christina Rossetti: The Sisterhood of Self,” *Victorian Poetry* 3.2 (Spring 1965): 81–89, p. 82. For a discussion of sister poems see also Theo Dombrowski, “Dualism in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti,” *Victorian Poetry* 14.1 (Spring 1976): 70–76; Scott Rogers, “Re-reading Sisterhood in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Noble Sisters’ and ‘Sister Maude,’ ” *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 43.4 (Autumn 2003): 859–875.

Here the world is ruled with perfect symmetry – paired birds and flowers as the objects of the gaze, and the watchers looking “hand in hand” (5), a description which implies a doubled state, as well. There is always a link that holds the two doubled objects together – a branch, a stem, a flower. The two gazers are also connected by holding hands. “It is a world of doubles and redoubled equivalences”, suggests Isobel Armstrong.¹³⁹ And for a moment, it seems so – the world framed in a double stereoscopic gaze of the pair seems to be unperturbed even by the ominous mention of the night in the final line: “And never gave a thought to night.”

But Rossetti is not a poet of happy pairings. Similar to Turner’s ideas of the twin rituals in the liminal, her duplications not only explore duplication as “a coincidence of opposites, and not as a doubling of similar,”¹⁴⁰ but also brings forward the painful separation that is necessary for the final transformation. The hands will inevitably part. Turner mentions how the single personality of the twins is related to the sacred order, and their physical duality to the secular domain. In a number of poems Rossetti splits the narrative between the watcher and the subject of the watch who performs the action. Their assumed reintegration might be achieved outside the framework of the poem, but we are presented with the liminal threshold between them, the ‘I’ watching its twin transform.

“From House to Home” (1858), a poem that explores this duplication and ensuing feeling of loss, serves as an example of doubling on narrative, visual and structural levels. Thus it echoes the sister-split in the narrative of “Goblin Market,” and can serve as a good example of Rossetti’s technique. The connection between the two poems has not been left unnoticed. Simon Humphries notes its “bitter sacrament” and “explicit rejection of the duplicitous world” and draws parallels between the eschatological vision of a woman with “the loathsome cup” (I. 194) in “From House to Home” and Laura’s renunciation of the goblin fruit.¹⁴¹ Links between this poem and “Goblin

¹³⁹ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 363.

¹⁴⁰ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 50.

¹⁴¹ Simon Humphries. “The Uncertainty of Goblin Market”, *Victorian Poetry* 45.4 (Winter 2007): 391-413, pp. 405, 408.

Market" have also been suggested by Dolores Rosenblum and Stephanie Johnson. The latter defines it as "a dream-vision to convey in part the speaker's psychological move from her attachment to an earthly paradise to a desire for the New Jerusalem,"¹⁴² and reads it as a conscious fusion of the female body with this lost paradise.

Indeed, despite the pronounced presence of the narratorial 'I' throughout the poem, "From House to Home" starts with mysterious double introduction: "The first was like a dream thro' summer heat,/ The second like a tedious numbing swoon" (1-2). This can refer to the two parts of the poem – the dreamlike bliss with the spirit lover, and the nightmarish journey to rediscover the self after his loss. On the structural level it also corresponds to the two parts of the liminal experience, as they turn out to be representations of a "pleasure-place" and an "earthly paradise" which in the end are taken from the protagonist. Turning "it" and "the thing" into "me" and "mine" - as in "That night destroyed me like an avalanche;/ One night turned all my summer back to snow:/ Next morning not a bird upon my branch" (77-80) - according to Johnson, allows Rossetti to exercise "the subversive power of such codes when she moves between architectural symbols, natural metaphors, and the literal female body to locate and dislocate simultaneously the pleasure of earthly existence". (It is not rare for Rossetti to use female body as a metaphor for space – in a different poem, "Autumn" (1858), Rossetti plays with a similar image of a woman turning into a deserted land).

This approach is shared by Linda E. Marshall, who shows that the opposition between "house" and "home" implies a dichotomy which results in "house" being reconstructed within "home."¹⁴³ Thus there is a certain mirrored doubling on the symbolic level (movement from a private house towards the home promised by faith which will grant a new house as a place where to live in heaven together with the angels) that I would develop further in my reading. It can also be read parallel to Turner's pilgrimage with

¹⁴² Stephanie L. Johnson, "'Home one and all': Redeeming the Whore of Babylon in Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry", *Victorian Poetry* 49.1 (Spring 2011): 105-125, p. 107.

¹⁴³ Linda E. Marshall, "Mysteries beyond Angels in Christina Rossetti's 'From House to Home'" in Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (ed) *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830-1900* (London: MacMillan, 1999), p. 313-324, p. 313.

its “elliptical journey” and mirrored structure of a movement “outward” towards the transformative encounter and return “homeward” transformed.

As Rossetti employs a pattern of doubling, the poem easily falls into two parts, each with its own story of the initiation. At the same time, the setting of each of them allows multiple readings. In the first part, one of the key issues is whether it is the angelic love-object who is abducted into the fairy dwelling of the liminal narrator and then fled, or is it the narrator herself who is enclosed in this paradisiacal space and then, with the disappearance of her angel, becomes ousted/ shut out from it. They live in a glass house which symbolically turns ablaze: “My castle stood of white transparent glass/ Glittering and frail with many a fretted spire,/ But when the summer sunset came to pass/ It kindled into fire” (13-16). This fire early on warns us about the possible outcome – destruction and loss; at the same time, it is not kept as a symbol for long as the boundaries of “pleasure” expand once again to include the greenery of the garden space around it. The danger of fire provides another link to “Goblin Market” where Laura is described as the one “most like leaping flame” (218) on the eve of meeting the goblins, and when Lizzie goes for the fruit to save her, she is characterised as “sending up a golden fire” (414).

The initial impression is that of a paradise on earth where everything is preserved in its state of innocence - “Swift squirrels on the pastures took their ease,/ With leaping lambs safe from the unfear'd knife;/ All singing-birds rejoicing in those trees/ Fulfilled their careless life” (21-23). But there is also something disturbing here and the feeling of paradisical bliss is suspiciously displaced when describing the hearth of her ideal house Rossetti muses upon: “lizards.../ In strange metallic mail, just spied and gone” (29-30), “Frogs and fat toads were there to hop or plod/ And propagate in peace, an uncouth crew” (33-34), “All caterpillars throng beneath my rule,/ With snails and slugs in corners out of sight.” (37-38) One of the possible readings would be to stress the egalitarian vision of Rossetti; those creatures are slightly reminiscent of the goblins in “Goblin Market”, but it would have seemed that those are not typical dwellers of a paradise. They might also reference the garden of sin I have previously discussed. At the same time, the garden displays liminality as the space of hybridity and reversed meanings. Its ambiguous characteristics are further emphasized by the transformation caused by the disappearance of the narrator’s lover: “One night turned all my summer

back to snow:/ Next morning not a bird upon my branch,/ Not a lamb woke below,—/ No bird, no lamb, no living breathing thing”(77-79) and then “Azure and sun were starved from heaven above,/ No dew had fallen, but biting frost lay hoar” (85-86).

This place has fluid temporality and physicality. References and descriptions that are given to us are contradictory. The love-object of the narrator is referred to as a supernatural creature with “spirit-discerning eyes like flames of fire,/ But deep as the unfathomed endless sea” (46-47), and “like a snowdrift he was fair,/ And sometimes like a sunset glorious red, / And sometimes he had wings to scale the air/ With aureole round his head” (49-52). The description is ambiguous, bearing both angelic and demonic traits. Moreover, as Johnson rightly notices, it is hard to locate this friend or lover in any one figure or any given place: “through the dislocation of both, Rossetti lessens her speaker’s compulsion... to look beyond the material world and the temporal present for restoration, and through her underscoring of the material dimension of this vision, she blurs the distinction between body and spirit.”¹⁴⁴ After all, this mysterious friend might be the same person as the angel with flaming eyes or the God in the last lines of the poem, and it is His blood that is going to “nourish and warm my root” (222). He might also be seen as the same friend who is referred to when describing the suffering woman in the second vision: “The wounds are faithful of a friend” (157). Or he might as well be a far more sinister figure.

At least initially, we are given the impression that this little kingdom is ruled by the female narrator, and not her male lover.. As she draws attention to his “fulfilling my desire” (48) and revealing all things secret to her, it is tempting to read the opening descriptions of the poem as an answer to the Song of Songs: “Awake, O north Wind; and come, thou south, blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his pleasant fruits” (Song of Solomon 4.16). Here is a curious parallel with the Bride in “The Prince’s Progress”: while the latter is accused by Dawn Henwood of inactivity and passivity compared to the Bride in the Song of Songs, whose speeches “give vent to praise of the beloved and magnification of

¹⁴⁴ Johnson, “Home one and All,” opus cit., p.109.

desire, in unmistakably carnal terms,”¹⁴⁵ the narrator in “From House to Home” gives deliberately unequivocal descriptions of her happiness: “We sang our songs together by the way,/ Calls and recalls and echoes of delight” (53-54), “I have no words to tell what way we walked” (57) or “I waxed more feastful, lifted up and glad” (62). In a way, her situation is similar to that of the Lady of Shalott or the female figure in Tennyson’s “Palace of Art”: she lives bemused in a glass palace and follows the world without ever getting too drawn to anything, consuming images without experiencing them directly.¹⁴⁶ Her secrecy in “I have no words” is not that of inexperience or unwillingness, but that of unreality and unfulfilment. As Laurence Talairach-Vielmas suggests, “shattering her own imaginary world, like the lady of Shalott, the woman writer is doomed to get entangled in the threads of her own creation, her body laced up and moulded by representational codes she no longer controls.”¹⁴⁷ The moment her mirror cracks – and it is usually the moment when her power is opposed to the male gaze – her world is destined to fall apart. As the heroine of “From House to Home” cries in desperation, “my heart broke and my spirit broke:/ Upon the frost-bound floor I stumbled, fell, / And moaned: 'It is enough: withhold the stroke” (101-102).

The glasslike construction of the world is broken, and the speaker is laid bare against the hostile liminality with a vague understanding of her future. But at the same time this cracking of the mirror is also related to the end of the liminal phase, as it brings a moment of definite separation. From this point on, there are no doubling or fusing images: there is no ambiguity between the narrator and the suffering woman in the second part. It might be a projection of her afterlife (and thus akin to the visions of the female speaker in “The Convent’s Threshold” which I analysed in the previous chapter), distant and separate. Rossetti deliberately renounces all parallels in the plot by not allowing her speaker to mix in with other triumphant voices. The speaker seems to be

¹⁴⁵ Dawn Henwood, “Christian Allegory and Subversive Poetics: Christina Rossetti’s *Prince’s Progress* Re-examined” in *Victorian Poetry* 35 (1997): 83-94, p. 88.

¹⁴⁶ The link between Rossetti’s “From House to Home” and Tennyson’s “The Palace of Art” is explored in detail by John Woolford, “The Advent of Christina Rossetti”, in *The Review of English Studies* 26.256 (2011): 618-639.

¹⁴⁷ Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body*, opus cit., p. 46.

trapped in the liminal space. Though she is resolved to gain the right to be saved in the last lines of the poem, it is not she who is being saved through the dream sequence.

The unnatural stupor that the narrator falls into after the loss of her lover in the second part of “From House to Home” (“Then life swooned from me.../ .../ So while I lay entranced” (105, 113)) is not dissimilar to the catatonic trauma of Laura in “Goblin Market”. This experience enables her to become a spectator in a liminal show, a random observer; and this move transforms her into a figure similar to the marginal subject of lady Hawarden’s photographs. When “Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,/ Double against each other, filled, sufficed” (189-190), the “I” of the poem is pictured standing aside. She is faced with a vision of a woman (in this moment it almost re-enacts Lady Hawarden’s mirror photographs), pale and with “eyes like some fire-enshrining gem” (121). There is a certain mirror parallelism of their poses as they face each other: “I stood upon the outer barren ground,/ She stood on inner ground that budded flowers” (126-127). Yet the focus of the show is transferred from the narrator to the woman. While the narrator, when being subjected to the gaze of “spheres and spirits”, was motionless and entranced, the woman “bled and wept, yet did not shrink” (133). The culmination of the spectacle comes when she drinks from the cup – and a choir of angels appears to celebrate the happy resolution. Curiously enough, all these angels appear to be multiplied through a mirror passage:

Multitudes--multitudes--stood up in bliss,
...
Tier beyond tier they rose and rose and rose
...
As though one pulse stirred all, one rush of blood
Fed all, one breath swept through them myriad-voiced...
...
Each face looked one way like a moon new-lit,
Each face looked one way towards its Sun of Love;
Drank love and bathed in love and mirrored it. (II.165; 173; 177-178; 181-183).

This woman becomes the reflection of the narrator – her real self, the one who joins the liminal *communitas* and completes the transformation. After fragmentation and

multiplication of the liminality, only one of the split personae can re-emerge in the real world. This closing scene is a celebration of mismatched unity, reconciliation of the split personalities, and total dissolution of self, which in the end causes the narrator to refuse her beloved house: “Therefore, O friend, I would not if I might/ Rebuild my house of lies, wherein I joyed/ One time to dwell” (201-203). It reads like the end of true initiation, and at the same time re-establishes the fairy-tale roots of the poem. As Bruno Bettelheim notes, “[i]f there is a central theme to the wide variety of fairy tales, it is that of a rebirth to a higher plane.”¹⁴⁸

Rossetti’s protagonist, lingering in the liminal, is still planning to be reborn: “Although to-day He prunes my twigs with pain,/ Yet doth His blood nourish and warm my root:/ To-morrow I shall put forth buds again/ And clothe myself with fruit” (221-224). At the same time there is no definite ending as there is no definite voice, since we are not sure whether it is the protagonist, the choir or the suffering spirit who is delivering the final lines. This ecstatic choir seems vaguely familiar as it retraces the taboo lines in “Goblin Market”: “We must not look at goblin men,/ We must not buy their fruits:/ Who knows upon what soil they fed/ Their hungry thirsty roots?” (43-45) Taking into account the positioning of the poem (it is positioned in the end of the Rossetti’s first book of which “Goblin Market” is the first and the title story), it brings a circular ending to the collection. Yet it has no definite answer - and still reads as a liminal space.

“From House to Home” closes with an ambiguous promise “to build up again the whole -/ But in a distant land” (207-208) and “wait for Him the appointed days.” (227). Undeniably in the tone of high faith, it also stresses one of the important leitmotifs in Rossetti’s poetry – that of waiting on the threshold, waiting between life and death. This threshold is similar to Hades from the popular Victorian doctrine of “Soul Sleep,” and raises the question of “the consciousness or unconsciousness of the soul when apart from the body, either whilst the body is alive, or whilst it is dead.”¹⁴⁹ It can be argued

¹⁴⁸ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 179.

¹⁴⁹ John Kitto, “Heaven, Hell, Hades; or Sleep of the Soul” in *Journal of Sacred Literature and Biblical Record* 4.7 (Apr 1855): 56-79. For the influence of this doctrine on Christina Rossetti, see Jerome J. McGann "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti" in *Critical Inquiry* 10.1 (September 1983): 127-

that this sleep-in-death state is one of most common patterns in Rossetti's poems, as well as undeniably a liminal place and a place of transformation. Sleep does not block our perception of the real world. In "Dream Land" Rossetti states it clearly – the heroine who is described as having "a charmed sleep", not to be awaken, is still capable of physical perception: "Through sleep, as through a veil, / She sees the sky look pale, / And hears the nightingale" (13-15). This veil is a reference to Hebrews 10:20 - "By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh" - thus the heroine's physical sleep is a way to transgress mortality and see the light. Dolores Rosenblum presents this poem as a carefully constructed palimpsest, a haunted space of literary influences, ranging from Coleridge's "Khubla Khan" (1797, published 1816) and Wordsworth's "She dwelt among the untrodden ways" and "A slumber did my spirit steal" (1798) to Tennyson's "The Kraken" (1830) and "The Lady of Shalott" (1832). Through this network of allusions, Rossetti suggests that the dreamer's awakening to joy and power is analogous to a visionary transfiguration from insignificant life to glorious life-in-death, from object to subject.¹⁵⁰

At the same time Rossetti herself seems to be haunted by this figure of a shut-out dreamer, who lost track of time and reality weaving images and possibilities in their liminal world. In "Yet a Little While" (1879), her speaker circles in-between dream, life and death, sliding between the subject and the object of the gaze. The poem offers no narratorial development. It presents a commentary upon the fragmented state of the speaker where the conflict of dreams and unfulfillment in reality is raised on all levels. The first two stanzas are paralleled: they start with a reference to the state of dream in the past, challenged by unfulfilled reality in the present. The dream is evoked by a combination of "dream" and a verb of action in its negative form, "did not seek" (1) and "did not work" (6), followed by its complete reversal in the present reality: "I seek/ Who cannot dream" (1-2) and "I work/ Kept wide awake" (6-7), with "awake" being the antonym of "dream." The dichotomy of fulfillment and unfulfillment ("dreamed" and "did not seek" or "did not work") creates a feeling of confusion as to whether the action

¹⁴⁴ and Linda E. Marshall, "What the Dead Are Doing Underground: Hades and Heaven in the Writings of Christina Rossetti", *Victorian Newsletter* 72 (Fall 1987): 55-60.

¹⁵⁰ See: Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), pp. 128-129.

was or was not carried through; and whether the dream sequence of non-action is prioritized over the present sequence of carrying the action out. Yet although the second part of each line seems to reinstate the action (“to-day I seek” (1) and “to-day I work” (6)), the verb suggest that the action is still (and possibly will always be) unfulfilled, without ever reaching its conclusion.

The oxymoronic opening “I dreamed and did not seek: to-day I seek/ Who can no longer dream” raises yet another set of questions related to the identity of the speaker. If the one who can no longer dream is the speaker herself, then she is looking for her othered self, a reading which is further confirmed by the first lines of the second stanza: “I dreamed and didn’t work; to-day I work/ Kept wide awake by care.” (6-7) At the same time we do not know what exactly happened to her, why she was shut out of reality and why did she come back. She describes herself as “all behindhand, waxen weak,/ And dazed” (3-4) where “behindhand” hints at its archaic meaning of “unaware of recent events.” By the interior logic of the poem, she could not be aware of what was happening around her, as she was dreaming, or present in a different reality. The interior alliteration of “behindhand” and “waxen weak” further emphasizes this feeling of looped temporality. We usually suppose that the moment you wake up, you are brought back to life and feeling refreshed and invigorated. Here the process of awakening is reversed, and instead of feeling energetic, the speaker is devoid of colour (“waxen”), power (“weak”), understanding and reaction (“behindhand”); the “behind” in “behindhand” also implies looking backwards, as a reference to a taboo. This idea is further strengthened in stanza two when the speaker confesses that she has lost her grasp over reality: while she is “wide awake” by care, and loss, and perils, they are “dimly guessed to lurk” (8) – all three words implying insecurity, half-felt presence, unfulfillment. Moreover, the alliteration in “wide awake” continues that of “waxen weak;” it is at the same time contradictory (full force against lack of power) and questioning the nature of both sleep and life experienced by the speaker. The reversal of life and dream is confirmed in lines 9-10, as the speaker explains that her life “goes bare/ And void in wintry air.” Double negation of any fulfilment (“bare” as lack of outside shell, “void” as lack of inside filling) ascertains that dream was as full of life as life is full of passive nightmare. The “wintry air” reminds us of the riddles of “Winter: My Secret” (a poem that I will come back to in Chapter V); and this overall enigmatic

tone finishes the poem as Rossetti ends it with a dubious “I hope indeed; but hope itself is fear/ Viewed on the sunny side” (11-12).

This riddle is as unresolved, as the life of the speaker brings her to failure and unfulfillment. Instead of making the ending lighter, Rossetti defers the feeling of resolution and claims her “disregard” (13) for the world. The “sweet things that betide” (14) are strangely reminiscent of “many things that gleam/ Yet are not what they seem” (4-5); so the spatio-temporal loop closes with the speaker promising to “abide”- though we are left unsure as to what she is resolved to accept. It seems that Rossetti is keen to introduce a dichotomy of split selves – the active dreamer, who keeps a watch over the world, and the passive actor of real life whose hope is forever deferred. If the first one is reminiscent of the lady of Shalott, musing about the world seen as a reflection, the second is an automaton, a doll, or stretching it further, a living corpse devoid of reason, will, and power. Rossetti’s character is poised between the two, never crossing the line to either of the projections.

One of the most well-known of Christina Rossetti’s poems that follows a similar pattern with a sleeping female is “The Prince’s Progress”, the title poem of her second volume. It has its origin in a dirge written as early as 1861 (two years after “Goblin Market” was written, and one year before its publication) and at the suggestion of her brother Dante Gabriel it was extended into a narrative poem in January 1865. By the time the draft entitled “The Fairy Prince Who Arrived Too Late”¹⁵¹ was changed into the poem we now know, the focus was also switched from the grievous lamentation over the unfortunate death of the enchanted princess to the Prince’s failed quest with the lady consequently ousted to the margins of the story.

Various interpretations of the poem have attempted to decipher its religious symbolism. Simon Humphries and a number of other critics, including Ludlow and Brandt, connect the title of this narrative poem to John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), a tale of a pilgrim travelling through an allegorical, biblical landscape,¹⁵² while Dawn

¹⁵¹ As published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1863.

¹⁵² Simon Humphreys, “Who is the Alchemist in Christina Rossetti’s ‘The Prince’s Progress’?”, *Review of English Studies* 58 (2007): 684-697.

Henwood reads it in parallel to the Song of Solomon.¹⁵³ Needless to say, most of the criticism deals with the Prince's character, and hence either claims the poem as an allegorical failure or presents it as a proto-feminist revelation of the social entrapment and powerlessness of Victorian middle-class women. It has been lamented that Rossetti's resistance to making the prince a heroic figure was carried out at the expense of the poem itself, as it is structurally weak and "the action is all a dying fall, a following out of 'repining' to its inevitable conclusion."¹⁵⁴ In other analyses it is called an "adaptation of the abandoned woman narrative"¹⁵⁵ with the emphasis on the weak copying of the "Goblin Market" style in quoting Rossetti's own words about the "prince lack<ing> the special felicity (!) of [her] goblins,"¹⁵⁶ or read as a critique of "the confinement of womanhood, condemned to inaction and emotional atrophy unless 'woken' by marriage."¹⁵⁷ Sarah Fiona Winters goes even further and suggests that in "The Prince's Progress" Rossetti challenges "the very Author of her Being: she puts her God to the test and finds Him wanting" as he fails to recognize her as his Bride.¹⁵⁸ A different reading is suggested by Noelle Bowles who sees the poem as a disapproval of the century's burgeoning interest in and admiration for "a chivalric past" with a "hedonistic prince" and a "princess who serves as the reward for the prince's quest" and "has little part in the poem."¹⁵⁹ Bowles questions Rossetti's approval of Victorian fascination of the Victorians with medieval patriarchal conventions, and suggests that

¹⁵³ Dawn Henwood, "Christian Allegory and Subversive Poetics: Christina Rossetti's *Prince's Progress* Re-examined" in *Victorian Poetry* 35 (1997): 83-94, see p. 88-89 in particular.

¹⁵⁴ Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 4.

¹⁵⁵ Constance W. Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* (University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 86-87.

¹⁵⁶ Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti on 6 March 1865, in Anthony H. Harrison (ed.), *The Letters of Christina Rossetti* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997-2004), vol. 1, 1843-1873; 1:256.

¹⁵⁷ Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Writer's Life* (New York: Viking Press, 1995), p. 275.

¹⁵⁸ Sarah Fiona Winters, "Questioning Milton, Questioning God: Christina Rossetti's Challenges to Authority in 'Goblin Market' and 'The Prince's Progress'" in *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 10 (Fall 2001): 14-26.

¹⁵⁹ Noelle Bowles, "A Chink in the Armour: Christina Rossetti's "The Prince's Progress", "A Royal Princess", and Victorian Medievalism" in *Women's Writing* 12.1 (2005): 115-126, p. 119.

the failure of the Prince's quest subverts popular Victorian constructions of a glorious past as being built upon misconceptions.

The Prince's pilgrimage is, according to Victor Turner's classification, a liminal process. Thus his bonding with various characters on the way can be seen as forming existential *communitas*, and his adventures become, in Turner's phrasing, "increasingly sacralised at one level and increasingly secularized at another."¹⁶⁰ The very marginal position of the Bride marks her as the centre of the Prince's pilgrimage: "a pilgrimage centre, from the standpoint of the believing actor, also represents 'a threshold,' a place and moment 'in and out of time.'"¹⁶¹ The participant of the pilgrimage wants to reach this centre to experience supernatural and sacred transformation. Yet what is of particular interest in Rossetti's treatment of the topic, is that despite the Prince being the main actor, we know nothing about the background of his decision to start the quest. He seems to have embarked on the journey upon the request of the Bride; and the voluntary nature of his quest may be questioned. It could be that this lack of resolution is the cause of his failure.

Despite the Prince being the main active character, I will focus here primarily on the not-so-present princess. This approach seems to be sanctioned by Rossetti herself, since in the course of her arguments with Dante Gabriel over the illustrations she abandoned the cause of the Prince and insisted upon emphasizing the depiction of the Princess: "Never mind the Prince's beard, if you please, though I won't record his waste of time in shaving: only please don't mulct me of the Bride's essential veil."¹⁶² Thus in the printed edition, the marginality of the princess was refuted by the illustrations: retrieving the repressed image of the bride from the margins of the text, Dante Gabriel depicts her sitting at the window, her arms resting upon the window ledge, "the narrowness of the open window heighten[ing] the sense of claustrophobic enclosure, the

¹⁶⁰ Victor Turner, "The Center Out There: Pilgrim's Goal" in *History of Religions* 12.3 (February 1973): 191-230.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, p. 214.

¹⁶² Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti on 13 March 1865, in Anthony H. Harrison (ed.), *The Letters of Christina Rossetti* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997-2004), vol. 1, 1843-1873; 1:258.

circular pattern inscribed upon the closed window”, as Smulders puts it.¹⁶³ This image is strangely reminiscent of Christina Rossetti herself, as the criticism the poet has inspired, using Alison Chapman’s words, is often led by “a tendency to literally and figuratively frame Rossetti as object and as trope.”¹⁶⁴ Chapman also evokes Dorothy Margaret Stuart’s reminiscences of Rossetti’s stay at Penkill Castle, where the poet is pictured as seen through an open window – thus, observing the world, yet being an object to be observed as well.

“The Prince’s Progress” starts from the perspective of the Bride and ends with it, thus presenting a particular frame. The “sweet gums and juices” (1) of the opening lines are reminiscent of the goblins’ fruit juices in “Goblin Market” and those in “The Dead City”, and the Bride seems to be entrapped in the same senseless monotonous pattern of sleep-wake-weep-sleep as Laura. But the first speech in the poem actually belongs to her (“How long shall I wait, come heat come rime?” (7)), and there are other women – who can be read as agents of patriarchy, same as Lizzie - who put her back to sleep: “sleep, dream and sleep; / Sleep’ (they say): we’ve muffled the chime” (10-11). This chime brings to mind T. H. Huxley’s “bell of a clock” in “the soul stands related to the body as the bell of a clock to the works, and consciousness answers to the sound which the bell gives out when it is struck.”¹⁶⁵ As the nineteenth century standardization of time brought into the focus clock or watch time as an instrument in regulating one’s life, it was often compared to a heartbeat as regulating the lifespan of a living creature (an idea I come back to when discussing irregularities in Rossetti’s metres). If the chime of the body clock is “muffled,” so is the heartbeat. With the chime muffled, the Princess does not fully belong to the world of the living. The soul becomes separated and independent, and physical and temporal continuity is disrupted. It implies that the soul is no longer included into the orderly organization of the here and now, but becomes a

¹⁶³ Sharon Smulders, *Christina Rossetti Revisited* (Twayne Publishers Inc., U.S: 1996), p. 65.

¹⁶⁴ See, Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 2000). Chapman also quotes Dorothy Margaret Stuart, *Christina Rossetti* (London: Macmillan, 1930), describing the window of Rossetti’s bedroom at Penkill Castle.

¹⁶⁵ T.H.Huxley, “On the Hypothesis that Animals are Automata,” in Thomas D. Huxley, *Method and Results: Essays* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1898), p. 242. I will return to these ideas of automata and inner rhythms and mechanisms in the fourth chapter.

part of a differently regulated system. This is the moment when liminality comes into play.

The Prince, though, still insists on the patriarchal hierarchy while asking the voice of his doom whether his bride keeps “watch through glare and through gloom,/ Watch for me asleep and awake?”(21-22) The interior logic of the poem prompts us to remember Laura’s fate as “day after day, night after night” (269) she “kept watch in vain/ In sullen silence of exceeding pain”(270-271). As Mary Arseneau rightly notices, the description given by the voice of doom hints at the duelling dichotomy between love and death (symbolised by the red and white flowers respectively), but it also “partially interprets the symbols for the Prince by indicating that the white poppies are ‘death-cups’ ready to burst.”¹⁶⁶ The monotonous repetitiveness and redundancy of the flower description in the opening reminds us once again of the exuberant berry lists in “Goblin Market”:

By her head lilies and rosebuds grow;
The lilies droop, will the rosebuds blow? (25-26)

After having lingered for the whole night with the milkmaid, the Prince is woken up by the voices: “Be thy bands loosed, O sleeper, long held/ In sweet sleep whose end is not sweet” (117-118). As he is not the real “sleeper” of the poem (this liminal role is reserved for the princess), this half-formed divination sounds ominous. The sleep of the Bride becomes one of the leitmotifs of the poem, with various voices wishing her to sleep: “if she watches, go bid her sleep”, “If many laugh, one well may rue:/ Sleep on, thou Bride” (335-336). Yet another choir of voices reflects upon the performance of the Prince: “He can sleep who holdeth her cheap,/ Sleep and wake and sleep again. / Let him sow, one day he shall reap” (267-269), ending with the stinging accusation:

Is there life?—the lamp burns low;
Is there hope?—the coming is slow:
The promise promised so long ago,
The long promise, has not been kept.

¹⁶⁶ Mary Arseneau, “Pilgrimage and Postponement: Christina Rossetti’s *The Prince’s Progress*” in *Victorian Poetry* 32. 3-4 (Fall 1994): 279-298, p. 281.

Does she live?—does she die?—she slumbers so. (379-383)

Though Henwood suggests that these are “age-old persuasions belonging to the *carpe diem* motif of erotic (or would-be erotic) poetry,”¹⁶⁷ it might be questioned whether those voices (divided between ‘glad’ and ‘sad’, encouraging and reproaching) are a reflection of the doubts of the princess herself. They also act as her invisible servants following the Prince and reporting his progress. Thus, in this liminal space Rossetti’s poetic voice becomes polymorphic. As Stephanie L. Johnson notes, by bringing together the various modes of discourse that Paul Ricoeur attributes to revelation - prophecy, narrative, hymn - Rossetti binds together “ethos and cosmos, the sphere of human action, and the sphere of the world.”¹⁶⁸ Thus the voices that accompany the Prince’s pilgrimage do not only become the voice-over for the non-visible Bride, but also represent and vocalize the inherent structure of the world itself. We perceive the setting of this fairy-tale world in the spirits’ reported speech. Not only is the Prince within the framework of the gaze of the Bride, but the world itself is within the framework of her voice(s). They become the final point of reference, and as they describe the Prince and his progress, their story becomes embodied.

When the Prince arrives at the opal house of the Bride, the fairy-tale setting of the story is stressed again. Taking into consideration the transparency of the opal, the house that the Prince faces is at the same time a variation of the glass coffin and the glass palace of the fairies. In Thomas Keightley’s *Fairy Mythology* (1828) glass is one of the materials closely associated with fairies: in one of the stories, “The Adventures of John Dietrich”, Fairyland is even referred to as glass underground.¹⁶⁹ Another possible reference here is Avalon which is referred to as the glassy island, and the glass fortress where Merlin is kept by the power of enchantress Morgan. Both are places of unfulfillment and distorted temporality. At the same time, the glass of the nineteenth century – even in its fairy

¹⁶⁷Henwood, opus cit., p. 84.

¹⁶⁸See Stephanie L. Johnson, “‘Home one and all’: Redeeming the Whore of Babylon in Christina Rossetti’s Religious Poetry”, *Victorian Poetry*, 49. 1, (Spring 2011): 105-125, Paul Ricouer quoted on p. 109.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Keightly, *The Fairy Mythology* (London: William Harrison Ainsworth, 1828). Keightly was an acquaintance of the Rossetti family.

variation – is the material of modernity. In the context of theories of liminal spaces, glass offers an ideal entrance, a pseudo-penetrable surface: what Isobel Armstrong calls a “poetics of transparency” can be easily linked to the architecture of liminality I explore. Glass surfaces, by capturing and then transmitting reflections of random, fragmented and fragile images of the world, allow a certain reinterpretation of them and give them a second life outside themselves in the traces of reflection. As Armstrong argues:

In a counter movement, the glass surface intervening between self and world reinforce[ing] the subject’s interiority... [and] set[s] up a dialogue between reflection and translucency, the mirror and the window.¹⁷⁰

The liminality of the place where the princess sleeps is further emphasized by the reference to the threshold - “and his foot would stand/ On the threshold” (447-448). The Prince keeps lingering and feeling uneasy about the possibility of the Bride being awake and watching: “Does she wake or sleep? – the time is late -/ Does she sleep now, or watch and wait?” (452-453). His anxiety marks an important point in the whole liminal space of the princess’s abode: the Prince is afraid of being watched, and hence, in a way, of relinquishing control over the events. Moreover, his imagining the Bride as singing patiently references to the siren, another powerful female stereotype. Indeed, if the Prince is framed in the Bride’s constant watch (similar to the Lady of Shalott watching over Lancelot), she switches from a passive and marginal character of the poem to its pivotal figure. She herself becomes a consumer of moving images, thus reverting the spectacle of her sleep to the ‘spectatorship’ of her gaze. But in an anti-climax to the romantic rescue love story we find out that the Bride is not watching him as he feared, but long dead - as Noelle Bowls pronounces, “killed presumably by his wandering sexual interest and sloth-like ‘progress’ toward her tower.”¹⁷¹

Some critics see a negative attitude in such a plot twist. For example, Henwood stresses that the Bride is not “a perfect model of humility and patience” and that “her supposed

¹⁷⁰ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, op. cit., p. 96.

¹⁷¹ Noelle Bowles, “A Chink in the Armour: Christina Rossetti’s ‘The Prince’s Progress’, ‘A Royal Princess’, and Victorian Medievalism” in *Women’s Writing* 12.1 (2005): 115-126, p. 115.

sanctity so readily upheld as an exemplary icon” is actually a pose.¹⁷² In contrast, Bowles writes that “Rossetti’s poem indicates that the man real women wait for may not be worth the suffering and self-abnegation,” opposing it to Tennyson’s sleeping princess in “The Day Dream” who is “thrilled by the other-worldly sexuality of the fairy prince.”¹⁷³ The Bride might have been chosen and kept in waiting slumber to be saved by the hero, but in the end she breaks with all conventions of the dominant plot by not having waited long enough to be saved:

Too late for love, too late for joy,

Too late, too late!

...

The enchanted princess in her tower

Slept, died, behind the grate. (475-482)

This can be read as a wail for a forlorn lover, but there is also a tinge of triumph to it. “Easy pleasure laid at his hand/ And the dear Bride won” (449-450) seems to promise a happy ending for the princess, but actually prompts a curious counter-reading, a nice twist of the plot. It is as if Rossetti proclaimed that the Bride was the winner. And although this victory is death, it reads as a conscious choice, a wilful rupture of the preconditioned sleep and a reassertion of her own independent identity. The poem ends with the choice of the flowers, choice of white over red, which also seems to be a conscious choice on behalf of the silent, yet victorious princess, hinting at the choice of death over life. In a poem written almost ten years later, “A Bride Song” (1876), Rossetti seems to step back to retell the story as if the Bride were to make the journey. Three of the four stanzas start with anaphoric promise and fulfilment – “Through the vales to my love” - and the journey’s colours and overall tone are very different. What was a quest unfulfilled for the Prince, is a transformative act for the Princess - starting from the description of the “happy small nest of home/ Green from basement to roof” (2) to the place “where greenness grows greener” (28). While the Prince faces liminal landscapes and dangers, the Princess confirms: even if this land “were turned to a desert of sand,/ Stripped bare of delight” (33-34) it would still be a garden and a rose as long

¹⁷² Henwood, opus cit., p. 84.

¹⁷³ Bowles, “A Chink in the Armour,” opus cit., p. 119.

as it led to her love. This leads us to the dichotomy of uncompletedness and incompleteness which I explore in chapter four: one implies a transient state which allows for completion in the future, the other, an irreversible state of lack, not redeemable by Christ's sacrifice. This is the basic difference between the Prince and the Bride – although the latter dies, there is hope for her, while the former is forever doomed to tarry in the liminal.

A similar pattern of a female watching over the world from her trance-like isolation is employed in "Autumn" (1858), a poem which is in a way reminiscent of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott" or "Mariana". From the first lines, the protagonist describes her solitary life in the way of a sleeping princess: "I dwell alone – I dwell alone, alone" (1). Her elevated position is perfect for being the subject and the object of observation, yet she is strangely both and neither. The whole world for her is nothing but a sequence of moving pictures, which by its own passing character immortalizes her own liminal existence. Whatever is happening around her, it neither wakes her up, nor makes her act – seeing a spider's trap to catch his victims, and pitying them, she would not "mar the web" (39). In a way, the narrator of "Autumn" is similar to a fly caught in the web without the ability to leave it.

A similar senseless passivity comes over those who approach her: while the speaker watches birds and maidens pass her abode, those messengers of life "float and wane" (50) still seemingly watched by the ever-living narrator. Rossetti evidently enjoys the pun of waning as disappearing from sight and from the (living) world while the narrator herself is becoming fused with the land - "my river flows down to the sea" (2), "it shakes – my trees shake – for a wind is roused" (41) - as if her very life is the eternal watch of the land over the sea. The difference from Tennyson's Lady of Shalott is that here the narrator has the control over the visual field, while the former is limited to the circumscribed site of a mirror. At the same time, as Sharon Smulders argues, devising in "Autumn" a parallel to Tennyson's famous poem, Rossetti "replaces the mellow ripeness of Camelot with a landscape of death that mirrors the speaker's emptiness, with a climate of impending storm that mirrors her repressed anger."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁴ Smulders, *Christina Rossetti Revisited*, opus cot., p. 84.

The reading of Tennyson's poem offered by Lindsay Smith shows that his heroine is "located in the context of the tower which affords optical overview. However... [n]ot only can 'the Lady' not see that which lies outside her circumscribed vision, but she cannot be seen: she is, so to speak, an invisible object in the visual fields of others."¹⁷⁵ Rossetti's heroine occupies a central elevated position, similar to the watchman in the Panopticon, "Uplifted, like a beacon, on her tower" (53). What is interesting is that she is not described as locked "in"; rather, she seems to have the power of being "on". The Panopticon was designed by Jeremy Bentham in such a way that a guard could observe prisoners, who knew they could be observed, but were unable to tell when they were being observed. Foucault (1977) later extended Bentham's work and adopted the panopticon as a metaphor for societal surveillance and disciplinary power, and used it to structure both the object and the subject of the gaze. Reversing this power balance, Rossetti's speaker is not only watching – but is being subjected to the gaze. She doesn't stay invisible – the maidens in the boats seem to be aware of her presence as they comment upon her emotional state. Her elevated position commands a most detailed view and transfers most detailed knowledge of the surrounding area – yet turns her into a perfect spectacle.

At the same time her presence is liminal and insignificant, as the maidens switch to discussing the "looked-for land" and imagine the end of their journey (their chorus is similar to the orchestra of voices in "The Prince's Progress" when they keep encouraging the Prince to continue his quest). So her being seen and being able to see brings her no power. I have noted in the previous chapter that the Medusa myth present a vicious circle – where the victim and the perpetrator are both projected onto the same point of gaze. Similar to the Medusa, Rossetti's speaker in "Autumn" entraps others in her watch, but she is also trapped by her own power to gaze.

The bird is the only creature who escapes the ever-present gaze – "Dropped down into this uncongenial sea,/ With no kind eyes/ To watch it while it dies,/ Unguessed, uncared for" (20-24). Its death becomes a marker of her freedom, not only from life, but also from this state of ever-being watched or forever-watching. The bird's sleep-in-death, at

¹⁷⁵ Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 136-137.

least, implies no “moving pictures”: “Set free at last/ The short pang past,/ In sleep, in death, in dreamless sleep locked fast” (25-27). It prompts a curious contrast – that of the narrator, locked in her sleep-and-waiting, and that of a bird, free from the gaze, unseeing – still “locked”, but free at last. Her watch is grievous and bitter, and the trees in this place do not bloom. Moreover, it is interesting to evoke the parallel with the *Song of Songs* again: there is a certain split displacement in the description: “Make my garden breathe out fragrance, Let its spices be wafted abroad. May my beloved come into his garden And eat its choice fruits” (4:16), says the Bride in the *Song of Songs*, but in Rossetti’s text we see that “the garden” is not in bloom, and “spices” are indeed “wafted abroad”, but on “flashing boats” where maidens sing “their mellow notes,/ Love-promising, entreating” (9-10), boats that “bring no friend” to the narrator. If the bridal imagery in the *Song of Songs* is often read as referring to the eroticised female body, then in Rossetti the body is simultaneously eroticized and de-eroticized through the imagery of desolation and waning. There is no redemption for the narrator, no fertile soil for her roots that can transform and revive her, as is promised to the protagonist of “From House to Home”. No prince is tarrying to her rescue. Her self is not split, but she is trapped in this liminal life-in-death forever. Her gaze is powerless, and her watch is rendered void.

Thus, the balance of power between the watcher and the watched is very complex in Rossetti. If the watcher has no power of the gaze, could it be that the power lies with the watched? One of the earlier Rossetti’s poems, “After Death” (1849), explores this idea of the reversed gaze. This poem has attracted much critical attention, although most critics read it to a certain extent as an exercise in declaration of unrequited love and the woman’s dubious entrapment in the life-in-death. Landow argues that it is an ironic depiction of an aestheticized and objectified dead woman gaining a voice,¹⁷⁶ while Dolores Rosenblum reads it as a confession of “a pathetic, misunderstood figure who is set to stir regret in the neglectful mourner.” Juxtaposing it to a later poem, “A Pause” (1853) she appeals to “the pathos of invisibility”, but also mentions “a striking sense of the woman’s fragmentation: the body that arrests and repels the viewer; the

¹⁷⁶ George Landow, ‘The Dead Woman Talks Back: Christina Rossetti’s Ironic Intonation of the Dead Fair Maiden’ (2002), *The Victorian Web*. He goes to the extent as to call it “the standard self-pitying adolescent fantasy expressed in the words, “they’ll miss me when I’m gone (sob)”.

consciousness that lies in wait, tenacious, possibly vindictive, but certainly entrapped.”

¹⁷⁷ Moreover, I would also stress the parallels to the “Soul Sleep” doctrine.

Erika Kvistad also suggests that death in Rossetti’s work is not an ending, but a paralysis and stagnation “that cuts off the ability to act without cutting off consciousness.”¹⁷⁸ A similar argument is put forward by Conley, who suggests that Rossetti’s poems spoken from the point of view of a dying woman “take the image of the confined or incarcerated woman... to a logical extreme.... <depicting the grave> as the Pre-Raphaelite woman’s ultimate nightmare, an entrapment in living hell.”¹⁷⁹ However, I would argue that the dead speaker is not necessarily entrapped in hell; there is no hint at suffering or condemnation in Rossetti’s distant descriptions. It is much more similar to Hades – and, as I have previously mentioned, Hades is often seen as a place for the souls trapped in the liminal state but not caught in the eternal circle of suffering. The speaking female persona in the poem is calm and composed; she seems to have control over both spatial and narrative dimensions. It is rather the living man, blinded and silenced, who is willing to draw back, unconsciously feeling uneasy.¹⁸⁰

The opening description - “The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept/ And strewn with rushes, rosemary and may / Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay,/ Where through the lattice ivy-shadows crept” (1-4) – appeals to the setting of a medieval romance or a fairy tale. Half-drawn curtains and the creeping ivy also hint at the possibility of intrusion and disruption of the temporal and spatial integrity of the place. In her analysis of the poem, Margaret Reynolds shows how threatening this intrusion may seem: “While the half seen, half hidden is economically set up in the first lines, there is also a clear sense of barriers crossed, division broken down, laws of place transgressed. The outside world has come into the inside, death has invaded life (or vice

¹⁷⁷ Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*, opus cit., p. 129.

¹⁷⁸ Erika Kvistad. “What Happens, or Rather Doesn’t Happen”: Death and Possibility in Alice James and Christina Rossetti”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 12.2 (Mar 2011): 75-87.

¹⁷⁹ Susan Conley, “Rossetti’s Cold Women: Irony and Liminal Fantasy in the Death Lyrics” in Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (ed.) *The Culture of Christina Rossetti: Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1999).

¹⁸⁰ Jamison in her analysis of the poem comes to the same conclusion. See Jamison, *Poetics en Passant*, opus cit., pp. 132-133.

versa), and the seen/not seen of the 'lattice' is no protection.”¹⁸¹ Contrary to the usual pattern, however, it is not death which sneaks into the domain of life; it is a living friend who enters the space of the narrator, leaning over the deathbed. Although the balance is restored almost immediately by negating all other action - “He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold/ That hid my face, or take my hand in his,/ Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head” (9-11) - we still feel the uneasy tension of the moment, to the extent that we are tempted to ignore the unfulfillment of his actions. After all, it is the force of life that should triumph, not the sleep of death; and the ‘he’ of the poem, not knowing that he is being observed, feels no necessity “to constrain and curb himself.”¹⁸² Still, the negation of action is important – as I explore in the next part of this thesis, unfulfillment is, for Rossetti, one of the most important markers of narratorial climax, to the extent that whenever she wants to stress the action, she cancels it completely or repeats it ad absurdum.

It should be noted here that Rossetti uses the same pattern of a calm sleep-in-death as opposed to life intruding into its privacy in a number of poems. For example, “Sound Sleep” (1849) starts with noise intrusion into the quietness of death (“Some are laughing, some are weeping/ She is sleeping, only sleeping” (1-2)) followed by the whole world trying to push itself upon the sleeper to break the spell, as in a full frontal assault (“Round her rest wild flowers are creeping”, “the wind is heaping”, “by the corn-fields ripe for reaping”; “the lark is singing”, “the grass and weeds are springing”, “the bat is winging”, “winds are bringing/ Far-off chimes of church-bell ringing”). And all those jovial present-participle forms convey the impression that they are about to break through and wake the sleeper up; at least they go as far as to influence her dreams (“Their sound fills her dreams with Heaven” (18)). But the ending is dishearteningly distant and cold, - the last line is always pronounced by the dead, rather than by the living.

And here is one of the most ambiguous questions of Rossetti’s life and death clashes. Is death impenetrable? In the previous chapter I cited “Symbols,” where the speaker

¹⁸¹ Margaret Reynolds, “Speaking un- likeness: The double text in Christina Rossetti’s ‘After Death’ and ‘Remember’”, *Textual Practice* 13.1 (1999): 25-41.

¹⁸² Ibid, p. 28.

breaks through the eggshell of the unhatched eggs, thus violating both the space of life unfulfilled and the space of death. There is a suggested parallel between death as dream-state and death as life unfulfilled, a haunted yet idealised space. In “After Death,” the unfulfilled life (the male addressee does not care about the female speaker while she is alive; the anticipated interaction comes only after she dies) seems to be forced to be fulfilled after death. For Reynolds, everything in the poem is “breached” and hence violated: “[a] should-be-externalized object intrudes disturbingly into a discrete space. In this particular context the room is first invaded, and then the garments, wrapping up, closing off, protecting, identifying ('the fold that hid my face') the very body of the speaker, are all twitched aside by linguistic sleight of hand.”¹⁸³ For Jamison, on the contrary, “the speaker is inviolate... untouched, unruffled... The persona, like the tidy sonnet form, is continent. Male readers may look, but cannot *get in* these inviolate poem-corpses”¹⁸⁴ – in a striking contrast to Tennyson’s “Mariana” or Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover.” Similarly to Rossetti’s handling of the garden trope, the speaker’s space is sealed. I read it rather as an instance of liminality where the speaker becomes the embodiment of the threshold between the living and the supernatural, as I have suggested in the previous chapter. This threshold is penetrable only from the side of the dead; the living are shut out. The balance is disrupted: the living, even if physically intruding into the space of the dead, are powerless. Those are the dead that frame them in their gaze.

In my readings of these poems, I suggest that there is no stable power balance between the subject and the object of the gaze. Although in general Rossetti seems to prefer the reversed structure, when the marginal and objectified stare back at the viewer, she is dubious about whether this gaze is invested with power. Her speakers are poised in-between active and passive roles, and Rossetti’s reworkings of the Sleeping Beauty and the Lady of Shalott patterns show that she fuses two stories into one. On one hand, we are tempted to believe that the female (dead or sleeping) is framed by the gaze of the onlooker and becomes a spectacle, yet on the other, it is the slumbering protagonist who peeps at the world through her sleep and fixes it within her dreams. The active participants that belong to the real world in Rossetti’s poems lack in resolution, will or

¹⁸³ Ibid, p. 30.

¹⁸⁴ Jamison, opus cit., p.133.

ability, and cede the decision power to the dreamers/ the sleepers/ the dead. This sliding power balance provides us with a curious structure full of absent subjects and gaps on perceptual, narrative and even rhythmical levels. In the next chapter I build on it by exploring Rossetti's ever-present silences and deficiencies of rhythm, to show how power can be constructed through the absence.

Chapter 3. Checks and Balances of Layered Repetitions

After six well-defined and several paroxysms of stamping, foaming, hair-uprooting, it seems time to assume a treacherous calm: and in this (comparatively) lucid interval I regain speech.

Christina Rossetti, in a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 31 March 1865

Most of those who met Christina Rossetti in person start their recollections of the poet with the description of her voice, as if she, was a saint or a soul rather than a human being. Theodore Watts, after giving his readers a long introduction to the saintly character of Rossetti's writing, describes their first meeting: "I heard a voice, precise, formal, yet as sweet as a silver bell.... There was something in the tone of the voice that banished all my awe of the saint, and I entered the room."¹⁸⁵ Grace Gilchrist, after giving a short sketch of Rossetti's fame and presentation (supposedly as an Italian fairy-princess), dwells upon her voice. "She possessed, too, the beautiful Italian voice all the Rossettis were gifted with – a voice made up of strange, sweet inflections, which rippled into silvery modulations in sustained conversation, making ordinary English words and phrases fall upon the ear with a soft, foreign, musical intonation, though she pronounced the words themselves with the purest of English accents."¹⁸⁶ For Rossetti, a voice is "inseparable from the person to whom it belongs," yet it also holds a promise of eternal life: though songs may be new, "those singing voices are the selfsame which spake and sang on earth, the same which age enfeebled and death silenced."¹⁸⁷ Hence the voice becomes not only the embodiment of the personality with all its peculiarities and differences, but at the same time the carrier of seemingly universal truths. This idea is important in understanding Victorian written texts, as they were meant to be read out aloud. As Garrett Stewart notes, "[many] Victorian audiences read for the conjuring work of the language, phrase by phrase, sometimes syllable by syllable... they savoured

¹⁸⁵ Theodore Watts, "Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti", *The Nineteenth Century: a Monthly Review* March 1877-December 1900 37.216 (1895): 355-66.

¹⁸⁶ Grace Gilchrist, "Christina Rossetti," *Good words* (1896): 822-6, p. 823.

¹⁸⁷ Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies*, (London: Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1897), p. 30.

the cadences of syntax and the surprises of diction, the recitational vestiges of writing's phonetic patterns, the beat and lift of the sentences as well as their dying falls."¹⁸⁸ This silent intoning helps to decipher Rossetti's interior polyphony, and reading and re-reading sounds, metres and rhymes will provide the framework for this chapter.

The second part of my research deals with the irregularity of Christina Rossetti's poetic voice – her engagement with rhythm and rhyme techniques. Building upon the imagery of threshold as entrance to the liminal space discussed in the previous chapter, I suggest that the poet inserts into the tissue of the poem a sound/sense framework marked by irregularities whose function is similar to that of a threshold. This allows her to establish multiple realities within the poem and wrap meanings around its core, illuminating different and often conflicting points. The space of her liminality becomes regulated by rhythms and repetitive rhyming structures which give the reader a sense of action caught midway and not to be carried through. Rossetti's preference for a repetitive framing system on the formal grammar and sound level contributes to the "secret" hidden in the poem (which in my reading is usually related to emptiness and non-fulfillment), creating an atmosphere of delayed and subverted expectations. Having defined the general challenges of the liminal spaces in the first part of this thesis, I proceed with their physical embodiment here. The second part of the thesis focuses on the often superfluous presence of repetition and conflicting rhythmic sequences in Christina Rossetti's works, and the blanks in the text it often entails. The poet is constantly in search of a new poetic technique that can bring forward dense emotional and spiritual meaning. It is through rhythmical lapses and slips and irregularly repeated formal structures that Rossetti orchestrates sophisticated inner polyphony (or rather, polyacoustic surplus of meaning) in her texts. The act of joining imperfect rhymes and conflicting metres so that they fit into an elegantly balanced form, as it is often the case with Rossetti, requires deliberate effort which has often been neglected by previous critics. I believe that Bakhtin's idea of polyphony and Genette's theory of palimpsest

¹⁸⁸ Garrett Stewart, *Novel Violence: A Narratography of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 1.

arrangement provide a good point of reference for Rossetti's work.¹⁸⁹ The idea of palimpsest, in particular, brings out the liminality of the texts written between the boundaries of one-sided approaches, inviting "the productive violence of the involvement, entanglement, interruption and inhabitation of disciplines in and on each other."¹⁹⁰ Rossetti's play with echoing sounds and rhymes extends to more nuanced levels than she has been given credit for. As she puts it herself, "[m]y actual *Prince* seems to me invested with a certain artistic congruity of construction not lightly to be despised...See how the subtle elements balance each other and fuse into a noble conglom!"¹⁹¹

By way of introduction to the second stage of my work I want to highlight the relationship between the structure of the poem and liminality. My analysis is focused on Rossetti's use of repetition. While formally repetition serves as a confirmation of an idea previously stated, Rossetti uses it to introduce her own doubts into seemingly simple and straightforward texts.¹⁹² It becomes a subtle way to illustrate differences: it clarifies, and distorts the initial focus at the same time. The easily recognized forms become anchor points with which to signal subsequent shifts of meaning and overlapping perspectives. I explore how Rossetti creates a space of open possibilities on the textual level, a technique similar to Turner's reconfiguration of symbols on the liminal stage. For Turner, liminality is partially a stage of reflection – a process that involves deconstruction, reconfiguration and repetition of familiar symbols in new

¹⁸⁹ See Bakhtin's analysis of polyphony in Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982) and Genette's elaboration of palimpsests in Gerard Genette, *Palimpsests: La Litterature au second degré* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982).

¹⁹⁰ Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), p. 2.

¹⁹¹ In a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 10 February 1865, quoted in William Michael Rossetti (ed), *Rossetti Papers: 1862 to 1870* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), p. 77.

¹⁹² A similar approach to repetition was suggested by Sylvan Esh in "Not Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion and Repetition in Christina Rossetti's *Monna Innominata* Sequence." *Studies in English Literature, 1500 - 1900* 34: 4 (Autumn, 1994): 835-851 and Amy Christine Bilone's analysis of Rossetti's sonnets in *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-century Sonnet* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2007).

settings.¹⁹³ And here repetition becomes a sort of a magnifying glass that brings into focus things usually taken for granted; it also deflects our perception into new planes so that new meanings of the commonplace can be brought to light. The text is haunted by its own elements as repetition structures it on all the levels, from sounds (as in alliteration or assonance) to repetition of separate words (as in anaphora or ploce), from echoing lines and syntactical patterns to intertextual repetition in different poems throughout the book or even throughout the whole span of Rossetti's writing. I believe that it is exactly the inconspicuous banality and manipulation of conventions in verbal and phrasal repetition that subverts our expectations, and provides a unique instrument to orchestrate Rossetti's layered dreamscapes and changes in (self)-perception. Here I'd like to return back to Turner's description the liminal stage as a repetition/ re-enactment of socially accepted norms that allows to try out new connections and dependencies; similarly, in Rossetti's poems repetition seems to trigger a mechanism of re-assemblage and reassessment of meaning reminiscent of the experience of a neophyte in the liminal space.

Another important point in creating this effect of liminal layering lies with Rossetti's repetitive rhymes. Rhyme is intrinsically mnemonic, so it guides our perception and creates memories that make it easier to follow the temporal flow. As Gillian Beer shows in "Rhyming as Resurrection," rhyme references the past – tribal or childhood - and is dangerously close to magic and liminality. It projects us into the times when we were not truly ourselves and the world seemed unknown and dangerous; on the other, it allows the comfortable complicity of re-cognition, regaining territory of the known: "Rhyme aids recollection. It also brings things back. It creates memory within the poem, raising again words that might die out in the mind and straining them across lines as echoes, deformations, recurrences."¹⁹⁴ At the same time rhyme is a make-believe technique as it tricks us into imagining non-existent parallels between things that have

¹⁹³ See Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in William A. Lessa, and Evon Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion* (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1979).

¹⁹⁴ Gillian Beer, "Rhyming as Resurrection", in *Memory and Memorials, 1789-1914: Literary and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline M. Labbe and Sally Shuttlewoth (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 189-207, p. 191.

nothing in common.¹⁹⁵ By a sleight of hand (or rather, a slip of sound) Rossetti brings her readers into a different spatial reality, a temporal loop; by constantly rearranging and transposing echoing sounds she dilutes and compromises the meaning of her texts, similar to Turner's communication of the sacra in "Betwixt and Between" – the elements of the real world are taken apart and reconstructed in the liminal in a kaleidoscopic procession of information, discussed in the first chapter.

For Rossetti herself, the idea of structuring polyphony is of great importance. "Is music monotonous?" she enquires in *Time Flies*, and answers her question immediately: "A monotone is not music." The act of creation is only possible through unity of differences: "How is it [sound] to become an element of music? By forming part of a sequence. Change, succession, are of the essence of music."¹⁹⁶ This assemblage principle proves that for Rossetti, minor disruptions of rhythm or rhyme are a conscious choice of constructing an inner melody which guides the reader through the temporal and spatial complexity of the text.

Rossetti's manipulation of rhythms and sounds is even more complicated when considered in the historical perspective. Recently there have been a number of works studying Victorian prosody and rhyme, especially in their connection to scientific advances.¹⁹⁷ As has been suggested by various critics, a steady rhythm was viewed as the major principle of the natural order of things, and all the newly discovered phenomena, such as electricity, sound and light waves, were believed to be in tune with

¹⁹⁵ Peter MacDonald in his *Sound Intentions: Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth Century Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) discusses Victorian discourse on rhymes and produces a number of close readings of Victorian texts to show how rhyme and reason can pull the reader in different directions, including a sound reading of Rossetti's "The Convent Threshold" with which I engage in Chapter 1.

¹⁹⁶ *Time Flies*, p. 29.

¹⁹⁷ Most notably Jason K. Rudy, *Electric Meters: Victorian Physiological Poetics* (Athens, Ohio : Ohio University Press, 2009); Jason David Hall (ed), *Meter Matters: Verse Culture of the Long Nineteenth Century* (Ohio University Press: 2011); Yopie Prins, "Victorian Meters" in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, (Cambridge: 2000); Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2006); Adam Martin Mazel, *The Work and Play of Rhyme in Victorian Verse Cultures, 1850-1900*, a PhD dissertation submitted in the University of Michigan, 2014.

the pulse of the universe orchestrated by God's will.¹⁹⁸ Fostered by physiological investigations, this regularity was perceived to be embodied in the pulse of the human body. In a similar way, a skilled poem was to be composed in equal or proportionate spaces, which was seen as natural proof of the strong will and healthy mind of the poet, and a key to many national, social and even gender issues.¹⁹⁹ In contrast, the instability of poetic rhythm was seen as a sign of emotional breakdown and a threat to stability and functionality of mind and thus the nation. Blair (2006) and Campbell (2004) in their respective works draw a number of convincing literary examples of how the nation's heart was believed to be unable to cope with social unrest, the latter being translated into the disrupted rhythm of social life, as is seen for example, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) in relation to Italian liberation.

On the other hand, this very regularity of rhythm was sometimes also viewed as mechanical and impersonal. Thus fractured rhythm was presented as an individualized and more emotional alternative. "I am not a mechanism," protests Christina Rossetti when Dante Gabriel reproaches her for her fanciful metres. In a message to the editor William Edmonstoune Aytoun, she assures him that "poetry is with me, not a mechanism, but an impulse and a reality;"²⁰⁰ and in another letter to her brother she stands her ground even more firmly:

I don't think it would have done to write the Alchemist without the metric jolt, however unfortunate the original selection of such rhythm may have been; <however> but we will file and polish... You see, were you next to propose my writing a classic epic in quantitative hexameters or in the hendecasyllables which

¹⁹⁸ Kirstie Blair, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of the Heart* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2006), p. 67.

¹⁹⁹ Adam Mazel and Anne Jamison discuss Victorian debates over national and political significance of metrical systems. See also Joshua King, "Patmore, Hopkins, and the Problem of the English Metrical Law" in *Victorian Poetry* 49.2 (Summer 2011): 31-49.

²⁰⁰ Christina Rossetti to William Edmonstoune Aytoun, 1 August 1854, in Anthony E. Harrison (ed), *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, (Charlottesville, VA.: University of Virginia Press, 1997-2004), 4 vols, 1: 72.

might almost trip up Tennyson, what could I do? Only what I feel inclined to do in the present instance, plead good will but inability...²⁰¹

There is a certain defiance in Christina's acknowledgement of her inability to write in proper metres. In probably the most cited and least deserved criticism of her work, John Ruskin stigmatizes her writing as full of "quaintnesses and other offences," and advises her to "exercise herself in the severest commonplace of metre."²⁰² Taking this judgement close to heart, both Dante Gabriel and William Michael would never cease trying to correct what they termed the 'metric jolt', 'screech', 'queer rhyme' and 'groan' of their sister's writing.²⁰³ Their wording is quite curious, as it highlights particular irregularities of Christina's poems that sit contrary to her public image of a 'spiritual lady' whose days are spent in "utter quiet and seclusion."²⁰⁴ It involves a break, a disturbance of one's mental composure, incontrollable and violent.²⁰⁵ This very "violent" and "broken" vocabulary will be used again by Gerard Manley Hopkins when he elaborates his "sprung rhythm" and calls on Rossetti "for aid in defining a metric <...> a dramatic and eruptive voice whose spontaneity challenges Tennyson's sculpted lines."²⁰⁶

²⁰¹ Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 10 February 1865 in Anthony E. Harrison (ed), *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, (Charlottesville, VA.: University of Virginia Press, 1997-2004), 4 vols, 1:253.

²⁰² Quoted in Lona Mosk Packer (ed), *The Rossetti-Macmillan Letters: Some 133 Unpublished Letters*, (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 5-6. It is curious to note that when the relationship between Ruskin and Dante Gabriel become strained in 1865, Ruskin dismisses the new work of the latter in a similar tone, as "moral insolences and iniquities."

²⁰³ See William Michael Rossetti, *Rossetti Papers 1862 to 1870* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903), pp. 77; 93; 99-100. It is worth mentioning that all those terms are quoted by Christina herself as written by her brothers.

²⁰⁴ A. Smellie, "Christina Rossetti and Her Message" in *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 118 (March 1895): 203-206.

²⁰⁵ It also reminds one of a pen-and-ink drawing by Dante Gabriel showing "Christina Rossetti in a Tantrum" with the inscription: "Miss Rossetti can point to work which could not easily be mended."

²⁰⁶ Tom Paulin, *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 80. For works exploring the link between Hopkins and Rossetti, see Sharon Smulders, "'A Form That Differences': Vocational Metaphors in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins", *Victorian Poetry* 29. 2 (1991): 161-173; Simon Neil Humphries, 'The fiery antidote: an oppositional reading of Christina Rossetti and Gerard Hopkins', (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Oxford,

The first example that comes to mind in relation to Hopkins' "sprung rhythm" in particular, or the exploration of Rossetti's prosody in general, is "Goblin Market." Hardly any scholar approached the poet's legacy without noticing the poem's aggressive mix of voices, rhythmical palimpsest, and changing and challenging texture. Anne Jamison places Rossetti's writing in the context of (proto)-modernist technique of collage by highlighting the uneven texture of the poem and claims that "Goblin Market" has no dominant unifying metre, as it is "formed of amalgams of prior metrical identities, cobbled or gobbled together into recognizable, but always multiply sourced forms."²⁰⁷ She then juxtaposes 'foreign' male goblin metrics and Lizzie and Laura's 'national' (and maiden) prosody. Herbert E. Tucker discusses the "virtual orality" of the poem and the poetics of confusion, both verbal and cultural, although his main argument lies with the critique of mercantilism. He also notes how this approach reclaims the original mnemonic roots of poetry and develops almost shamanistic, brain-washing qualities through its sales-pitch repetition and strategic hype and recontextualization.²⁰⁸ On a physical level of reading Matthew Campbell follows parallels between the rhythmical overlaps and the changes happening to the sisters' consciousness, from the extended, unmetrical and packed stresses of the opening lines, to perfectly iambic middle lines, to the more irregular anapest stresses of falling into unconsciousness, and back to the iambic consciousness.²⁰⁹ His observations provide a clue to Rossetti's unpacking of physical and temporal characteristics into the variations of rhythm. Steven Connor discusses Rossetti's displacement of the subject through "contortions of the syntax" and notes that repetition "paradoxically keeps awareness alive of otherness and alteration." Thus otherness is reclaimed through the clash of

2002); Jude V. Nixon, "'Goldengrove Unleaving': Hopkins' 'Spring and Fall', Christina Rossetti's 'Mirrors of Life and Death', and the Politics of Inclusion", *Victorian Poetry* 43. 4 (2005), pp. 473-484; Jerome Bump. "Hopkins, Metalepsis, and the Metaphysicals" in *John Donne Journal* 4. 2 (1985): 303-320.

²⁰⁷ Jamison, *Poetics en Passant*, opus cit. Jamison's phonetic/metric reading is based on Edwin Guest's *History of English Rhythm* (1838).

²⁰⁸ Herbert E. Tucker, "Rossetti's Goblin Marketing: Sweet to Tongue and Sound to Eye," *Representations* 82 (Spring 2003): 117-133.

²⁰⁹ Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 56-57.

various metric approaches, and the objects are displaced and shattered as “images designed to convey stability dissolve into images of instability.”²¹⁰

Surprisingly most critics limit their acute observations of rhythm and rhyme patterns to “Goblin Market,” to the extent that there seems to be two Rossettis: the whimsical author of the fantasy poem, and the stately dull grand dame of devotional writing. Many critics note repetitious structures in her devotional writing – but even the most sympathetic accounts dismiss them as limited, reactionary and uninspired. Thus Isobel Armstrong refers to Christina’s work as “adamantly locked in repetition,” where repetition becomes a barrier or a limit to be transgressed and played with. Still Armstrong doesn’t see repetition as transgressive per se.²¹¹ In a similar way, repetition is seen as self-effacing and self limiting (Rosenblum) and even “lacking a fresh word or a matching sound” (Hassett).²¹² Even Joshua Taft in his recent attempt to reclaim the importance of Rossetti’s religious writing, still believes “it obsessively returns to a handful of topics and plays with a limited number of words,” linking it to the poet’s endorsement of Christian discipline.²¹³

I want to reclaim repetition as an imaginative trope and bridge the gap between those two Rossettis to show that metrical jolts and enchanting repetitions are not the exclusive trick of the goblin speech but are present everywhere in Rossetti’s poetry, and that her devotional poems have the same shamanistic sound of irregularity. To illustrate my point, I have brought together poems from different years and different subjects: a seasonal lyrical poem (“Spring” (1859)), two apocalyptic poems (“Sleep at Sea” (1853) and “A Ballad of Boding” (1882)), and three devotional poems (“A Better Resurrection”

²¹⁰ Steven Connor, “‘Speaking Likenesses’: Language and Repetition in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’”, *Victorian Poetry* 22. 4 (1984): 439-448. Connor doesn’t limit his analysis to the title poem but traces similar instances in the poet’s other work as well.

²¹¹ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 352.

²¹² Constance Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* (Charlottesville, VA: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2005); Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

²¹³ Joshua Taft, “The Forms of Discipline: Christina Rossetti’s Religious Verse,” in *Victorian Poetry* 51. 3 (2013): 311-330, p. 313.

(1857), “Whither the Tribes Go Up, even the Tribes of the Lord” (circa 1877) and “Advent” (1886)). My choice is neither chronological nor thematic; by picking these poems seemingly at random I want to show that similar approaches are omnipresent throughout Rossetti’s writing from her earliest poems to her later work. Some of these poems are well-known among the critics, some, such as “Advent” or “A Ballad of Boding,” received very limited criticism.

One of the most well-known of these poems is “Spring” (1859), cited by Jamison in support of her poetics of stealth and negative life. It takes up uneven rhythms and continuous repetition both within the text itself and within the whole corpus of works, evident through the links to other poems in the volume, notably “Winter Rain” (1859), “Another Spring” (1857), “May” (1859), and later seasonal poems, for example, “The Months. A Pageant” (1879). It exemplifies Rossetti’s ideas of spring as a liminal state between life and death and brings out the hidden violence of it. It also structurally echoes the title poem, “Goblin Market,” with its repetitious parallels to sapping roots and resurrection.²¹⁴ In the same manner, the rhythmic and rhyming patterns of the poem are uneven, following the insecure sap of seeds and roots breaking through the soil. The poem is written in a two-beat structure (x / | x /) with occasional variations (dactylic tetrameter, trimester, and pentameter lines), not matching the rhyme scheme. Rather, the key moments in inner reasoning are accompanied by a break in the rhythm, as if, indeed, life could “put forth shoots” through the locked metrics.

The poem starts with an image of seasonal (or temporary limited) sleeping-beauty type enclosure (“frost-locked”) as we see a snapshot of growth frozen in action.²¹⁵ The first four lines bear a hint of uncertainty as they end with a question (“What shall make their sap ascend” 3). The boundaries are blurred even further: this growth of the living is “nursed in its grave by death,” (9) and a “hidden life” (7) comes through in every push, every effort to grow. The movement is upwards and outwards (“ascend” (3), “put forth”

²¹⁴ The parallel between the two poems is also mentioned by Rosenblum who notes Laura’s desire to “breed new life” out of death. See Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti. The Poetry of Endurance*, opus cit., p. 78.

²¹⁵ Jamison also notes how the familiar (“landlocked”) is gaining in meaning and impact by association with new imagery of frost (Jamison, *Poetics en passant*, p. 192).

(4), “break forth” (8)), but the focus of attention is fixed on the “underneath”(8) and “the hidden.” The emphasis on the dark pre-spring state offers a seemingly vampiric vision of seeds and roots, waiting in cold sleep or death to feed on life.²¹⁶ A certain aggressive impulse is evident in the use of weapon-related “blade” and “sheath,” which strengthen the claim to get out (by force, if needed). There is a slight doubt as to whether the hidden life breaks forth with the grass (note the verb that also implies violence) or stays behind undisclosed. I would argue that Rossetti is intentionally vague here, as her earth is layered in both physical and temporal sense.

The poet was well-versed in contemporary science and no stranger to palaeontology and the idea of geological layers, Charles Lyell being an acquaintance of the family.²¹⁷ After all, Adelene Buckland notes, “always embroiled in literary debate, geology was *written* into existence in the nineteenth century as much as it was found, discovered, collected, mapped, or modelled”²¹⁸ and was linked to “the air of romance” and fantasy as geologists were directly or indirectly engaged in weaving together biblical narration, cosmogony, and history of rock formations. It was especially true in the case of Lyell, whose theories “expose the hidden narrative aesthetic”²¹⁹ that operated behind his vision of the earth’s past, so that geology becomes a poetic science referring to secret forces shaping layers of land. And indeed, Rossetti’s imagery is both reminiscent of Lyell’s poetic writing and his uniformitarian ideas. In *Seek and Find* she explains:

our actual earth is wholly or in part a reconstruction of wrecked and ruined material already existing; and those traces of organisms which science

²¹⁶ Hassett argues that such “underdevelopment” is typical of Rossetti’s poetry (as statement which I explore further in the next chapter), and “what is seen is often evanescent and half-hidden.” (Hassett, *Patience of Style*, opus cit., p. 56)

²¹⁷ More information on their acquaintance, especially in relation to their respective work on Dante, in Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth Century Geology* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2013), pp. 95-131. As far as Lyell’s poetic practices are concerned, it is curious to note his own play with metres and rhythms when in his youth he won a versification contest despite having transgressed the official rule ten-syllable rule.

²¹⁸ Adelene Buckland, *Novel Science: Fiction and the Invention of Nineteenth Century Geology* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 2013), p. 4.

²¹⁹ *Seek and Find*, p. 117.

recognises and which seem imperatively to demand a far longer period of formation, existence, decay, than the inspired Mosaic record appears to contemplate, are accounted for.²²⁰

In a similar way, her spring growth is not a one-directional, but a layered process. Roots and seeds are underground never to be revealed, and shoots and leaves are both their messengers and yet another decoy for them. The relationship between the dead and the yet-to-be living is that of interdependence and confrontation, as reflected in the aggressive language describing their cohabitation when the language itself becomes a battlefield.

A similar rivalry emerges on the level of phonetics. Voiced and unvoiced pairings seem to follow the spring tension. The almost whispered out alternating [s] and [t] in the first stanza create an effect of threat and hidden attack, which intensifies with occasional infrequent eruption of vocals [b], [d], trembling [r], [l] or nasals [m] and [n]. Thus, whispering “leaf” and “sheath” interrupted by vocal “blade” (6) create a haunting aggressive echo. “Telling” (7) here seems to be almost an overstatement, as it feels more like a hurriedly hissed account. The mention of a “nursery” as a space of protection of nurturing also implies quiet, hushed down tones, and appeals again to the idea of growing. The combination of weapon-related imagery and unvoiced plosives creates an atmosphere of ambush and assault, which is emphasized by the rhythmical conflict of the last two lines of the stanza. It might be relevant to remember that for Rossetti all homely and cozy images hide a certain ambiguity. As we have seen in the previous chapters, home for her is both a space of security and a place of entrapment.

The rhyming structure of the first stanza seems quite organized with a-b-c-b rhyming. But with a characteristic repetitive twist, Rossetti doubles the rhyme with a haunting quasi-echo of “roots/ fruits” (2) and “put/shoots” (4) which plunges the reader into longing and wondering. In her reading of this poem, Elizabeth Helsinger notes “anticipative rhymes” that seem to develop new meaning from slight variations and

²²⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

failed echoes where the ending rhyme is only a visual one.²²¹ Lines 5-9 are arranged around alternating [i:] and [ei] (“leaf”, “blade”, “break”, “underneath”, “grave”) closed by a shorter [e] of “death”; words that provide these changes of sound also serve as a visual rhyme: “sheath” – “breaks” – “underneath” – “death.”

The second stanza starts with less forceful action compared to the more brutal wording of the first: the wind blows (10), the rain drips (11), the sun looks down and wakes (12). Yet all those words refer to incomplete actions: a wind “blowing pleasantly” is half-force; a “soaking rain” is just “dripping;” young grass that “springs on the plain” implies sudden appearance but scarce coverage. The repetitive “young grass” and “young leaves” seem to answer the question of the first refrain as “Seeds, and roots, and stones of fruits” (2) become “Swollen with sap” (15). The paraphrase from the first stanza dictates a certain pattern in rhyme and rhythm structure. But the expected a-b-c-b rhyming turns into a h-i-j-i-k-b-b-i (where the b-rhyme is echoing the previous stanza.) Moreover, the i-rhyme repeats the alternate [ei] sound from the first stanza (“blade”-“break”-“grave”). Thus the echo is ominous: despite all the glory of spring, it is a bleak descendant of a far more gruesome hidden life. The rhythm settles down being broken just once when it comes to describing roots swollen with what they have presumably gained with their stealth attack.

The third and forth stanzas seem to reclaim the supremacy of the new life over its hidden origin: “There is no time like Spring” (19, 29). Various orders of repetition bring forward the layered perspective of spring. The third stanza puts a stress on the living, while the fourth stanza brings forward the dead, thus concluding the full circle of life. The emphasis on life of the third stanza is evident from the second line: “When life’s alive in everything” (20). It establishes the climax of symmetry – hidden life finally turns into life “alive,” an almost superfluous repetition. It also marks a climax for the poem: from now on, spring is not the death’s doing, but the God’s doing (“God guides their wing,/ He spreads their table that they nothing lack.”(24-25)) Rhyming takes up a simplified a-a-a-b-b-a-b pattern. As if it were not enough, Rossetti multiplies those echoing sounds by repeating them twice in the end of the line (“nestlings sing”

²²¹ Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Poetry and the Thought of Song in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015), pp. 117-121.

(21), “*trackless track*” (23)), creating a sense of overwhelming intensity. Those repetitions determine the temporal boundaries for the new life and highlight the symmetry of God’s plan. The hurriedness expressed on the sound level is projected onto the structure, by adding a line every next stanza (first two stanzas have 9 lines each, the third has 10 lines, and the fourth has 11.) Those additional lines reintroduce death into spring advances, with the sun ready “to scorch the world up” (28) and “hastening to die” (39). This quickening effect prompts us to ignore temporal markers: “*before* new nestlings sing,/ *Before* cleft swallows speed their journey back” (21-22); “*before* the daisy grows a common flower,/ *Before* the sun has power” (26-27). The past and the present seem to coincide for us as we get completely displaced in time.

As soon as death is reintroduced as an immanent ending in line 31, the rhythm becomes hectic again. The divine plan is broken, and so is the unity of the poem. The sharp disintegration of spring-life is recreated on the textual level through reiteration. If in the good times, “*nestlings*” (my emphasis) relied on God in their “*trackless track*” – “God guides their *wing*” (21-24), now “*hatched in the nest*” (34) are “*strong on the wing*” (36) on their own. In a similar way, “Now newly-born, and now/ Hastening to *die*” (38-39) an expanded and distorted echo of line 31 (“There is no time like Spring-life *born to die*”) with the same key stresses on “born” and “die,” a pale copy of the good times fading away.

Alliterated lines disappear (but for line 33 “clothing the uncouth clod,”) as if Rossetti becomes deliberately cacophonic. Each line starts with a different vowel sound in lines 32-36, which creates a feeling of sharp, yet inevitable change. The overall tone is aggressive again with “*piercing*” (39) and “*strong*” (36), and switches to completed actions: “*hatched*” (34), “*fledged*” (35). This completeness adds a sharp edge to the resolution of death. The same aggressive breakthrough is reflected in the rhyming structure. Starting with a-b-b-c-c, Rossetti deliberately reverts all expectations. Rhyming of lines 34-39 is fragmented and irregular, as if puncturing out the sharp inevitability of death.

Uneven rhymes are strengthened by uneven rhythms. The last lines of the poem show no identifiable pattern. Rossetti even repeats the same lines with a slight variation to break the previously established rhythmic pattern. Thus she merges a perfect

anadiplosic iambic couplet – “There is no time like Spring,/ Like Spring that passes by” (29-30) - into one line written in heroic iambic pentameter: “There is no time like Spring that passes by” (37), as if to underline the finality of this change. The idea of wild, unstoppable, aggressive break-through is confirmed on the sound and rhythm level, pressing into the inevitability of final resolution. It also stresses the layeredness of perception along Lyell’s ideas about geology, as there are multiple processes going on at the same time. The cycle of life-slipping-into-death is shadowed by a subtler process of death-growing-into-life, where the dead are the driving force of the living. Instead of unwrapping those processes, Rossetti creates a portemanteau of a text where repeated fragments and sudden changes of rhythm become markers of merged temporalities. This seems to be a common trope in her seasonal poems – for example, April in “The Months. A Pageant” reads, “Birth means dying/ As wings and wind mean flying/ So you and I and all things fly or die” (116-118). This fusion between controlled action (flying) and uncontrolled (dying) leaves a similar impression as the passing of spring in “Spring,” and brings forward the ambiguous liminal nature of the season. It also brings us back to the idea of natural development and the seasonal and climatic changes that transform the surface of the earth. Armstrong argues the Lyell’s ideas become the driving force behind Tennyson’s poetry,²²² but I have shown that this geological layering plays an important role in Rossetti’s work as well. And it is not only relevant to seasonal poems. If for Lyell, geology is the archive of the earth and its past, for Rossetti it preserves not only the history of the land, but spiritual development of the human being, bringing together the living and the dead.

To illustrate the idea of layering further, I take “Advent”, a poem composed almost 35 years later (William Michael marks it as written before 1886). At a first glance, it seems to be a formal metric exercise, with three stanzas of an uneven number of lines (4, 3, 4) in trochee tetrameter. It reflects Rossetti’s ideas on the afterlife and offers a vision of the dead and the living displaced and co-habiting the liminal space, and also serves as a metaphor for her layered textual construction.

The poem starts with “Earth grown old” (1) which is anaphorically repeated to close the first stanza and the poem itself. The “crust of cold” (2) refers to a space of entrapment,

²²² Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, pp. 252-280.

and life seems to be enclosed beneath it, reminiscent of the hidden life in “Spring”. The similarity of the two poems is even more striking if we compare the concluding lines of the first stanzas to note that the appeal to nursery and growth-into-death is shared between the two poems. In “Spring,” it is “Life nursed in its grave by death,” and “Nurses fire unfelt, unseen” (3) in “Advent.” Moreover, almost all of the verb forms in the second poem are in the passive voice – “grown,” “unfelt,” “unseen,” “are told,” “lie hid.” Who is the driving force behind all those descriptions, is left unsaid. If in “Spring” we are given a seasonal framework, here Rossetti revokes the temporal scale completely: the reader is locked within a liminal loop, marked with repeated questions “when” (8-9).

The link is strengthened even further in stanza two, when a claustrophobic image of the dead being hid between the earth’s “swathings” is deployed. This army of the dead is much closer to the inner fire of earth and spiritual “hidden life.”²²³ Presumably when the fire breaks through, it will be brought forward by the dead,²²⁴ in a process similar to the one described in “Spring.” Interaction between the dead and the living implies a reversal of roles where the transition between “life-in-death” and “death-in-life” becomes vague and often marked by limitation and violence. The third stanza calls for the time when the fire “break[s] up her screen” (8) and life “burst[s] thro’ her mould” (9). The imagery of breaking through the earth’s (and human) wholeness and the vocabulary of secrecy and layering (“crust,” “inner swathings,” “fold,” “screen,” “mould.”) constructs a liminal space of fusion and transgression. Rossetti leaves us with a hanging question as to which life is the real one. On one hand, she refers to “we who live” (5), on the other, “When will life burst thro’ her mould” (9) implies a different kind of life, opposed to ours. Instead of an answer, Rossetti ends the poem with a triple invocation and a paraphrase of the first line, thus creating a shamanistic circled structure (“Earth, earth, earth, thy cold is keen,/ Earth grown old” (10-11)) which cements the inherent controversy between the layers.

²²³ Christ himself was hidden in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights (St Matt. XII, 40).

²²⁴ The dead spirits as the bearers of a spiritual fire are also seen in “From House to Home” where they are depicted as standing torches: “Tier beyond tier they rose and rose and rose / So high that it was dreadful, flames with flames” (173-74).

Repetition is omnipresent on various levels. Throughout the poem the only two rhymes are used both in ending syllables and in echoing half-lines: a/b-b/a-b-a-a-b-a-b-a-a/b. One sound is used in descriptive words, and the other – in action-based or key words. Thus we have [ou] in “old,” “cold,” “told,” “fold,” “mould” – all related to layering and the death-in-life state; while the shrill alteration of long and short [i:]/ [i] in “still,” “green,” “deep,” “beneath,” “live,” “quickly,” “millions,” “hid,” “between,” “inner,” “will,” “screen,” “keen” appeals to the violent rhetoric of movement and life breaking through death. “Advent” becomes a parable of a different temporal framework, potential spiritual spring, and the dead taking over the world of the living. The push that joins organic processes with inorganic in “Spring” is the same that reverses life into death and turns the dead into the victorious living. Armstrong, in connection to Tennyson, mentions a shift from geology to pathology where “concealed, irrational energies not apparent to the rational surface but continuously working to disrupt it”²²⁵ are paralleled on material (geology) and psychological levels. Rossetti’s structure is even more complex, as she opens up new spiritual dimensions into this layering. Both “Advent” and “Spring” approach layering in a very physical way – as an alteration of life and death, or rather, the dead and the living coexisting in the same spatial reality. Rossetti can be seen to be following the pattern and subjecting the speakers of her poems to the hidden forces which cannot be known rationally; but it is the moment of their interaction that opens the liminal and marks the distinction; the dead being not only equal to the living, but acting as their mentors or even their mirrored doubles. Paralleling Turner’s interchangeability of the dead and the living in the liminal space, Rossetti’s living are dependent on the dead with supernatural forces acting as mediators between them in a “hostile and lethal,” or a “conciliatory and life-giving” connection.

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In a similar way, in her apocalyptic “Sleep at Sea” (1853/1862) Rossetti multiplies narratives and subjects to tell yet another story of death fused with life. In her thesis on Rossetti’s devotional writing, Ludlow suggests that repetitions stress “the interdependence of the personal and the cosmic. They point to a cyclical model of

²²⁵ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry*, p. 270.

²²⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process : Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 37-38.

understanding whereby the apocalypse is interpreted simultaneously in the world, the Communion of Saints, and the soul of the individual.”²²⁷ In a similar way, in “Sleep at Sea” Rossetti brings together several narratives to test the boundaries of sleep and death. In her thesis on apocalyptic literature, Rosemary Elizabeth Beckham claims that apocalypse per se is liminal as it focuses

on the performance of the uncertain, fluxional world as-text, where in theological terms, with faith, the emergence of hope (as a movement towards the instauration of love) opens us to the promise of encounter with that which is ultimately other.²²⁸

She further explains that in the modern and postmodern world where the absence of God leads to anguish, feeling of abandonment or indifference, apocalyptic variants end in rejecting the transformative Christian encounter with the divine and taking up the “atomized despair of lack.”²²⁹ In this sense, Rossetti’s poems which end in unfulfillment even for the faithful strike a very modern chord.

“Sleep at Sea” starts with uneven trochaic rhythm in the first stanza – albeit indecisive and slipping to iambs in lines 3-8 and a loose form of epanalepsis: “Sound the deep waters/ Who shall sound that deep?” (1-2) Joined by the question mark in the end of the second line, this immediately creates a tension, as “sound” in the first line might be read as homophones, both a verb and an adjective with opposite meanings – “sound” as in “sound asleep,” (deep, undisturbed), and “sound” as emitting audible signal. This awkward tenseness is stressed with the possible opposition of “deep waters” (2) and “short plummet” (3), and the rueful failure of the watchmen to stay awake. With the description of the watchmen’s dreams Rossetti tries to make the opening less dramatic, especially as three out of four rhymes in the first stanza (rhymes as a-b-c-b-d-b-e-b)

²²⁷ Elizabeth Ludlow, ‘*We can but spell a surface history*: The Biblical Typology of Christina Rossetti, a PhD dissertation submitted in the University of Warwick, 2008.

²²⁸ Rosemary Elizabeth Beckham, *Words at War: Liminality, Revelation and Representation in Apocalyptic Literature*, a PhD dissertation submitted in the University of Exeter, 2008, p. 8-9.

²²⁹ Ibid, p. 9.

present an alliterated list of quiet, safe, soothing images: “[s]leep” – “[s]teep” – “[sh]eep,” supported by the anaphora in lines 5 and 7: “Some dream of...”²³⁰

From the second stanza Rossetti switches to a loose iambic trilr with most of the even (rhyming) lines in dimeter and occasional expansions into tetrameter: despite minor variations, it seems to be following the rhythm of the ship. On the sound level, Rossetti picks up the alliteration of [s/sh]-[t]-[i:] in the first four lines of the second octave, where it is transformed into [sh]-[ei] of “shape” (9) and supported by repeated [f]’s and [st]’s throughout: “White *shapes* flit to and *fro*/ *From* mast to mast/ *They* feel the distant tempest/ *That* nears *them* fast.” (9-12) The whispering sounds mimic the voice of the sea before the tempest, suggesting a haunting, dangerous development. We are made aware of the imminent disaster, a feeling that is intensified by repetitious [fro] in lines 9-10, and syllabic rhyming of “tempest” with “mast” and “fast” (10, 12), which almost turns the first quartet into a powerful a-b-b-b sequence. Anaphoric “great” in lines 13, 14 evokes the ominous presence of “great rocks” and “great shoals,” joined by the “blast” of the wind: earth, water and air united against the people sleeping on the ship. “Shoal” is echoed in the “shout,” as if stretching the impact of the tempest. The flickering of sounds and shapes produces a fragmentation of reality and adds to the overall nervous expectation, the more so as we are not sure as to what is the true meaning of the setting. Familiar symbols are taken apart and reconstructed, yet the reader, being transposed into the liminal together with the characters of the poem, fails to decipher their meaning.

A master of riddles, Rossetti leaves the reader to guess the true nature of the benevolent “white shapes” in the opening of the stanza. Reminiscent of ghosts or mist, they seem to be more real than the vague “some” that is used in relation to the watchmen. Their presence is active: they flit, feel and shout, as opposed to the motionless sailors. The third stanza veers away from the tempest and catches up with the dreams of the watchmen. Thus Rossetti brings together different layers – the human world where the sailors embarked on a journey across the sea, the seemingly supernatural tempest as personified by the forces of nature, the spiritual world of the shades who try to wake the

²³⁰ Anaphora is used in the second part of every octave (lines 5, 7, 13-14, 21, 23, 22, 24, 38-39) in the first part of the poem (stanzas 1-5).

humans, and the flickering images of dreams. The poem creates a multidimensional space open to all sorts of interaction and possibility. This stanza shows how Rossetti's liminal experiences cross over the boundaries and stitch together things in different worlds by invisible connections on all levels, from sense to sound. Here we are transported into the world of the dreams that presents a stark contrast with the growing tension of the tempest in the real world: soft streams, music, hills opposed to deep waters, shouts, great rocks and blasts of the previous stanzas; at the same time it brings us back to "pasture grounds" from the first stanza. If a ship is "home" for those who are at sea, "the birds' nests" in the third stanza are similar "types of home/ Love-hidden from ills" (21-22). They are also echoing the benevolent shades from the second stanza as they are "types of spirits/ Love-music fills." (23-24) On the level of sound the [st] of the tempest that here is transformed in its syllabic rhyme of "nest," which is used both in anaphora (21, 23) and antidiplosis (19, 21). "Music" is used three times (lines 17, 24 and "musical" in line 19), seemingly to create an image of quiet paradise. Meanwhile this idyll is nothing but an illusion (and in this sense reminiscent of the fallen paradise in the beginning of "From House to Home"): repetitions, paired with partial anaphora of "love-hidden" and "love-music," produce a premonition of inevitable disruption.

Indeed, in the next stanza we are back watching the men sleep peacefully in the threatening light of the lightning (27). On the sound level the "sleepers" that "dream" (25) continue the soft "streams" (17) of bliss in the previous stanza – and act as a reference to Tennyson's "Lotus Eaters" (1832). Meanwhile the plosive [dr] of "dream" is soon transformed into the repeated "drive." The intense repetition of movement—"The ship is driving, - driving, - /It drives apace" (29-30) creates a sense of urgency in this staged performance of doom under the rueful accompaniment of the spirits' wails (repeated in stanza 10). The bliss of sleep becomes ominous set off by this background movement, almost as if they should be cancelling each other out. And the change follows quickly as in the fifth stanza we are thrown back into the apocalyptic tempest with the reddening skies and glaring lightning. Ploce (repetition to gain special emphasis) is now used with a more determined (if not ominous) "sunset" - Rossetti repeats it in lines 35 and 39, and breaks into "sun" and "go down" in line 37. This stanza marks the end of the first part of the poem where fate of the sleepers is undecided as evident through the question-marked "who" (2) and "when" (37, 40).

Rhythm and rhyme guide the reader through the next stanza, marking with slippages and repetitions the way through the liminal transformation and acting as a warning against the changing atmosphere. The breaking of the rhythm in stanza six (two stressed syllables in the beginning with “Wake,’ call the spirits” (/ / x / x (41)) makes the reader shudder and focus on the omission, and also warns us that the call of the spirits will be left unnoticed. The next lines prove this metrical pause right: anaphoric “[T]hey have forgotten” (43, 45) shows us the futility of all efforts to save the dreamers. It also marks the rupture between the worlds and the dreamers’ displacement: as they have forgotten their sorrows and hopes, they are captured in the world of their dreams. There is also a distinct opposition between the active movement of the ship and the fixed immobility of the sleepers, on the lexical level represented by “drive” versus “held,” which stresses the captivity of the dreamers. Similar to the speakers in “Shut Out” and “Autumn,” the dreamers here have chosen captivity of their own accord. Yet again, as Rossetti often demonstrates us, no power can be gained through withdrawal and dreaming. This feeling of helplessness and defeat is made evident by the lexical and sound parallels between the movement of the ship and the dream of the sailors.

Stanza seven continues the same pattern – the story is driven by the rhythm, and the changes in the rhythm make the reader shudder. It starts with anaphoric repetition from the previous stanza, extended with “again,” which breaks the rhythm even further and communicates a desperate attempt of the spirits to change the fate of the humans. Their “Wake!” (49) is echoed in “[to bid them a]wake,” (52) but the ears are “heedless.” (47) Here Rossetti plays with the reversal of the sirens’ imagery: the supernatural white shapes try to save the sailors from the wreck, but fail. The second quartet of the stanza makes a reference to the opening of the poem, with anaphoric “Some dream” and evocation of the sailors’ dreams (53, 55). The ending of the poem doubles the unfulfillment – the efforts of the spirits were wasted, and the dreams of the sailors are different from the active participation in reality of, for example, the Bride in “The Prince’s Progress.”

The benevolent spirits unwillingly abandon their cause. Rossetti again retorts to a layered space of references, turning the text into a palimpsest. Stanza eight is repeating itself: “spirits” appear three times (60, 61, 63); “wailing” – twice (59, 63), “slow” – twice (57, 58) and “white” twice in the same line (62). This “white” hints at the first

appearance of the spirits as “white shapes,” (9) but here the colour is being diluted into “clear” (61) and “pale” (63), as if becoming transparent. The reference to the “snow” (62) also stresses their transient nature - as figures on the threshold of changing, they belong to the liminal space and similar to the supernatural messengers I have discussed earlier. The poem itself seems to be on the threshold between the worlds, constantly referring to itself through anaphoric repetitions. Stanza nine offers a split parallelism between stanza two (“flitting,” 65, 9) and its imagery of the rising tempest, and stanza three with its idyllic dreamscapes (“bird,” 67, 19), as if pausing between the two realities and unwilling to switch completely to one of them. It seems that everything is being drawn into the liminal and disintegrating. The dreamscape is being diluted: the birds that were “musical” in stanza three, are mournful as their “song is tired at last;” (59) and “love” that was hiding the nests from ill and filling them with music is now “silent” and “useless.” (69-70) There is a curious displacement of action, as if the passivity of the dreamers is transferred to the spirits (“tired,” “silent,” “useless,” “sick”). At the same time, Rossetti draws a parallel between the birds from the dreams and the spirits trying to save the sleepers. Both are opposed to the ship: “sick with hope deferred” (72) versus “driving, - driving, -/ It drives apace” (29-30). It is emphasized on the sound level with the fast plosive [dr] of “drive” being weakened and separated into [d]-[f]-[r] of “deferred.” Continuous repetition adding neither sense nor action seems superfluous, but I read it as an important marker of Rossetti’s liminality. By tracing the same words and images over and over again, she both questions their validity and retracts her own judgement: the spirits could be the same as the dreams of the sleepers, so their presence can promise an escape or a trap.

The disappearing (and weakening) spirits are displaced again as their “flitting” movement is merged with the “drive” of the ship in stanza ten. Rossetti brings together repeated lines from stanza nine and stanza two to merge the world of the spiritual and the world of the tempest into one. The feeling is strengthened by the spirits casting a shadow upon the sails described as “a stain” (80) which stand in stark contrast with their “stainless” status in stanza eight. Rhyming “stain” with “slain” Rossetti makes it sound even more ominous if not accusing. The last stanza continues with this accusing tone, as it starts with a direct negation: “No voice to call the sleepers,/ No hand to raise” (81-82). Rossetti ends the poem with a triple repetition of “vanity.” It shifts the symmetry of composition and despite its definite preaching leaves us with a note of

uncertainty. With “Vanity is the end/ Of all their ways” (87-88) we are left with an uneasy feeling: who are the “they” she refers to? Are they the sleepers or the spirits? Under all the layers of narration we are faced with a nagging emptiness of a secret whose resolution is incomplete, and no explanation is given to the ambiguous, incomplete apocalyptic experience. It is not that the other is inaccessible, it is that we are never given a chance to know the speaker who is lost in repetitions. Derrida’s idea that the text becomes apocalyptic when we lose understanding of the narrator becomes a useful point of reference,²³¹ as it provides a new dimension to Rossetti’s layered poems. On one hand, the poems that focus on disguising the self behind layers of riddles become to a certain extent apocalyptic. On the other, the impossibility of “unmasking” the speaker provides the necessary link with the liminal – as the narration of apocalypse is already layered:

the interlacing of voices... beyond a distinct and calculable plurality... One does not know (for it is no longer of the order of knowing) to whom the apocalyptic dispatch [envoi] returns; it leaps [saute] from one place of emission to the other...; it always refers to [renvoie à] the name and to the tone of the other that is there but as having been there and before yet coming, no longer being or not yet there in the present of the récit.²³²

In this sense Rossetti’s poems are doubly apocalyptic: through their biblical references and through their complicated polyphony of voices. We neither know who the speaker is, nor what is their relation with the people surviving (or sleeping) through the Apocalypse. Thus the reader’s self-identification is displaced together with the speaker’s identity – we are stuck in-between the temporal layers, in the open sea of repetitive lines and sounds.

The imagery of (supernatural) shipwreck is recurrent in Rossetti’s poetry, and is further explored in “A Ballad of Boding” (before 1882). The poem is thematically close to “Sleep at Sea,” but the main focus is different. If in the earlier poem the sailors are

²³¹ Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” *Oxford Literary Review* 6.2 (1984): 3-37.

²³² Ibid, p. 27.

locked in their passive sleep, the people in the later one are actively involved in (fighting) their fate. The layering technique is evident from the very beginning of the poem: the opening lines seem to refer directly to “Sleep at the Sea:” “There are sleeping dreams and waking dreams;/ What seems is not always as it seems” (1-2). In this short introduction Rossetti juxtaposes two different planes of dreaming, suggesting a certain double vision. There is a one-directional dependence between the actual thing and its perceived looks, but our perception is distorted. Those two lines stand apart from the rest of the text, as an epigraph. They also suggest the first frame, and the first secret of the poem – who is the dreamer: the narrator, the sailors, or the reader?

The main body of the poem starts with the narrator looking out of the window. Windows as thresholds play an important role in Rossetti’s poetry as examined by Chris Wiesenthal in “Regarding Christina Rossetti’s ‘Reflection’”;²³³ here the window both introduces the narrator into the setting, and excludes her from it. A reference to the morning implies that this is a “waking dream.” Rossetti sets up different temporalities within the framework of the window and outside of it. What for the narrator are mere minutes of observation, for the sailors are hours and days (if not lives) spent at sea. There’s also a distortion of perspective, as no window would open wide enough to enclose the whole picture as narrated in the poem: it is reminiscent of the distorted perspective of night flight over the land with Christ in “Repining” or even the omnipresent watch of the princess in “The Prince’s Progress.” This fragmentation of time and space continues further, as it seems that each of the three boats has its own rhythm and rhyme space. This inconsistency of rhythmic patterns creates tension points that highlight the deep differences between the ship and their crew, and mirrors the development of “Sleep at Sea.” But if in the earlier poem the story is framed in the dreams versus ‘reality’ opposition, here the question of ‘true’ knowledge provides the framework. The narrator hesitantly claims her authority over knowledge with an almost oxymoronic “I knew (I know not how),” (110) and fails it immediately as everything in the unfolding universe is turbulent and out of control. The switches in methods of perception – “I knew I know not how,” “I spied” (115, 131), “I saw” (143), “full of awe,/ with these same eyes I saw” (144:145) – become both a framework and a (failing)

²³³ Chris Wiesenthal, “Regarding Christina Rossetti’s ‘Reflection,’” in *Victorian Poetry* 39. 3 (2001) : pp.389-406.

way of controlling reality. The absence of controlling gaze is further emphasised by the opposition between passive and marginal narrator watching the sailors and turbulent forces of nature and the monster trying to absorb them. Once again, we are faced with a very Lyellian shift from organic into inorganic forces. The seascape is described as threatening the sailors (“quicksands full of dread,” “waterspout /Instantly leaped out, /Roaring as it reared its head” (110; 112-114)), a description reminiscent of “Advent” and its hidden dead. The waves are swayed and open their depths so that the narrator can see life and death entwined there with anaphoric “Full of skeletons” (132) and “Full of things that creep” (135). The short [i] associated with the monster (“dim,” “grim,” “lip”) is prolonged into [i:] in “creep,” “deep,” “breathe.” While the rhythm is a relatively even trochee, with occasional variations as in lines 127-128 related to the monster), by the end of the stanza, to stress the awe of the narrator, it becomes more hesitant and uneven with shortened lines and metric inversions. Again there are layers of existence – the dead and the creatures of the deep, the human beings and the supernatural monster, and the narrator watching them.²³⁴

Soundwise, Rossetti shifts from trembling [r] and [w] of the sea to the hissing and half-silent [s] and [f] of the monster. This vocal hushing and “contraction” is evident in the literal crashing of the waterspout that “instantly leaped out” (113) and then was “cleared” with “puffs of smoky breath/ From a smouldering lip” (119-120), shortening long [i:] of “leap” into a short [i] of “lip.” In a similar way, “roaring,” “reeling” and “rearing round” waterspout as a danger-figure is substituted by “flitting to and fro” (117) figure that “puffed the sails full out/ With puffs of smoky breath.” (118-119) The monster’s description is soundwise centered around [h]: “horny hand,” (124) “a horn appeared/ On its sneering head upreared/ Haughty and high” (125:127). Nature is almost overwhelmed by the monster – the sky is “blackening lowering” (128) – against the monster who is “haughty and high” (both adjectives, together with the horn, imply reaching upwards) and whose breath is smoky (hence the darkening hue of the sky.)

As the narrator sees the monster “leap” on to the deck (note the repetition of the “leap” from stanza 10), its main monster-sound is contracted to [ai]: “guile,” “smile,” “flying.” Double repetition of the verb of perception (143, 146) seems to pinpoint our attention to

²³⁴ I will come back to the construction of the monster image in the third part of this thesis.

the transformation of the beast: picking up from the repeated horn in the previous stanza, Rossetti describes a set of manipulative transformations in an almost technical way:

His head incredible retract its horn
Rounding like babe's new born,
While silvery phosphorescence played
About his dis-horned head (146-149)

The replication and reduplication of echoing sounds creates an atmosphere of tension, emphasising its beastly nature with [r] and its stealthy transformational attack with [h]. Those are the same sounds as in the previous reincarnation of the beast, so we are not blinded by his trick.²³⁵ This process of deformation, starting with the horn, expands further by erasing the sneer (150) and de-colouring dangerous smoky puffs into bland beams (151); followed by submission of natural forces (“all winds sank to a moan,/ All waves to a monotone” (152:3) This defacement of self becomes a point of control for the beast as now initially inimical tempest becomes “his realm.” (154)

The fight with the monster brings the dead and the living together with triple repetition “to the rescue” as it starts as “an alarm to wake the dead from the bed” (160) and finishes with invocation “O ye living, O ye dead” (162). We are tempted to question whether those are the same dead who were spied upon by the narrator before. The narrow trembling [r] – in the previous stanza associated with the beast – here communicates the desperate cry for help. The rhythm suddenly veers from variations of trochee in the second line (“shrieked to heaven, a clamour of desperate prayer” (157) to communicate the urgency of the plea. If the previous stanzas echoed the monotonous beat of the moving barks, here sudden change of rhythm implies fear and confusion. As the unifying effect of praying is passed on to all aspects of motion, animate and inanimate are joined in one single effort of resistance. The tempest seems to be joining forces with the humans in fear of a greater enemy: the winds and waves that were subdued and proclaimed the realm of the monster (155), now “girt up their strength,” (167) while “heaven flashed fire and volleyed thunder/ Through the rain-choked air”

²³⁵ For a similar argument about aural and oral perception in “Goblin Market” see: Jamison, opus cit., pp. 152-153

(169-170). Still, the atmosphere is that of constraint (“choked,” “laid bare”) and incomplete action (“flashed fire,” “volleyed thunder” – both verbs of quick succession and intensive, but brief discharge). On the sound level the stanza is built upon alternation of broad [ae] and [a] in “clamour”-“prayer”-“planks”-“must”-“asunder”-“masts”-“under” which communicate the urgency and force. The last lines of the stanza bring back the sounds of the Monster – [h], [r] and [s]: “sea and sky seemed to kiss/ In the horror and the hiss/ Of the whole world shuddering everywhere.” (171-173) The sound effect is also echoing the [r] and [h] pairing of the first part (as in “rescue” and “help”). The metre is hardly regular, but at the same time its pressing accentual-syllabic variations remind of a ballad and make it seem uniform. Still the metrically complex sections coincide with the moment when the different forces in the poem clash – be it the emotional surge of the third barge (highlighted against the passivity of the first two boats) or the shifts in the perception of the narrator (various times when she describes the monster).

And here the apocalyptic layering comes to its fullest. Rossetti’s monsters “leap” together with Derrida’s envoies as the coherence of our perception is threatened by repetition. The unfulfillment of change prompts us to rely on a make-believe rather than an established fact, and is closer to hybridization rather than evolution. It is Ruskin’s double vision applied to sound and syntax: we are faced with instability disguised as resolution, and while we are desperately trying to refocus between speakers and dreams, our reality is being fragmented. At the same time, this stage corresponds to the liminal reconfiguration of symbols; we are to grasp the knowledge, to question and recognize the ‘true’ meaning of familiar things. Yet in Rossetti’s texts, the meaning is sometimes lost behind layers of definitions – and not all of them provide a valid clue.

With the next poem I will take a look at perceptual layering – when (ir)regularities are used to patch together different physical/ emotional states of the speaker and a claim of resurrection is represented by dissolution and dwindling. A good example of Rossetti’s mastery of form, “A Better Resurrection” (1857) is written in a perfect iambic tetrameter. The rhyming scheme of the first stanza is the symmetrical a-b-a-b-c-d-c-d, which turns into a more varied c-e-c-e-f-d-f-a in the second stanza and crescendos with the unexpected g-g-g-g-f-a-f-a in the third. Soundwise the first stanza is constructed on the prevalence of trembling [l] (“Look right, look left, I dwell alone” (4-5), “My life is

in the falling leaf" (7)) and [w]/[v]/[f], and alteration of [i:]/[i].²³⁶ The instability is emphasized by the inner assonances of pararhyming "dwell"- "dim"- "hill"- "fall." The watery motion comes to an abrupt ending with whisper [f], and then starts again, heightening the melody of the lines, highlighted by the narrow [i]/[i:]. The sound imagery reminds us of watery changeability which is confirmed on the textual level with a "falling leaf" (emphasis on the motion) opposed to "the frozen thing" of the second stanza.

Indeed, much of the inner development of the poem is vested in sounds. Further on in the second stanza sounds switch to voiced/unvoiced pairings of [h], [v]/[f], [d]/[t], [b] ("faded leaf" (9), "harvest dwindled to a husk" (10)) seems to prompt the future failure of the speaker. In this sense the motion of the first stanza instead of "quicken" (as demanded in line 8), comes to a halt. Whispering [h],[f] communicate suppressed emotion, as sudden terminations of [d]/[t], [v]/[f] represent an action interrupted. Indeed the second stanza is about stasis – imagery that Linda Hughes reads as Tractarian influence in particular, Keble's, though she confirms that Rossetti breaks his conventionality and transgresses his poetics, being both "dutiful and rebellious daughter, "Goblin Market"'s Lizzie and Laura at once."²³⁷ I have already read into Rossetti's stasis as liminal state hosting the germ of future development. What is curious about her poetry – and this is one of the major traits of her liminality, - is that this state of growth deferred might never come to a resolution and grow into something new.

The same setting is deployed in "A Better Resurrection." On the textual level, the first line starts with a list of things that the narrator believes to be lacking, their negation producing false expectations in the reader and at the same time erasing all characteristics of a human being in the speaker. In this context she is likened to the neophyte in the liminal sphere, possessing nothing and "reduced or ground down to a

²³⁶ Curiously enough, Edwin Guest in describing [l] sound appeals to the imagery that could have inspired Rossetti. He refers to "a slow and uncertain trembling... the motion of water... a yielding wavy motion." In Edwin Guest, *History of English Rhythm* (William Pickering: London, 1838), pp. 13-21

²³⁷ Linda K. Hughes, *The Cambridge Introduction to Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 152.

uniform condition.”²³⁸ “Wit” – the faculty to process information, to reason; “words” – ability to communicate and express judgment, “tears” – ability to react emotionally. The narrator describes herself as devoid of reason, communication and empathy - a non-human excluded from the social and emotional norms. This estrangement is further emphasized in the second line, with an oxymoron of a “numbed” stone. A stone per se cannot be numbed (deprived of physical sensation or become emotionally unresponsive.) Thus Rossetti hints at the possible innate exclusion of her narrator from the human world as being in-between a human and a thing, suggesting a liminal state. Having “no hopes or fears” only confirms the emotion-void state. It inscribes the narrator into the pantheon of Rossetti’s characters living alone and fusing with the landscape (as in “Autumn”), devoid of human features but still seeking contact with the human world. This imagery is further developed in lines 5-6 confusingly indicate that “eyes are dimmed with grief,” meanwhile we have already established that the narrator has no tears nor emotions. At the same time grief is the only emotion that is based on self absorption and requires no external object, while establishing distance between the subject and the world. Thus the narrator can see “no everlasting hills” – she is both self-withdrawn and self-consumed in the hell of her own making.

In line 7 the anaphoric “My life is” appears for the first time; although it starts not as a comparison but as a direct statement “is in the fallen leaf”. The gerund form suggests that the process, as irreversible as it is, has just started. A moment ago the leaf was still connected to the tree – ‘living’; in a similar way the changes in the narrator, her isolation in her death-like state, must be very recent. The ‘in’ part presents a riddle to solve as to why Rossetti would not use a simile here as she would use in all the other lines. I believe that it is done to stress this recent connection to the world of the living; the gap between the spatial reality of nature and the liminal state is not that wide yet.

It is destined to grow wider, as liminal possibilities drift apart, creating temporal loops between life and death. In the second stanza “falling” is transformed into “faded” –

²³⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 38.

stopping the motion mid-way and confusing the reader by layers of definitions.²³⁹ Logically moment A (leaf falling and narrator shutting herself out from the human world) and moment B (leaf faded and the narrator feeling void) are temporally separated. Rossetti loves to present logical gaps and time lapses in her poems, she seems to purposefully skip the moment of crossing the barrier between the two states as if contracting both time and space. All the adjectives used so far invite a certain contraction: falling (as being cut from the whole), dwindle, void (as with the content being taken from it), and brief. The epitome of contraction is the image of a frozen thing. It keeps the alliteration of “falling”-“faded”-“void”-“frozen”, and provides a seasonal transition from autumn to winter. The distortion is all-encompassing - and Rossetti’s punctuation becomes less regular: in lines 10-13 “life” is void both of harvest and commas.

Thus the idea of dwindling physical presence and expanding hollowness is supported on the sound level. The last four lines of the poem, by deliberately indulging in all vowels but [ou], privileged in the first half of the stanza, seem promising to fill the emptiness. The poem seems to follow the metamorphosis of the leaf of life: falling – faded (and fallen(?)) – frozen – broken. Twice the relative equilibrium of its state is destroyed. A falling leaf dies through fading. A frozen thing breaks like glass. This imagery of deconstruction spins off a number of projections: the sap of spring (15) melts ice into water, but a broken bowl cannot hold it (17); the bowl itself is melted to be remoulded into a new shape (22). Symbolically a falling leaf in its shape closely resembles a bowl, thus the metamorphosis of the leaf matches that of a bowl. On the sound level it is maintained through the repeated [ou] (“frozen”-“broken”-“bowl”-“hold”-“soul”-“cold”), and “cold” throws us back into the winterscape of ”the frozen thing.” This is the crescendo of unfulfillment: the promised sap of Spring has not arrived. At the same time this, using Guest’s characteristic of [ou] as “a hollow place with depth and fullness of sound,” is about to be broken with hard closed consonants - brusque [b] and yielding [l] of “life” and “broken bowl”.

²³⁹ Also an evident link to Isaiah 64:4 (“we all do fade as leaves”). See also Emma Mason, “The Trouble with Comfort: Christina Rossetti, John Ruskin, and Leafy Emotion” in *The Yearbook of English Studies, 36.2, Victorian Literature* (2006): 169-179.

This “broken bowl” as a symbol of the void is key to understanding Rossetti’s position. There is no happy resolution, no guarantee that this emptiness can ever been filled – only a promise, a hint, a secret. Moreover, the image also refers to a sleeping life-in death state (in “A Peal of Bells” (1857) the dying/falling asleep friend was also described as a bowl “drained, is broken, can not hold”(27-28)). Trowbridge reads it as “the fallen state of the speaker, on behalf of the womankind,”²⁴⁰ while Katja Brand sees it as “emblematise<ing> the need of redemption... a quest for spiritual renewal from mortality and corruption described in terms of the faded leaf... to fulfilment and perfection.”²⁴¹ It is a recurrent Biblical image and a reference to Psalms 31.12;²⁴² and a number of critics note the similarity between Laura’s transformations in “The Goblin Market” and the plea of the speaker in “A Better Resurrection.”²⁴³ At the same time I read it as yet another manifestation of the liminal – the space where no body/object is impenetrable, and no quest is fulfilled. This inherent unfulfillment is echoed through all the states of all the objects and living beings, as we have seen in various spring-related poems. But it seems that even after death the same preoccupation with things that happened but never came to fruition haunts Rossetti’s speakers, as an echo of the voice long gone or a warning of a threat long subdued, weaving together narratives of possibility and impossibility.

Breaking the rhythm and challenging the reader with clashing sounds is not the only way to bring out the liminality of the text. Rossetti is eager to stick to the form – and present chiselled lines with a slight variation, weaving a pattern of repetition on the sound level that reads like an open possibility. A minor and almost never mentioned devotional poem, “Whither the Tribes Go Up, Even the Tribes of the Lord” (1877) was included by William Michael Rossetti into the same collection of “Songs for Strangers and Pilgrims” of “Devotional Poems” as “Sleep at Sea.” I am not going to analyse in detail its devotional motifs as I focus on the form. Its anaphoric structure and carefully

²⁴⁰ Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti’s Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 122.

²⁴¹ Katja Brandt, *Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”: Milton Revised or Revived?* (Abo: Abo Akademi University Press, 2006), p. 115.

²⁴² This reference is also followed in Rosenblum, *The Poetry of Endurance*, p. 76.

²⁴³ See Marylu Hill, ““Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me”: Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*” in *Victorian Poetry* 43.4 (Winter 2005): 455-472.

balanced rhythmical structure is strengthened by iambic pentameter with occasional variations. Repetitious structures permeate the text on the structural and sound levels with echoing rhymes breaking the lines in two.

The first stanza explores the relation between sorrow, light and death with an almost Carrollian logical twist. On the level of sounds the stanza is organized by repeated half-line rhymes “sorrow/ tomorrow/sorrow” in odd lines, and “death/fast/death/past” in even lines. It rests on trembling [l]/[r] alternation (“light”-“sorrow”-“tomorrow”-“hold”-“scarcely”-“quickly”) and closed [b]/[d] (“death”/“brief”), with the closed consonants literally closing the trembling ones. The first two lines establish an anaphoric parallel between “Light is our sorrow” (1) and “Light is our death” (2) that is dismissed in lines 3-4 with “So brief a sorrow can be scarcely sorrow,/ Or death be death so quickly past.” As in a chant, death and sorrow are reiterated three times with a few words separating them, so that they become the only meaningful points in the text. The negative structure creates a sense of liminality as first it strips the object of its characteristics by proclaiming them non-existent, and then establishes the presence of the object through its affiliation with them. As a result, the reader feels insecure while reality is blurred and displaced through negation.

This pattern is continued in the second stanza, where the liminal becomes explicitly layered through deliberate reversal of the first statement in the second part of the sentence. The first two lines start with anaphoric “One night, no more” expanded into alliterative “pain that turns to pleasure” (5) and repetitive “weeping weeping sore.” (6) Both end up in layering and silencing – “heaped-up measure beyond measure/ In quietness for evermore” (7-8). The alteration of long [i:] in “weeping,” “heaped-up” and its visual rhyme [e] (“pleasure,” “measure”) adds up to the tension; same as the long [o:] of “more,” “sore” and “evermore” creates a feeling of irresolution and unfulfilled longing. On the temporal plane, we move from clearly defined “one night, no more” (5, 6) to the all-encompassing and limitless “evermore” (8). From a body-located physical experience of pain and sore we come to the “heaped-up” layers and measures.

The third and fourth stanzas present an even further entreat into the liminal territories. On one hand, the subjective focus is finally set on “us” – at the same time, it is displaced as the plural “our” is followed by “face” in the singular. It can be both a

marker of complete elimination of the pre-liminal personality, and a supra-personal unity with the liminal. This delayed self-perception is further developed in the fourth stanza, where “our” is alternatively used with plural and singular forms. Physicality is blurred further with the opposition of the hard “flint” of human beings and the “rainbow-coloured bubble” of reality. “We” (through association with “flint”) are stone-like: unchanging, hard, colourless, solid. The “bubble-life” is rainbow-coloured, unstable (tumultuous), hollow (note the symbolic parallel between the broken bowl in “A Better Resurrection,” and this hollow bubble ready to burst.) The fleetingness is emphasized by trembling [b]/[l]/[t] alterations of “bubble” and “trouble,” and both visual and sound impression of rounded hollowness in [u] and [ou] in “rainbow-coloured bubble” and “tumultuous” (11-12) are set against narrow vowels in “set” and “flint.”

Yet Rossetti is unwilling to allow anyone leave her liminal space. Stanza 4 starts with a description, and ends with a promise, the promise of all-accepting unity which offers no resolution but an ambiguous rest. Rossetti echoes the previous stanza with “Our sails are set... / Our face is set” (13-14). The switch to the whispering [s] is the main alliterative sound of the stanza – culminating in shrill hissing sibilants in “Sing with all Saints and rest with them” (15-16). This inglorious sound, joined with the only imperfect rhyme (“river” and “ever”), brings the bathos of the ending a couple of notes down. For such a meticulous rhymer as Rossetti, this sudden gap in rhyming can only be intentional. We have seen how she uses it to warn the reader about the unlikely happy ending. In this poem, again, a “metric jolt” it immediately re-focuses our attention from the overall solemn atmosphere of the unity with God to the temporal incongruity of this promise. This brings us into the territory of the liminal which is “at once de-structured and pre-structured;”²⁴⁴ we are opposed to the reality, and at the same time are not yet re-born and re-united with the Saints.

Sylvan Esh in his article suggests that repetition leads to a certain vacuum, as it alienates the reader. “A rainbow-coloured bubble” from the last poem could have served a good metaphor for Rossetti’s syntax and prosodic constructions. On one hand, multiple repetitions create clearly defined restricting structures as we have seen in “A

²⁴⁴ Victor Turner, “*Betwixt and Between*,” opus cit, p. 236.

Better Resurrection” or “Whither the Tribes Go Up, Even the Tribes of the Lord.” On the other, imperfect rhymes and overlapping rhythms create a hesitant echo which allows for multiple misreadings or parallel narratives as in “Sleep at Sea” or “Spring.” The sense of vacillation they evoke is clearly linked to the liminal confusion of identity both for the narrator and for the reader, and as such maintain an easily recognizable reference to oral speech and folk forms. Dolores Rosenblum in her article about supernatural vision and the cyclical pattern of Christian thought describes this approach as “[r]hymes call up meanings that call up other rhymes and meanings and which circle round... to underlying obsessions and fixations... and simultaneously break through to new grounds of feeling,”²⁴⁵ Once again, the double vision and the double sentence are brought together. Carefully balanced constructions, which produce an impression of careless childish rhyming, demand skill and effort which has often been ignored by the critics, and is only now gaining recognition.

Elizabeth Ludlow’s recent research has mapped out the patterns of repetition in Rossetti’s religious writing, as she brings together Biblical references and Tractarian influences across the whole volume of Christina Rossetti’s texts. I want to push this research in a different direction. Reclaiming the link between the nursery rhyme and the liturgy, the nonsense and the ineffable, in the next chapter I continue working with the sound and structural level of her poems to disclose the very core of Rossetti’s various secrets and show that her self-enclosed and echoing poetry is neither restrictive, nor repressive, but centered around a conscious silence. I do not believe that this silence is an act of self-subversion or mystic reversal of Christian ideology, but I read it through the lens of apophatic theology as re-inscribing the meaning through negation.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to mention yet another function of repetition in the context of layering. In *Time Flies* Rossetti enters two observations, dated 22 February, and 22 February. The first one is about “a square man in a round hole” and the options open “to mitigate the misfit which cannot be rectified.”²⁴⁶ She concludes the passage with bitter irony that in one way or another we all belong to this type as “we are

²⁴⁵ Dolores Rosenblum, “Christina Rossetti and Poetic Sequence” in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 132-156 (p. 155).

²⁴⁶ *Time Flies*, p. 37.

made less for our actual environment of earth and time than for heaven and eternity,” and to fit in, squares must sacrifice their angles. The angles is what makes us different; entering the circle of eternity we enter the space of liminality where everyone is equal and undefined. We gain entrance by lack (giving up our angles, our difference) rather than by acquisition, an approach which fits Turner’s idea of liminality as a space devoid of any distinction.

The next day Rossetti reverses the problem and scrutinizes the feelings of a round man in a square hole: “he abides cramped, dwarfed; he cannot expand evenly and harmoniously in all directions with perfect balance of parts.”²⁴⁷ This dwindling of space is actually a similar lack as in the previous example, but a lack of a different kind. Instead of cutting the edges, Rossetti squeezes them in, creating a distortion in space. Yet the man has to “exhibit noble indignant aspiration and the perpetual protest of balked latent power,” – the imagery that reminds us of “Spring” and “Advent” with their hidden forces bursting through. Turner suggests that interstices are necessary to the structure, as its whole equation “depends on its negative as well as its positive signs.”²⁴⁸ He calls them “gaps,” in other words, places of absence and omission. In the next chapter I will address how their lack becomes their power, expansive and violent, and how the rhetoric of absence and unfulfillment becomes the driving force of Rossetti’s liminality allowing her to affirm through negation.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁴⁸ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit, p. 201

Chapter 4: Negative Spaces and Unfulfillment

I do not expect the general public to catch these refined clues; but there they are for such minds as mine.

Christina Rossetti to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 3 March 1865

In *Seek and Find*, Rossetti states that “[a]ll creation begins by enforcing a negative lesson: ‘The depth saith, It is not in me;’ nevertheless in that negative is latent an affirmative: Not in me, then elsewhere.”²⁴⁹ This reference to elsewhere suggests a place of otherness at the same time as it is a place of negation and unfulfillment (as something nonexistent here). This subtle difference provides a key to Rossetti’s works as this reversal coupled with displacement (elsewhere-ness) offers a glimpse into her own poetics. There are two processes that go hand-in-hand in her texts: split/ multiplication of the narratorial self (through repetition and layering) and absence of action and proper definition (through negation and unfulfillment). As contradictory as it seems, this pairing corresponds to Turner’s scheme of the communication of the sacral knowledge in the liminal which I have previously mentioned. In the previous chapter I have traced the use of repetition and challenging rhythm and rhyme patterns through which Christina Rossetti develops her overlaying narratives. A slip of rhyme or unbalanced rhythm often serves as a marker of the apocalyptic and the threshold, being marginal per definition and thus not entering any structure. Due to its marginal status, it also converts any spatial arrangement into the liminal “elsewhere.” In this chapter I continue working with Rossetti’s poetics of layering, but focus on the concepts of absence and unfulfillment in order to explore the boundaries and functions of her “negative affirmative,” exploring her language and her techniques in addressing it.

Isobel Armstrong, in her *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth Century* (1982), describes language as “a model of consciousness or being itself,” where appealing to the Hegelian model for knowing through self-objectification. She vests the language with active powers as it “discloses a concern with the relationship of subject and object,”

²⁴⁹ Christina Rossetti, *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedictine* (London: Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1879), p. 60.

“restructures its own elements” and “*discovers* itself through repetition.”²⁵⁰ On a similar note, Dorothy Rosenblum suggests that Rossetti creates her own language “by piecing together fragments of ready-made language,”²⁵¹ and thus, through repetition of the known, creates new reality. This coinage reminds me of Turner’s ideas. In Turner’s liminal stage, “elements are withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration,”²⁵² a configuration that structurally arranges them in relation to the new reality. Rossetti, as I showed in the previous chapter, creates a polyphonic spatio-temporal setting and imposes thresholds and liminal markers within the text. With this in mind, we can distinguish two stages in Rossetti’s poetry: layering and repetition of components of the pre-liminal, and then actual dissolution, or withdrawal of some of the elements to enable the speaker to reflect and challenge the new reality. The poet multiplies “speaking likenesses,” to use the title of her prose work for children, until that they become unfamiliar and confusing. The constitutive elements are constantly being flipped around, fitted and refitted, as if in a desperate attempt to find the right one through echoes and repetitions. The continuity of this process stresses the impossibility of fitting in, inability to achieve wholeness. The discovery we are left with is the blank space, the gaping absence of a reference point that makes us question the overall structure and the validity of suggested answers.

Rossetti’s way into the liminal transgression and disintegration of the reference system is marked by use of verbs of unfulfillment (as we have seen in “Spring”) and negative constructions that suppress or silence the speaker’s experience and cancel out the expected development of the story. The two main characteristics are specific negative temporal and spatial arrangements (non-space and anti-temporality²⁵³), similar to the

²⁵⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *Language As Living Form in Nineteenth Century Poetry* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), p. 35.

²⁵¹ Dolores Rosenblum, “Christina Rossetti’s Religious Poetry: Watching, Looking, Keeping Vigil,” *Victorian Poetry* 20.1 (Spring 1982): 33-49, p. 36.

²⁵² Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (ed), *Reader in Comparative Religion* (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1979), p. 240.

²⁵³ A term used by Victor Turner in relation to the opposition between measurable everyday time and rituals that deny it in Victor Turner, “Images of Anti-Temporality: An Essay in the Anthology of Experience”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 75.2 (April 1982): 243-265.

process of shutting out as described in the first chapter, and a conscious refusal to carry out an expected sequence of actions that is supposed to be gratified with a certain result. To illustrate this technique, I offer close readings of “Somewhere or Other” (1863), “Hollow-Sounding and Mysterious” (1882), “Where never tempest heaveth” (1893), “A Castle-BUILDER’s World” (1886), “Life and Death” (1863), “Easter Day” (1886), “If I Had Words” (1864), supported by discussion of two better known poems, “Cobwebs” (1855) and “May” (1855). This range of poems was chosen to highlight the omnipresence and importance of the pattern in Rossetti’s writing. It will also help to prepare the basic ideas of the chapters to follow, which track the same technique in relation to the construction.

Both layering and negation are aiming at one thing – veiling the subject of the poem and making it more difficult to bare its core. Reserve, secrecy and skilful avoidance of positive constructions are among recurrent themes in Rossetti scholarship. Thus, Constance Hassett in her reassessment of Rossetti’s poetry brings together ideas of “muteness, understatement, gently restrained rhythms and rhymed stanzaic shape” as highlighting the speaker’s inability to communicate. She suggests that, as the necessity of being silent moves into the sphere of having no words, “the silence itself is Rossetti’s medium.”²⁵⁴ For other critics, including Anne Jamison and Dolores Rosenblum, Rossetti’s language is subversively aimed at reinscribing the dominant patriarchal discourse through silence, or resisting it through ventriloquizing the “silent dead girl,” giving her the opportunity to speak. From this perspective, the death/ silence of the female subject does not follow the male-oriented pattern and no longer signifies the unattainability of the quest, but suggests a direct withdrawal from the quest.²⁵⁵ In this chapter I develop this gender-influenced vision, and expand it to discuss the relationship between silence, form and unfulfillment as employed by Rossetti on formal, textual and conceptual levels.

²⁵⁴ Constance Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2005) p. 1.

²⁵⁵ Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), Anne Jamison, *Poetics En Passant* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010).

In my close readings, I focus on silence and unfulfillment as key elements in Rossetti's poetics. It can be argued that by repetition and interchanging rhythm patterns Rossetti seems to be constructing a narrative through silence, in other words, through omitting action and names. Amy Christine Billone in *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-century Sonnet* observes that the poet keeps stressing the speaker's presence, and thus defies silence: on one hand, the female speaker stresses that her marginal position bars her from expressing her views ("stated silence"), on the other, textual contradictions make communication difficult, if not impossible ("semantic silence"). At the same time she follows Hassett and suggests that, as "the speaker's personality both takes the place of "stated"/ "semantic" silence and also stays unspecified, the lyric subject becomes the equivalent of silence itself."²⁵⁶ With this in mind, I would suggest that silence and incongruity of speech marks the speaker as a threshold persona, deprived of all ties with the real world, including the ties of speech and coherence. Silence makes the speaker void, absent – and the object of the (unpronounced) speech is also the equivalent of silence. Thus we have a narrative defeated twice, where both the action and its verbal actualization are deferred or reversed. This conscious dissolution of presence is essential for entering the liminal space; it is also one of the key features of Christina Rossetti's poetry. I will expand Hassett's argument that "the withholding of speech is constitutive"²⁵⁷ for the poet and suggest that, on all levels of the text, this withdrawal is not an acquiescence or submission, but a tool to shape liminal experience surpassing ordinary human perception.

The inability to name, or unwillingness to speak implies an unspeakability of the highest kind, similar to the principles of apophatic theology where God is described only in terms of what He is not. In this sense Rossetti's repetitive technique carries a double function of unnaming and undoing the object; her negatives are more sophisticated than simple negations. As Reginald Gibbons puts it, "[t]he apophatic... can imply something that is in fact present despite the absence or inadequacy of a name for it – such as the nature of God – or present as an absence, like meaningful negative

²⁵⁶ Amy Christine Billone, *Little Songs: Women, Silence, and the Nineteenth-century Sonnet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press), p. 84.

²⁵⁷ Constance Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style*, opus cit., p. 52.

space in a sculpture.”²⁵⁸ The opposition between cataphatic and apophatic writing is an opposition between naming, referencing, and fixing, on one hand, and focusing on whatever is missing on the other. Christina Rossetti’s poetry, with its evident inclination towards the latter, is poised inbetween the two, cataloguing and referencing instances of absence.

Surprisingly, it is not Rossetti but Emily Dickinson who is celebrated as the queen of the poetic silences. Thus Harold Bloom in his commentary upon Dickinson praises her work with absence and unnaming as a way to intellectual complexity which demands an active participation on behalf of the reader: “her unique transport, her Sublime, is founded upon her unnaming of all our certitudes into so many blanks; it gives her, and her authentic readers, another way to see, almost, in the dark.”²⁵⁹ In this context omission becomes a textual politics allowing the readers to build upon their guesses; the non-presence becomes material. This description would well suit Rossetti’s poetry as her texts deploy carefully constructed omissions through which they recuperate the marginal elements. By not naming an object/ not letting the action be carried through, Rossetti makes us question the logical order that we are used to taking for granted and builds up inner suspense, a process similar to Turner’s liminal re-actualisation of symbols. By analysing Rossetti’s techniques in constructing non-spaces and using unfulfillment as a narrative strategy, I hope to reclaim Rossetti’s place as a poet of absences and omissions.

In a number of Rossetti’s poems we see that they represent a catalogue of things that are not there. In “Cobwebs” (1855), a poem which appeared only in William Michael’s posthumous edition, the tense emotional space is built up through a list of things it lacks. The poem starts with a descriptive opening (“It is a land”), but then goes on through an enumeration of what it is not. Almost every line starts with a “no,” creating an enclosed negative parallelism. There are twenty three objects missing. Although they all describe lack of change, they intrinsically signify change. None is a direct negation of action: heat/cold implies change in temperature, hills/valleys - change in heights. The only positive description lacking inner change is that of a plain that “stretches thro’ long

²⁵⁸ Reginald Gibbons, "On Apophatic Poetics", *American Poetry Review* 36. 6 (2007): 19-23, p.20.

²⁵⁹ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), pp. 308-309.

unbroken miles” (4), and the brooding “twilight grey” (5): both refer to inconspicuous, amorphous entities that lack any definitive features. Repeated [br] in “unbroken” and “broodeth” (5) highlights the inner conflict of the poem: devastation does not necessarily originate in a break, it often comes from quiet desperation. There is a certain air of liminality, in-between state in the language itself: grey is a colour between black and white, twilight is time between night and day. The air is “sluggish” (5), lacking movement and alertness; further emphasis on the liminal state is made through the implied opposition between “twilight” (having soft glowing light) and “broodeth” (6) (engaging in dark thoughts, appearing darkly). Ensuing reference to the absent moon only strengthens the feeling of being shut out from both light and darkness. At the same time the inner movement of the poem is not one-directional, but cyclical – it dwells on “wax and wane” (6) and “ebb and flow” (7) as a reference to natural/ seasonal expansion and contraction. The seasonal theme is continued through reference to the absence of buds and falling leaves. This is the first mention in the list of absences that refers not to spatial deficiency, but to the natural order of things.

Kathryn Burlinson reads it as “empty space reflecting psychic stasis” where “the “I” or “aye” is stranded, abandoned by every elemental, natural and human force, stripped of memory.”²⁶⁰ However, I would draw attention to the movement within the poem. It is reminiscent of “the philosophy of a Moebius loop,” suggested by Karen Alkalay-Gut in relation to Swinburne’s poetry.²⁶¹ All development within the poem is locked upon itself in a reversed way. Rossetti’s absences are neither static, nor invisible in this sense; I suggest that they are physically present. Rossetti moves on from universal laws to personal reactions as she goes through various types of movement, from the unfulfilled inevitability of moons and waters to the seasonal modality of leaves; then switches to environment-dependent ripples in the water or shifting sand and closes it with the flutter of wings (of a bird? a butterfly?) that stresses life’s frailty and fleetingness. Moreover, if previously listed types of movement are caused by exterior conditions (leaf-falling or ripples on the water), this last example reverses the causal relationship and triggers the

²⁶⁰ Kathryn Burlinson, *Speaking Silence: Indeterminate Identities in the Writings of Christina Rossetti*, (a PhD thesis submitted at Birbeck College, London, 1994), p. 86.

²⁶¹ See Karen Alkalay-Gut, “Swinburne’s Twisted Circle: The Logic of ‘A Match’” in *Victorian Institutes Journal* 24 (1996): 141-163.

movement in its turn (“to stir the stagnant space”(10)), thus making the loop complete. The flutter of wings implies life in its purest form – birds in Christian imagery symbolize a soul’s ascent to the skies and the spiritual as opposed to the material.²⁶² Then the whole poem could be read as describing the soul’s journey towards redemption. But the redemption is failed. The world is lacking its spiritual push and is out of tune with God’s will. I have briefly discussed the importance of regular rhythm in Victorian perception in the previous chapter; here we see that by defying seasonal, gravitational, elemental and other natural forces the landscape is falling out of the rhythm of life. In the last stanza the poem moves from the physical (non-)movement to emotional stagnation. Both land and sea are “loveless” (11, 12) – and have no “pulse of life” (a rhythm/ movement deficiency again). Rossetti meticulously notes the disruption of all emotional systems – there are no memories, no home, no resting place, no future, no hope, no fear. The landscape is deconstructed through listing various features it lacks; the speaker is deconstructed through the feelings she lacks; and it is this lack – the void - that constitutes the core of the poem.

The repetitive list of non-objects in “Cobwebs” provides a frame to Rossetti’s non-scape. Moreover, she manages to find inspiration in what initially appears negative, inspiration transgressing denial and transcending all things. Still, it would have been too easy if negative spaces were created by simple negation. Rossetti is no poet of easy ways, and her usual defiance is subtle. While “Cobwebs” is indeed a perfect example of direct unnaming and undefining, this straightforwardness is rare for the poet. The only other instances of this technique of negation are liminal landscape passages in “From House to Home” (79-86) and “The Prince’s Progress” (129-156), and a short poem “Where never tempest heaveth” (1893).

Appearing in *The Face of the Deep* as a commentary on Revelation 11:8, “Where never tempest heaveth” utilizes imagery and grammar of negation similar to “Cobwebs” and reads as a description of a negative space. There are two stanzas in the poem, each constructed as a negation in the first four lines and an affirmative refrain. The first stanza is focused around the long [i:] in “heaveth”-“grieveth”-“bereaveth”-“deceiveth”-

²⁶² See George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954).

“sleep” (and the visual rhyme “death”). Lack of open vowels and emphasis on fricative [s]/[h] and plosive [t]/[d] creates a feeling of enclosedness, as if the world is being trapped up in its own grief and shrinking to fit into the imposed limits. The second stanza is based on [ei]-rhymes with “shame”-“bewaileth”-“traileth”-“prevaileth”-“faileth.” This contraction of the vowels creates an additional tension, as Rossetti looks forward to completing the full circle of time. It builds up textual tension and then releases it with “death” being the climax in both stanzas. In the first stanza, from “sorrow” we plunge into “death” and rise with “hope.” In the second stanza, it is even more dramatic: from “serpent” to “death” again, and ending with “harvest.” “Sorrow” and “serpent” (alliterative [s]-[r]) suggest betrayal and pain, “hope” and “harvest” (stressing [h]) imply resolution and fulfillment.

In contrast to “Cobwebs,” where the narration is deployed through negation and the speaker figure is omitted, in “Where never tempest heaveth” there exists a well-defined relation between the speaker and the addressee, although they both remain on the margins of the poem. Their lurking present is felt through the imperatives (“Sleep” (5) and “Reap” (10) closing each stanza), thus framing the non-emotional landscape both with a gaze and an overruling will, evident in the commanding tone and the accepting silence. The poem is constructed as a dialogue where the replies are omitted; and both interlocutors are shrouded in mystery – we have no clue as to who demands obedience and who is the one to obey. Moreover, while negative constructions bring about a positive change (tempest will not heave, hope will not deceive), even grammatically positive imperatives are poised between fulfillment and hesitancy. We have seen in the previous chapters that sleep in Rossetti’s image patterns can imply a liminal state of reconstruction of consciousness supposed to bring about unity with God and with self. The time of harvest – the time to reap – seems to open a similar place of liminality where all definitions are reversed. Yet there is an ambiguity about this harvest that does not allow us to accept it as a positive development. Surrounded by negative affirmatives, we know nothing about the essence of what we are going to reap – and it might turn out to be as poisonous as the goblin fruit.

The imagery of (non-)harvest also plays an important role in “A Castle-Builder’s World” (before 1886). The poem was recorded following a double entry on 30 March and 31 March discussing Rossetti’s stay at a friend’s castle in Scotland. The first part of the

entry describes the poet's experience trying to throw away a millipede only to discover a whole family of millipedes in her hand. A rather uncanny episode made the poet muse over our false estimations and inability to assess the full extent of our influence: "it seems to me a parable setting forth visibly and vividly the incalculable element in all our actions."²⁶³ In the second part she describes how she believed herself to be called by someone only to realise she was answering the tapping of starlings lodged in the turrets; it made her think about false expectations. Both entries in a way deal with a certain confusion, an inability to assess and react properly – "how many fancied calls or omens are in fact no more significant than jackdaws or starlings?"²⁶⁴

The poem itself seems not to be directly following those episodes, but it raises similar issues of defeated expectations and unfulfillment and displaced systems of interaction. Its essence is summarized in the epigraph: "the line of confusion and the stones of emptiness" (Isaiah 34:11): the world is lying in waste, all the links are broken, and nothing is left but confusion and desolation. The whole picture reminds us of Turner's liminal space, where familiar meanings are erased or deconstructed as neophytes are withdrawn from their organized and structured world. There are ten lines in the poem, alternating between long and short varied metrics. They logically fall into two parts: the first four lines describing the non-place, the last six lines describing its inhabitants. And in various aspects it is reminiscent of "Goblin Market."

Both poems share the imagery of unearthly harvest and its inhuman owners. Many critics have offered market-related interpretations of "Goblin Market," with Albert Pionke's "spiritual economy," Terrence Holt's marginalised female consumption and Elizabeth Campbell's "female economics," among them.²⁶⁵ But if "Goblin Market" was

²⁶³ *Time Flies*, p. 62.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p. 62.

²⁶⁵ See also Mary Carpenter, "Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me?": The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market.'", *Victorian Poetry* 29.4 (1991): 415-434; Elizabeth Campbell, "Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" *Victorian Studies* 33.3 (1990): 393-410; Elizabeth Helsinger, "Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,'" *ELH* 58.4 (1991): 903-933; Terrence Holt, "'Men Sell Not Such in Any Town': Exchange in 'Goblin Market,'" *Victorian Poetry* 28.1 (1990): 51-67; Richard Menke, "The Political Economy of Fruit", in Mary Arseneau, Antony Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (ed) *The Culture*

Rossetti's narrative about the burgeoning system of the liberal market, "A Castle-Builder's World" shows her possible deconstruction of it. The almost omnipresent practicability of Victorian economy is not applicable here: the logic of the liminal space reverts the market laws. There is no reaper to reap the unripe harvest. The harvest and the vineyard are "unripe" (1,3). The place is "misty gusty" – this nursery-rhyme-like assonance stands in sharp contrast to the overall gloomy description, but at the same time reminds us of the fantasy world of the goblins. So do the dubious qualities of the land – ripe or unripe, the question is still the same: "Who knows upon what soil they fed. Their hungry thirsty roots?" ("Goblin Market", 44-45) And the answer is, the land is "misty gusty," unstable, unknown. Moreover, it is "unprofitable" (4) – it might be through Lizzie's unmaking that the trade fell into destitution. The repetition of rhyming [un] and [none] in lines 1 and 3 structures the poem by emphasizing the absence it entails, as the logical (though not rhythmical) stress falls on this statement of unfulfillment.

The second part describes the inhabitants of the place. The land is devoid of harvest; the vineyard is devoid of profit; the goblins are stripped of their mischievous fancy. The difference from "Goblin Market" is evident again. The merchants in "Goblin Market" may be dangerous and ill-meaning, but they are alive. The inhabitants of the unripe garden in "A Castle-Builder's World" are locked between life and death; they are neither good nor evil – they are empty if anything, automatons at best. Rossetti meticulously takes away every definition from them – they are fleshless, bloodless, vapid "shades of bodies without souls." (9-10) This reference to masks and automatons makes it evident that Rossetti was interested in Gothic literature. These parallels have recently been acknowledged by a number of critics, most notably Diane D'Amico and Serena Trowbridge,²⁶⁶ and it would not be too much of a stretch to suggest that masks in "A Castle-Builder's World" could come directly from Maturin or Radcliffe. The framing episodes in the diary, as discussed earlier, seem to confirm this influence. Indeed, Rossetti internalizes and reworks Gothic elements; as Trowbridge points out,

of Christina Rossetti: *Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999); pp. 105-136; Albert D. Pionke, "The Spiritual Economy of "Goblin Market""', *SEL* 52.4 (2012): 897-915.

²⁶⁶ Most of all, Diane D'Amico 'Christina Rossetti: The Maturin Poems', *Victorian Poetry* 19 (1981): 117-131; Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti's Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

the poet is engaged in “considerable exploration of fear within the world: a fear of evil..., but also of the world’s seductiveness” and returns to the idea of flight from this fear.²⁶⁷

If “Goblin Market” offers temptation and resistance, the non-space of “A Castle-Builder’s World” is temptation resisted, stripped of its attraction. Here the final triumph of Lizzie and Laura is celebrated – the deal that was not fulfilled leads to the deconstruction of the merchant. Whoever they might be, the owners of the unripe vineyard are the embodiment of unfulfillment, their proper identity taken from them. Deprived of flesh, blood or soul, on one hand, and of their garden, vineyard or fruit on the other, they become forever incomplete. And the poet seems to be dubious about this victory over the evil.

In *Seek and Find*, Rossetti draws the distinction between uncompleteness and incompleteness when commenting on the Old Testament.²⁶⁸ Ludlow and Scheinberg both address this paragraph to give their position on Rossetti’s devotional writing. For Scheinberg in her study of Jewish identity in Victorian literature, the difference is drawn through temporal implications: “uncompleteness” implies a temporal state of “lack,” which allows for completion in the future, while “incompleteness” is a permanent lack without possible fulfilment (a quality she traces in Rossetti’s treatment of the Old Testament figures).²⁶⁹ In Ludlow’s reading, spiritual completeness has been accomplished for all by Christ, so the human is living “between the ‘Divers Worlds’ of incompleteness and completion... [and] attaining it is not a matter of human strength but of supernatural grace.”²⁷⁰ With that in mind, the shades of “A Castle-Builder’s World” (sharing the fate with the goblins, I might suggest) are captured in the state of irreversible incompleteness, not redeemed by Christ’s sacrifice, and hence intrinsically temporal, defaced, forever lurking on the margins of the non-scape. I would extend this

²⁶⁷ Serena Trowbridge, “The Wordless Secrets of Death’s Deep: Christina Rossetti’s Gothic” in *Women and Gothic*, ed. Maria Purves, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), p. 161.

²⁶⁸ *Seek and Find*, p. 147.

²⁶⁹ Cynthia Scheinberg, *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 117.

²⁷⁰ Elizabeth Ludlow, “‘We can but spell a surface history’: The Biblical Typology of Christina Rossetti,” a PhD thesis (University of Warwick: 1993), p.35.

definition from human identity to perception in general and argue that in Rossetti's perspective, unfulfillment becomes a major shaping force which is involved in creating haunting non-places and a sense of liminality. It can serve as an open invitation to redemption, a reminder of our liminal position in the face of the supernatural grace and our quest to attain unity with God.

Rossetti seems to be inwardly opposed to the idea of fulfillment, and hides her aversion with layers of questions as in "Hollow-Sounding and Mysterious" (1881). This poem is about silence in its most sophisticated form - that of the impossibility of communication; and the poem's main riddle is announced in the title. "Hollow-sounding" could relate both to the object of the poem (the wind's howling) and the poem itself, as it produces a haunting feeling of going nowhere. The echoing confusion of subject and object is constructed through contrasting rhyming gerunds. Starting with a general statement ("There's no replying/ To the Wind's sighing" (1-2)), the poem is lost in layers of descriptions that are often contradictory and unrevealing. Contrary to the riddle form where each consecutive line holds a new clue, here no knowledge is accumulated as each line provides a pair of seemingly contradicting definitions. Repetitive gerunds create confusion, and the subject and the object seem to be fused together as none of them is identified as the actor of the poem. Throughout the first stanza we are not sure whether the gerunds define the wind, or the narratorial "we." The wind is clearly a channel of communication with the liminal, but throughout the poem Rossetti stresses the impossibility of a dialogue between the wind and the narratorial plural.

This feeling of confusion is enhanced through contrasted pairings. "Telling, foretelling" (3) implies a contradictory perception of truth: while "telling" refers to sharing experience, "foretelling" involves supernatural insight and premonition. "Dying, undying" (4) could be read as the wind getting weaker and picking up again, if not for the inherent impossibility of "undying." It can also imply a reference to Christ as the only known case of undying; thus the teaching of the Wind becomes the word of Christ. "Dwindling and swelling" (5) involves expansion in opposite directions; "lagging and fleeting" (11) implies a contradiction between the swift passing and hesitant pausing. "Hinting and dinning" (12) is also an awkward pairing, as a hint implies covertness and indirectness, while dinning is focused on conscious direct repetition. There are eleven

words that refer to communication effort, and all of them seem to be pulling the speaker in different directions. It all ends with predictable climax of unfulfillment – “We’ve no replying/ Living or dying/ To the Wind’s sighing.” (12-14)

The liminal space is the threshold between the known and the unknown. By refusing (or being unable) to reply and interact, we are shut in the liminal. The second stanza of the poem offers no way out of it. Rossetti emphasizes the impossibility of getting through the threshold: “The earliest riser/ Catches no meaning” (24-25), but neither does “the last who hearkens” (26). Echoing repetition of gerunds produces shifts in meaning – the more details are wrapped around the Wind’s teaching, the less secure we feel about its essence, the less chances we have to reply.

The last stanza actually defies the efforts on both sides: on one hand, “we’ve no replying” to the Wind, on the other, its teaching is “wordless, flying” (33). But for sighing, the wind is silent – none the less, Rossetti’s silence demands an audience. The reader is faced with double unfulfillment – our impenetrability to the teaching and the wind’s inability to voice its preaching. The only unity that is possible between the two sides in this context is the precarious effort, the fleeting moment before the loss is actually accepted. The unfulfillment of the wind in Rossetti’s imagery demands further explanation. On one hand, as we learn from *Seek and Find*, it is a non-entity embodied – it is “invisible, intangible,” but at the same time “audible and sensible.”²⁷¹ Further on, the poet would suggest that:

wind or windfall or budding bough acquire a sacred association, and cross our path under aspects at once familiar and transfigured, and preach to our spirits while they serve our bodies: till not prophets alone and sons of prophets, but each creature of time bears witness to things which concern eternity, and without speech or language makes its voice heard...²⁷²

In this context, our inability to hear the wind is only confirmed as unfulfillment; being shut out of it, we are shut out of salvation.

²⁷¹ *Seek and Find*, p. 43.

²⁷² *Seek and Find*, pp. 203-204.

In her PhD thesis, Elizabeth Ludlow aligns Rossetti's poetry with the Tractarian depiction of human individuality as a reflection and extension of (quoting Rowan Williams) "divine plurality as interrelation of subsistent actions, ... each exiting as an act of self-bestowal, self-emptying."²⁷³ Building upon the idea of spiritual unity of the believers raised by Ludlow, I would suggest a parallel between the community of saints and the liminal "we." Arnold van Gennep distinguishes between two types of his liminal "rites of passage" – those performed at life-crises, such as birth, marriage, death, and those performed on occasions of collective crisis. Victor Turner expands the idea of collective/ communal liminal space by describing a public liminality where "the subjunctive space/time [becomes] a counterstroke to its pragmatical indicative texture." This spatio-temporal conditioning is objectified within the ritual, and is shared by the participants of the ritual.²⁷⁴ In a similar way, "all who are united to Christ are thereby united to one another,"²⁷⁵ the community of the living and the dead sharing the same moment of faith. In this sense, Rossetti's "we" is not just spiritually plural: it also carries out a performative function of unity in a ritualized performance – "a unified flowing from one moment to the next" where the individual becomes fully absorbed in the environment. In this context, Ludlow's reading of the Communion of Saints in Rossetti's religious verse follows Turner's *communitas*. With that in mind, the impossibility of dialogue between "non-receptive" us and "wordless" wind becomes more coherent.

In *Letter and Spirit*, Rossetti confirms that "the absolute Unite, the Oneness at all times, in all connexions, for all purposes" is the most difficult concept to understand.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past?* quoted in Ludlow, "'We can but spell a surface history': The Biblical Typology of Christina Rossetti," opus cit., p. 15.

²⁷⁴ Victor Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6. 4 (December 1979): 465-499.

²⁷⁵ *The Face of the Deep*, p. 209.

²⁷⁶ Christina Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit. Notes on the Commandments* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1883), p. 11. Commenting upon this passage, Elizabeth Ludlow traces it to the influence of St. Augustine in Edward Pusey's translation and quotes from the foreword to the book where the time is defined as "confusing realm of suspense." This wording is of interest for my thesis, as it brings us into the domain of liminality.

Projected onto the text of “Hollow-Sounding and Mysterious,” it is this ineffable unity with the absolute that is being both promised and denied. But the poet seems to be hesitant about the final answer, and in an earlier poem, “Somewhere or Other” (1863), Rossetti seems to reverse the equilibrium suggested by “Hollow-Sounding and Mysterious.” It opens with a familiar introduction into the space of indeterminacy, but this time we are not among the recipients in the carefully staged ritual. The flow is disrupted, and the speaker (or rather, supposed narrator) is given the quest to reconnect with this silent and yet necessary communication channel. The very opening line displaces us into a different spatial layer. It triggers the entrance into the liminal, as the inherent hesitancy of “somewhere or other” (1) is conflicting with determined “there must surely be” (1), where both the modal verb and the adverb express definitiveness. The next two lines make the conflict even more intense as they throw the balance off even further by defying sensual perception: “The face not seen, the voice not heard” (2), and the heart not entering into a dialogue with the speaker. A non-received answer implies previous contact, so the relationship between the speaker and the mysterious somewhere is disrupted at the same moment it is established. There is a reversed parallel between “The heart that not yet – never yet – ah me’/ Made answer to my word” (3-4) and the inability to reply in “Hollow-Sounding and Mysterious.” Even if there is no direct negation of the experience, the quest is still failed, and the speaker is wrapped in silence. David L. Eng, in “The Value of Silence”, describes silence as “that moment before – that liminal space from which – loss is expropriated into its symbolic meaning.”²⁷⁷ In this sense, Rossetti’s liminal silenced lyrics are a lamentation of loss before actual experience of loss.

The determinacy announced by “must” and “surely” is weakened in stanza two as it switches to a higher degree of uncertainty with “may”. The boundaries are blurred as the invisibility and detachedness of the land is emphasized with “Past land and sea, clean out of sight.”(6) Triple appeal to distance and transgression of boundaries – “past land and sea” (6); “beyond the wandering moon, beyond the star” (7) – makes the distance even more substantial. The perception of distance between the speaker and his object of desire is stretched through all dimensions (sky, sea, land) and beyond them. The spiritual journey is projected onto the natural order of things; thus the “wandering

²⁷⁷ David L. Eng, “The Value of Silence,” *Theatre Journal* 54.1 (March 2002): 85-94, p. 85.

moon” is followed by the star – in a similar quest of never being answered. The first line of the third stanza recalls the first line of the previous stanza with a slight variation. “Far” is moved to the first place, thus distance and unattainability are emphasized even further. But it is not only distance that slows the progress of the speaker.

I have previously discussed Rossetti’s imagery of enclosure and threshold; here Rossetti erects a wall between her speaker and the invisible addressee – a wall that defies all hopes for reunion, even though its significance is undermined by ‘just’: “With just a wall, a hedge between.” (10) This barrier is at the same time physical and spiritual. On a further layer of association, the threshold is marked with the “last leaves of the dying year/ Fallen on the turf grown green” (11-12). There are several symbolic layers fused into one short phrase. On one hand, it adds a note of finality to the previously highlighted haunting quest by bringing up ideas of last fallen leaves and the dying year, on the other the growing greenness of the turf promises us a new beginning. Those leaves are also reminiscent of a life unfulfilled in “A Better Resurrection,” and of the life-through-death succession of “Spring.” Still, the quest is poised on the threshold of a failure, in-between uncompletedness and incompleteness. It could be that not only the supernatural voice is hidden behind the wall. Similar to the experience of “Shut-Out,” the speaker of “Somewhere or Other” is barred both from discovering her ‘true’ self and hearing the answer of “the face not seen.”

In this way, the speaker is similar to Orpheus, forever mourning Eurydice. I have already mentioned this myth in relation to vision taboos in the first chapter. In “Somewhere or Other,” the speaker becomes Orpheus trying to bring Eurydice back. Orpheus is a complex figure. On one hand, he is the archetypal poet, a key motif in a tradition that brings together the memory of loss and lyrical poetry where the lyre from the feminine association with song and charm becomes a masculine weapon with the help of which the poet overcomes the obstacles and wins his lover. On the other, he is a male poet “feminized” by his loss. Catherine Maxwell places the myth of Orpheus at the origin of the nineteenth-century poet’s feminine identification, noting that “poetry and song feminize as does the grief which unmans the male lover.” The poets she invokes - notably Milton, Tennyson and Swinburne – have a certain connection to Christina Rossetti, so the parallel is not altogether unexpected. Moreover, on a larger scale it matches another gender reversion that I have mentioned in the first chapter.

There, the feminized object of the gaze is transformed into the masculine witness. As noted by Rosenblum, the metaphor of sight has deeply rooted gender connotations: “from Sidney through Keats and Shelley to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the poet writes as a male “seer” who gazes upon a beloved... female face. This face answers his look, or does not; <....> in any case, it is always an *object* of vision.”²⁷⁸ Rossetti, we have seen, reverts the paradigm by staring back into the eyes of the gazer. The myth of Orpheus represents a similar reversal: traditionally, the bereaved or abandoned lover is female, so the man, through his ability to grieve, occupies her place. Rossetti complicates this reversal even further. In “Somewhere or Other,” the relationship between Orpheus and Eurydice is paralleled by that of the speaker and the ephemeral voice of her quest: the female speaker occupies the place of Orpheus, the male singer, and the liminal voice – or the projection of the Christ figure – becomes feminized through reference to Eurydice. As Eurydice is the poet’s “*alter ego* or epipsyche, a spiritual reflection of himself. Yet, strangely, in that movement of reflection, Orpheus seems to tend toward *her* femininity.”²⁷⁹ The parallel between Christ as alter ego for Rossetti has been also noted by John Schad who observes various instances of mirroring Christ through death in Rossetti’s poetry.²⁸⁰ Maxwell analyzes gender shift initiated by Orpheus’ love for Eurydice, when the poet acquires certain feminine qualities through his identification with his muse. A similar projection occurs through speaker’s longing to unite with God. In the quest for this unity both go through the liminal space, and both quests end in failure. The figure of Eurydice is that of absence: she is present only liminally, as a heart that has not given the answer and not committed to return. On the same note Rossetti ends the poem without any narrative development; the speaker is forever shut out in the liminal story of her quest. Yet the lingering absence of the addressee is read as presence, and the unfulfillment becomes the real object of the poem.

²⁷⁸ Dolores Rosenblum, “Christina Rossetti’s Religious Poetry: Watching, Looking, Keeping Vigil”, *Victorian Poetry* 20.1 (Spring, 1982): 33-49

²⁷⁹ Catherine Maxwell, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 17.

²⁸⁰ John Schad, *Victorians in Theory: From Derrida to Browning* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 22-27.

This “negative affirmative,” absence read as presence is a usual projection of liminality—after all, initiands are seen as both present and absent from the world through the disruption of their social ties. But Rossetti establishes the affinity with death through non-fulfilled actions, that seem to freeze the moment in the liminal, in-between the states and possible developments. In a similar cadence of non-fulfilled actions Rossetti appeals to deathly sleep in “Life and Death” (1863). This technique makes us read absence as presence; by being notified of things that are going to disappear from our lives when we shut our eyes, we are forced to register them as existing. It may be argued whether our perspective of life includes “wild flowers blow” or “birds dart by”, but as we are reminded of their transience, we unconsciously start to miss their presence. This longing is further emphasised by echoing rhymes throughout the poem. The rhyming pattern is a/a-b-b/b-b-a-b/b-a/a-a-a with alternating long [i:] and short [ai] as in “Life is not sweet. One day it will be sweet/ To shut our eyes and die” (1-2), offering additional pattern of contraction. Moreover, if the rhyme is not doubled mid-line, it is strengthened by alliteration or assonance, as in “waxing wheat” (8) or even the expansion from [i] to [i:] in “sit” and “seat” pairing in the last line of the first stanza: “Nor know who sits in our accustomed seat.” (9) These picking up sounds create an echo and a special musicality to the carefully balanced lines, that seem to be haunting each other.

The slow change of the flowers is re-created with [w] and [ou] alternation in “wild flowers blow” (3), while the quick movement of birds and butterflies is marked with emphasis on [t] in “dart by/ With flitting butterfly” (4) (a possible cross-reference to the same butterfly whose absence was to stir the stagnation in “Cobwebs”). The impossibility of dwelling on [t] (and the sharp termination of action it stands for) punctuates the imagery of a swift flight. Alliterated [gr] in “Nor grass grow long” (5) followed by long vowels of “heads and feet” communicates the impetus of growing (note also its parallels to poems of seasonal development such as “Spring”). At the same time there is a certain spatial/ temporal contradiction. If we read closely how the speaker laments not seeing the grass growing “long above our heads and feet” (5), we see that the perspective is from the point of view of the buried. Hissing [h] and [s] of lines 7-8 “*hear the happy lark that soars sky-high/ Nor sigh that spring is fleet and summer fleet*” (my italics) would have been a strange choice for the jubilant demonstration of life if we did not know that the overall feeling is not that of joy.

The final appeal to those who “sit in our accustomed seat” (9) recalls Rossetti’s revenants and speakers from the threshold of death I have focused on in chapter two; it also produces a familiar feeling of objectification. Moreover, the parallel in the first line between two rhymed and pseudo-repetitive sentences (“Life is not sweet. One day it will be sweet”) tricks us into double reading of the whole stanza. On one hand, it marks the introduction into the liminal negative space as it opens the list of unfulfilled events. All senses are denied – sound (lark’s song), sight (birds and butterflies), touch (grass), smell (flowers) and taste (as a reference to feast and food through “wheat” and “seat”). On the other, it tempts us into reading it as “life is not sweet now, but it will be sweet one day,” thus promising us, the dead, a new life.

The second stanza mirrors the first one with slight variations in rhyming (a/a-b-b-a-b-a-b-b-b), and echoing it with [ai] in “to die, then live again” (11), including the visual rhyme in “live”, and [i:] in “sleep”-“meanwhile”-“feel”-“leaves”-“bean-fields”-“asleep” (and the visual rhyme in “dead”). In its rhythm and rhyme pattern, as well as in the triple juxtaposition of death-sleep-life, it is reminiscent of Hamlet’s soliloquy – especially in its plea for a pause in dreams, thus creating an additional layer of cultural justification. The verbs are repeated from the first stanza – “feel”-“hear”-“mark,” although the overall atmosphere is slightly changed from “waxing wheat” (8) to “the wane” of falling leaves. Both refer to the idea of “harvest,” yet “the wane/ Of shrunk leaves dropping in the wood” (12-13) has the familiar feeling of a negative harvest.²⁸¹ A master of sounds, Rossetti extends [gr] from “growing grass” into [g/r] of “ranks of golden grain” (16), and alliterated “waxing wheat” into alliterated “blackened bean-fields.” (15) The description ends with a hard, stumbling line that contradicts all the balanced musicality: “only dead refuse stubble clothe the plain.” (17) This line embodies the tense desperation with life; and even the stressed calmness of the ending line – “Asleep from risk, asleep from pain” (18) – brings no relief. The grammatically curious form, “asleep from”, suggests that sleep is akin to running away from something; moreover, it can easily be applied both to the speaker (and the dead she represents) and the world itself. Then the forces that make the world and the dead withdraw into sleep are “risk” and “pain”, an unusual pairing as juxtaposed to the

²⁸¹ It can also be read as a reference to the falling leaf in “A Better Resurrection”

darting birds and butterflies from the first stanza or even ranks of gold from the second. It can be said that this is the only clue as to why the speaker wants to be shut out of life in sleep. It is closer to the unfulfillment as we have seen in “Somewhere or Other,” and yet it seems that something important is lacking, that the plot is taken out, and its development is frozen and marred from the text. We are faced with silenced pre-lost state, the exhaustion before desperation; - a story where all movement is taken out. This experience is hidden from us, as Christina Rossetti is unwilling to give us any clue. All those layers of unrelated details seem to be dressing up a void rather than telling a proper story.

But from the liminal point of view, there is no story but disintegration and reassembly. Moreover, with the absent system of reference, the experience should be untranslatable into proper language. Instead, the language itself must be pausing on the threshold – hinting at, fitting in, but never referencing or naming directly the elements of the liminal space. In “May” (1855), an early poem that made its way to Rossetti’s first published book, the poet states directly the impossibility to put her experience into words: “I cannot tell you how it was; But this I know: it came to pass.” (1-2) This poem has attracted much attention from critics, and most define it as an example of poetics of secrecy or “the untelling ‘I’’s inability to articulate,”²⁸² or a method of “evasion, converging around some mystery in the lyric.”²⁸³ I believe that for Rossetti silence replaces the expected lyrical explanation – it marks lack of sentiment rather than an overwhelming emotion.

Once again the poet resorts to her favourite parallel constructions to frame the central void, as I have shown in the previous chapter. In the very first line the ensuing conflict is already present, as both stanzas start with the dichotomy between telling (I can’t and I won’t) and knowing (I have experienced and I know). Hassett sees there a reference to the biblical “it came to pass,” and believes that the reader is being encouraged to guess at the riddle of what has passed.²⁸⁴ I would rather suggest that the whole poetics of unfulfillment suggest not ever revealing the secrecy. The first stanza plunges us into the

²⁸² Jamison, *Poetics en Passant*, opus cit., p. 198

²⁸³ Hassett, *The Patience of Style*, opus cit., p. 57

²⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 55

world of incompleteness, despite the initially promising description (“bright and breezy day/ When May was young” (3-4)). May is universally acknowledged as a month of fulfilment, but evidently not for Rossetti. The whole landscape is that of indirect negation – negation that is transformed into negotiation. The speaker’s experience is described through words that show non-action: the poppies “were not born,” (5) the eggs “had not hatched as yet,” (7) “nor any bird forgone its mate.” (8). Moreover, the possible birth of poppies “between the blades of tender corn” (6) is even more complicated by the contradictory vicinity of tender blades through their affinity to death. A poppy is a flower that was given to Demeter, the goddess of the harvest (corn), to help her to sleep when her daughter Persephone was abducted to the kingdom of the dead. Thus, unborn poppies imply a reference to this pre-death state – before Persephone was taken to the dead and shut out of the world of the living and to sleep as the liminal state of waiting. It also strengthens the link to harvest as unfulfillment – a tendency I have previously noted in a number of poems.

While for Hassett “[t]he displaced precision of this image... creates an impression of accuracy that works to heighten... a felt absence,”²⁸⁵ I would stress again the absence as both landscape- and personality-shaping tool. It is through absence and through non-action that we perceive information about the situation as presented by Rossetti. All the verbs here indicate a beginning of a new process, yet this process is stalled without any indication as to whether it would be finished. Moreover, this “non-start” is contrasted with the opening “it came to pass.” Thus, passing is the only not-negated action, the only positive verb form in the poem, surrounded by the verbs of unfulfillment. Jamison emphasizes the passivity of the speaker who is left “static, stagnant and without voice or language adequate to her object,”²⁸⁶ but I would rather suggest that the speaker is only the quintessence of the environment. The whole world is represented as being empty, frail and fleeting. The disturbance of the stagnation lies in the elusiveness of the experience that lies beyond the framework of the poem. The framing repetitions only stress the void inside.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 56.

²⁸⁶ Jamison, *Poetics en Passant*, opus cit., p. 198.

The second stanza strengthens this feeling of baffling loss – no clue is given as to what exactly had passed in May. Defined by Jamison as “an event unspecified, introduced... by an “I” self-construed as not telling,”²⁸⁷ it still has an effect over the speaker’s life. Its end is repeated three times, almost like an incantation, - joined in this glorious passing by “sunny May” and “all sweet things.” We are left to guess as to whether those sweet things include unborn poppies and hatchlings from the first stanza. But what is more important, its passing deprives the speaker of her own colours and leaves her “old, and cold and grey.” (13) Devoid of age, warmth, colour – the speaker herself is ousted into the non-scape, slipping into the liminal space between the living and the dead. Here once again she is likened to the initiands of the liminal stage, who are devoid of all characteristics

Liminal spaces are by definition negative, being absent from the central narrative. There is a certain tradition of reading female texts as marginal, as “nontext, or supratext; they occupy a space reserved for silence”²⁸⁸; despite all the recovery work, they still remain peripheral. Thus the whole text Rossetti can be seen as a silenced figure speaking in “the limited and limiting terms within which resistance can be spoken.”²⁸⁹ I will not try to place this figure within the framework of a gendered experience, although it is one of the most fruitful trends in Rossetti’s scholarship; I believe it is a genderless yet conscious choice. The speaker of “May” is silenced twice – through her unnamed experience that is evident only in negation, and through her being unable to relate it. She is neither an observer, nor a participant, but a looming liminal presence in-between; one of those threshold figures in the early photographs we have seen in chapter two.

Analysing the art of roundels in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Ludlow evokes Barthes’ idea of *punctum* (personally touching detail as opposed to *studium*, the culturally, linguistically or politically based interpretation) as the sting of the unknown, for the known can never have the same wounding effect; it is the “accident which pricks

²⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 198.

²⁸⁸ Indira Karamcheti, “The Geographics of Marginality: Place and Textuality in Simone Schwarz-Bart and Anita Desai,” in *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), p. 129.

²⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 131.

me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" but at the same time stays beyond the framework of perception.²⁹⁰ Most of Rossetti's poems about the silencing liminal experience have this "pricking moment" which is highlighted by a list of painful reactions or physical deficiencies as experience in front of the unidentifiable experience. It comes through the "blades" of grass in "Spring" and the punctured collapse of Laura in "Goblin Market", that I examined in the first chapter – even the violent aggressive language, employed by Barthes ("bruises", "shoots", "pierces", "wound") is similar to Rossetti's assaults of "hidden life."

It is useful to recall here the photographs of Lady Hawarden I have discussed in the second chapter as they transfer the same feeling of hesitation, a moment of disturbance, displacement, a sense of *déjà vu* and unnamed presence on the threshold; as well as fractured rhymes and metric jolts that were the focus of the third chapter. All those instances can be read as *punctum* – the blindspot of the poem, incorporating the void and the indeterminacy characteristic of a liminal space. The *punctum* introduces the logic of presence in absence. The shock, experienced by the observer, is triggered by something that initially was not present in the moment of taking the photograph, but appeared through the private experience of the observer based on his personal associations or recollections. In this sense, photography becomes a momentum of private performance. Despite the physical form of photograph, the pleasure of consumption of images is transient and dependent on the *punctum*, that is re-lived each time independently.

Hence Barthes' definition of photography as a primitive theatre intermediated by death can serve as an example of a liminal experience. In this sense (and it echoes my argument in chapter two), photography is liminal, and the *punctum* – the double focus, or using Barthes' words, "additional vision" – becomes its marker, its point of entrance. "The Photographer's "second sight" does not consist in "seeing" but in being there"²⁹¹ – and here Barthes references the myth of Orpheus and the taboo of looking back. The

²⁹⁰ Elizabeth Ludlow, "Christina Rossetti, Amy Levy, and the Composition of Roundels in Late-Victorian Bloomsbury: Poetic Snapshots of Urban Subjects" in *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 56.1 (2013): 83-103. Barthes' definition quoted on p. 84.

²⁹¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections of Photography* (London: Cape, 1982), p. 47.

whole experience of the shock thus becomes the entrance point to the theatrical, liminal experience. The punctum – as a moment of hesitation – denies fulfillment, it is neither coded nor limited to a certain intentional composition- it is at the same time the void and the “desire beyond.” My theory of unfulfilled punctum is confirmed by Barthes’ own words: “This something has triggered me, has provoked a tiny shock, a satori, the passage of a void (it is of no importance that its referent is insignificant).”²⁹² The insignificant referent is then left speechless, unfulfilled as he has no control over the punctum. In the same way Rossetti’s speakers find themselves in a desirable space of expansion (as it is always a surplus to their experience or their understanding) beyond their control.

The speechless speaker is an image that follows the same logic of untranslatable experience. This logic implies a two-fold unfulfillment – inability to name one’s experience properly, and hence, inability to reflex and organize it, being shut out in the momentum, instead of transgressing it. The threshold is as impossible to pass, as the language. “If I Had Words” (1864) starts with a double statement of uncertainty and unfulfilled possibility and announces its liminality through the very subjunctive mood it employs. “If I had words,” repeated twice, creates a halt and frames the poem as a narrative of unfullfillment. The pleading is strengthened further with [i]/ [e] alteration in “at least to vent my misery;” the belittlement of “at least” and the expansion of “to vent” are brought together in the all encompassing “misery.” The [m] of “my misery” is passed on to “muter” in the next line, thus it is sealed with silence. This appeal to silence is also repeated three times in different arrangements: “muter,” “speechless,” “no voice wherewith to cry,” excluding communication from the options available to her. The following lines suggest a logic of denial reminiscent of “A Better Resurrection”: “I have no voice” (4), “no strength” (5), “no heart” (6). But if in the former the speaker was deprived of senses, here it is through physical disabilities that she laments her state. The line prompts a curious misreading of “have no heart” as literally lacking heart, thus the heart becomes an organ responsible for visual perception (note also the singular in “to lift the eye” (6)). Even if the speaker is frozen without motion in the liminal state and confesses her physical and emotional disability, her thoughts “wander here and there” (9). The triple repetition of “wander” (9-10)

²⁹² Ibid, p. 49.

strengthens the feeling of futility and unfulfillment; and intensifies the constraint as it brings “nothing that I may live thereby.” (12)

From this physical incompleteness and inability, Rossetti moves on to describe her emotional state. Her soul is “bound with brazen bands” – an alliterative plosive [b] becomes the main repeated sound through the next seven lines, with thoughts that “bring nothing back” (11) and echoing “my heart is broken in my breast/ My breath is but a broken sigh” (13-14). A quasi-rhyme of “breast”/”breath,” supported by the visual rhyme “heart”-“breast,” punctuates the narrative from the physical and emotional (heart) to the spiritual (breath). But this spirituality is broken – all the verbs in the first part of the poem refer to crippled or incomplete state (“bound,” “crushed,” “broken”).

The second part of the poem is arranged in a circular form echoing the first part, although the link between them is purely relational. It falls into two 8-line couplets which echo each other. The missing “words” from the first line of the first part transform into the imaginary “wings” (17-18, note also the labial alliterated [w] in the “word”/”wing” pairing), hence validating Susan Waldman’s claim that in this poem language is a “route beyond the confines of self.”²⁹³ This transformation is supposed to bring on liberation from the “brazen bands” (7), and tense disfiguration and inability highlighted in the first part is softened by the reference to “wings” and “dove” and the quest to find love. In its punctuation of misery, it echoes the first part, albeit more meekly and with more affirmation. The wish to “vent my misery” (2) is transformed into “fountains run which not dry” (20) (as vent can also mean to provide with an outlet for liquid). The muteness turns into “none that road to tell” (21), and futile wandering of thoughts is mirrored by “haste to find out love” (27). The death-ride highlighted with “my soul is crushed and like to die” (8) is also transformed into expectation - “Then if I lived I should do well, / And if I died I should but die” (23-24) - and conditional - “Then if I lived it might be best,/ Or if I died I could but die” (31-32), thus reducing the tension. Waldman’s reading, relying on Lacan’s ideas of death as marking the limit of symbolic order for a human, suggests a transformation through death. Indeed, in the second part the verbs imply a dart beyond the limits – “fly”, “seek”, “run”, “haste”,

²⁹³ Susan Waldman, *The Demon & the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 23.

“find”, producing an overlaying narrative of transgression. This transgression is still unfulfilled, as the only necessary condition of it – the transgression of the language – is not to be achieved.

The speechlessness is not a rare reference in Rossetti’s poems. Countless speechless characters populate her poem, and there we should distinguish between being silenced and being silent. Silencing implies deprivation of speech, or conscious choice of being deprived of speech, while “speechless” for Rossetti is preparing unity with God.²⁹⁴ This difference is similar to the dichotomy of incompleteness and uncompleteness, with the former being a permanent lack not to be recovered, the latter being a sign of emptiness to be filled with God’s presence. In “Speechless” (composed before 1893) Rossetti’s speaker describes herself in a similar way:

Lord, Thou art fullness, I am emptiness:
Yet hear my heart speak in its speechlessness... (1-2)

This intransgressible boundary of the language is omnipresent in Rossetti’s poetry, and is an important marker of her faith, as her spiritual experience is often left outside of words. The last poem I examine in this chapter, “Easter Day” (composed before 1886), provides us with a counterpoint regarding the inexpressibility of experience of Christ’s returning. Similar to many of the poems I have discussed previously, it starts with a proclamation of silence “Words cannot utter” (1). The relationship between the object and the subject is blurred: technically speaking, words indeed cannot utter. But here much more is at stake - the inherent silence prompted by the apophatic experience of Easter. In the beginning of *Time Flies*, Rossetti claims that “Stars, like Christians, utter their silent voice to all lands and their speechless words to the ends of the world.”²⁹⁵ The poem reinforces this image – in a certain way it suggests the ultimate speechlessness as its culmination. A true moment of glory is to be shared without the limiting construction of words. As the stanza disintegrates into grammatically

²⁹⁴ Speechlessness as related to mystical religious experience was analyzed by Serafim Seppala in *In Speechless Ecstasy: Expression and Interpretation of Mystical Experience in Classical Syriac and Sufi Literature* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2003).

²⁹⁵ *Time Flies*, p. 2.

unconnected fragments, we feel wrapped into the liminal space and being freed from all constraints. The vocabulary is that of liberation and spending – “strip off your mourning” (4); “Crown you with garlands” (5); “set your lamps burning” (6). This jubilant, careless mood is continued well into stanzas two and three.

Stanza two reiterates Rossetti’s conscious refusal of words. It is exactly when “speech is left speechless” that there is something to speak about for the poet. Indeed, in the second stanza every image references to emptiness that leads to completedness: speechless speech is to be filled with singing, hearts that seem to be open and empty will be filled with all-encompassing love for Christ. Ringing bells – an image that for Rossetti is usually linked to death – here celebrate the victory over death and Christ’s return as the chief reaper to gather his harvest. Still there is an undertone of ambiguity behind this joyful feast. As I have previously noted, the ringing of bells is usually linked to death, and the harvest in Rossetti’s imagery is rarely a positive image.

The third stanza of “Easter Day” is structured as a ritualized public interaction similar to a carnival. Turner suggests that public reflexivity takes the form of a performance; so shared experience of liminality comes as highly ritualized interaction that allows an individual to reach transfiguration. Indeed, Rossetti’s description of the marriage of Christ and earth does not differentiate between the actors and the public of the feast: “This is man’s spousal day/ Christ’s day and ours.” (17-18) This is the climax of unity – and at the same time, this is complete dissolution of self. This unity-through-dissolution is further confirmed in Rossetti’s spiritual writing. Thus, in *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti writes:

All who are united to Christ are thereby united to one another. The Communion of Saints flows in one continuous stream from the One Fountain Head; descends as one unbroken chain link by link from that irremovable anchor our only hope, the Cross of Christ.²⁹⁶

Rossetti uses the verb “to flow” – to the same as the one used by Victor Turner in relation to experience of *communitas*. The last stanza of “Easter Day” presents us with

²⁹⁶ *Face of the Deep*, pp. 209-210.

this moment of Turner's flow – the one continuous stream where earth, nature, mankind and Christ perform a play and a transformation; and the experience stays beyond the capacity of the language.

William Michael Rossetti once wrote that removal of Biblical references and dictions from Christina's poems would reduce her pages “to something approaching a vacuum.”²⁹⁷ As true as those words may be (Biblical references are both numerous and inextricable from Rossetti's writing),²⁹⁸ there is a different dimension to her vacuum that her brother fails to mention: her vacuum is full of meanings. As we have seen in “Easter Day,” a close reading of a purely spiritual poem of Rossetti's brings up an intertextual complex of problems not limited to spiritual experience only. In this way Rossetti's resolution to the secret is in a similar way apophatic – not only does she refuses either to name it, or to share the experience, but she presents us with a dichotomy of simultaneous presence and absence, speech and silence. Words emerge out of silence when ineffability does no longer suffice; but words do not suffice either, their projections are limited and provisional.

The impossibility of complete understanding or union with the Absolute also implies things being held together by separation rather than being fused together, expectation rather than resolution, a mutual tension established without verbal communication or physical interaction,²⁹⁹ similar to the idea of negative spaces in art. I find this unfulfilled unity particularly useful in relation to Rossetti's work because of its links to liminality. The closest experience in art to this construct of meaningful emptiness is the Japanese concept of “ma” which can roughly be explained as creation of meaningful voids rooted in spiritual belief and a complete fusion of spatial and temporal characteristics of a space in between two objects or events. Indeed, in a way Rossetti's emphasis on smaller adjustments to already existing texts in order to generate new layers of meaning is

²⁹⁷ William M. Rossetti, Preface to *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1904), p. xii.

²⁹⁸ A study of Rossetti's Biblical references is offered by Nilda Jimenez in Nilda Jimenez, *The Bible and the Poetry of Christina Rossetti: A Concordance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979).

²⁹⁹ This passage relies heavily on the description of Ma – absent places in Japanese architecture in Goda Sachiyo, “An Investigation into the Japanese Notion of ‘Ma’: Practicing Sculpture within Space-Time Dialogues,” a PhD thesis, University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 2010.

reminiscent of Japanese poetics,³⁰⁰ especially its emphasis on ineffability, emptiness, mutual dependency, lack of essence, the compressed temporality of the moment in “Cobwebs” or “A Castle-BUILDER’s World.”

Rossetti’s spaces are constructed as “positioned uncertainly between heaven and earth... both spatial and temporal uncertainty: the room is neither in one place nor in the other - an indescribable place to be,” suggesting “an impossibly expansive world seen through the limited frame of an ordinary, everyday opening.”³⁰¹ This everyday opening provides layers of descriptions, similes, comparisons and associations that in close reading prove void if not useless. What is important for Rossetti, is that this great void inside becomes a site for a push beyond, for experimentation and transgression; the zero origin.

Empty space is an unsettling idea, as we tend to associate emptiness with negative connotations. But I suggest that Rossetti’s rhetoric of negation on different levels of text leads her to constructing apophasic spaces where both name and action are taken out of the picture. Basically, we are presented with objects and spaces as they are per se, devoid of classification and meaning, not constituted as a container for or interpretation of nonspatial knowledge or experience. In this sense they are at the same time opened and closed for interpretation. Such gapped spaces are difficult to fit into any ordered system, be it textual, theological, linguistic or purely spatial, and hence the trouble we are faced with when trying to analyse them.

I am not the first to mention these “voids” in the poetry of Christina Rossetti, although I might be the first in marking them as the corner-stone of her verses. Alice Law writes about Rossetti’s poetry as “that indescribable “nothingness” which eluding our clumsy mental grasp floats tantalizingly about us, but threatens to melt imperceptibly at a touch.”³⁰² But if Alice Law stresses the poet’s “elusive intangibility,” she focuses on the felicitous lightness of Rossetti’s secrecy, while I see it as a conscious and almost

³⁰⁰ For a detailed analyses of Japanese poetics see Charles Shiro Inouye, *Evanescence and Form: The Searching for Meaning and Identity in Japanese culture* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

³⁰¹ Goda, opus cit., p. 23-25.

³⁰² Alice Law, “The Poetry of Christina G. Rossetti,” in *Westminster Review* 143 (1895): 444-453, p. 445.

material presence of negative spaces. In advancing my hypothesis I would suggest that Rossetti's texts should be read in the context of a spatial and structural embracing of the void, to the stage that her theology can be seen as apophatic to a certain extent. Even if the last suggestion is out of the limits of this project, still I see Rossetti as a poet consciously engaged in producing voids and silences. She is not the one to trust explicit explanation accepting the inevitability of layering possibilities and perceptions – after all, as she suggests in *Letter and Spirit*:

may not light be thrown on that mass of bewildering error (whose name is legion) which at every turn meeting us as man's invention, is after all a more or less close travestie of truth? So like in detail, so unlike as a whole, to the truth it simulates, that already we incline to ask: If so much is known without immediate revelation, wherefore reveal?³⁰³

If “mass of bewildering error” is present in any definition made by a human being, then the only way to defy it is to trust the absence of definition. Rossetti's texts deploy carefully constructed omissions through which they recuperate the marginal elements. To put it simpler, by unnamning the object/ not letting the action be carried through, Rossetti makes us question the logical order that we are used to taking for granted. If there is no-Self, could it be perceived as non-sense? If we uncover all the wraps that guard her secrets and find the sacred emptiness, would it be considered a sacrilege? Moreover, as Derrida notes, the roots of apocalypse imply

Apokaluptō, I disclose, I uncover, I unveil, I reveal the thing... a secret thing, the thing to be dissembled, a thing that is neither shown nor said, signified perhaps but that cannot or must not first be delivered up to self-evidence... It is a matter of secret...³⁰⁴

This approach enables us to re-read Rossetti's poems about keeping a secret with a new understanding of the consequences of disclosure and view secrecy as a blessing rather

³⁰³ *Letter and Spirit*, p. 10.

³⁰⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” *Oxford Literary Review* 6.2 (1984): 3-37, p. 4.

than a punishment. Instead, I focus on a different aspect of her unwillingness to unveil the speaker and define the extent to which her layered constructions and uneven rhythms contribute to the definition of selfhood. If in this chapter I brought forward the use of layering technique to highlight absence and unfulfillment, in the chapters to come I transfer the same approach to Rossetti's speaker as I show how the poet creates layered personalities or explores the void created by the split inside the self. While the culmination point of the liminal passage implies re-emergence from the liminality and re-integration into the world, Rossetti's speakers are often left poised in-between worlds, never fulfilling reconstruction of the self. Liminality for her becomes the result, rather than means, of self-acceptance.

Chapter 5. Layers of I: Rossetti's Secret Selves

Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together, that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life.

Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

Writing to her old friend Amelia Heimann in July 1870, Rossetti muses about the advantages of multiplying the self:

If one could only cut oneself in two how handy it would be on occasion: — or if in two, why not in twenty? Granted the power, I would cross the Atlantic and look with my own eyes at Henrietta, — I would dart into 56 <Euston square> and salute Maria, — I would peep in at Louisa Parke and announce myself were she at leisure, — and one or two more of my replicas would speed to goals, I do assure you.

Meanwhile in unbroken unity I sit and scribble to you.³⁰⁵

As useful as the opportunity might have seemed to the poet who complained about her physical inability to be present at various places at the same time, in her poetry Rossetti offers far less pleasing prospects of such a split. “Unbroken unity”, she mentions, stands in opposition to fulfilling many goals at once, yet this possible “fulfilment” does not necessarily correspond to the higher unity with God. While in the previous chapters we have seen how the multiplication of self is re-enacted through the mirror, at this stage I will work with a subtler way of self-division.

In the first and second parts of this thesis, I explored perception and construction of the liminal space as seen in Christina Rossetti’s works in order to highlight her spatial, temporal and grammatical layering and the effect it produces on the reader. In the third part, I continue with my analysis of Rossetti’s technique of layering, and deal more closely with the way she works with the liminal to re-define the self through multiplication and negation/silencing. The poet’s frequent use of unfulfillment and

³⁰⁵ Letter to Amelia Barnard Heimann, July 1870, in Anthony H. Harrison (ed.), *The Letters of Christina Rossetti* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1997-2004), vol. 1, 1843-1873., 1:428.

absence as a driving force in her poems creates a complex poetic mode of vacuum spaces, where unity with God is desirable but unattainable, and the speaker is shut out from the world in a death-like reverie. In the previous chapters I introduced two important techniques of Rossetti's poetics: layering and unfulfillment/ negation as a way of constructing liminal space, and the ways they work on compositional and sound levels. I suggest a similar approach should be used in analysing Rossetti's speakers and their perception of self. The self is reconstructed through negation and/or subsequent meeting with the Other, where the Other becomes a mirrored version of the self (a way of self-multiplication, similar to the trauma-induced split of personality I have mentioned in chapter one). By fusing the gap between the signifier and the signified through negation, Rossetti makes the presence of her speakers liminal and fragmented. Their indeterminacy and multiplicity are strengthened by layers of possibilities presented through the guessing game with which Rossetti engages her reader; as such, the speaker often finds herself in-between "nonentity and identity," to use the expression of George E. Dimock,³⁰⁶ and registers her being through disowning and disavowing herself, thus making her identity void. My third part focuses on the questioning and negation of self through objectifying the liminal experience.

Rossetti uses two different approaches in alienating the self. On one hand, the 'I' of her narrator is stripped of its subjectivity, objectified and equated to an unidentifiable 'it.' The essence of this 'it' is veiled by layers of definitions, as Rossetti throws innumerable hints at the reader and involves them in a guessing game as to what the heart of the 'I' is. The speaker details her attempts to reach (surpass, forget, transgress) this mysterious 'it,' or describes in what ways 'it' is different from her 'I.' In the liminal structure, this 'it' becomes both the sacra (and that is why, as we shall see, Rossetti refers to it as to something parasitizing within her, reigning in her, gaining power over her) and carries a certain link with death. In Turner's liminal space, the neophyte "must be a tabula rasa, a blank slate, on which is inscribed the knowledge and wisdom of the group,"³⁰⁷ – those definitions appeal to the idea of a blank space I have discussed in the previous chapter.

³⁰⁶ George E. Dimock, "The Name of Odysseus," quoted in Meghan Vicks, *Narratives of Nothing in Twentieth-Century Literature*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 3.

³⁰⁷ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 103.

At the same time this alienation and partial or full disappearance of self in both Turner and Rossetti is reminiscent of Lacan's interpretation of the 'fort-da' game and offers a curious glimpse into the understanding of split in the self.

The 'fort-da' game was initially described by Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as a game of throwing a reel played by his one-and-a-half-year-old grandson. The "fort" refers to throwing the reel away, the "da" to the act of bringing it back. Freud believes that repetition is a means of securing control: instead of being a passive object of distress inflicted by mother's absence, the child becomes the master of his displeasure. The repetition allows the child to re-instate absence and presence at his own pace, even though it is a displacement constructed by substitution.³⁰⁸ But Lacan, addressing the same episode in "Tuche and Automaton" (1964), suggests that instead of substitution, there is a split and objectification of self. The child is not actually dependent on his mother's return as it falls out of the framework of the game; his actual power is concentrated within the limits of the substitute reel. Instead, he sees the reel as a displaced extension of himself:

It is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, still retained ... It is with his object that the child leaps the frontiers of his domain.³⁰⁹

This moment in Rossetti's poetics would correspond to the poet's describing an object, an 'it' residing in the speaker's soul as a solidified memory of something she would rather have forgotten; instead, she creates a liminal space within herself and keeps it in-between life and death, memory and oblivion. In the same way, Lacan's subject tries to overcome the loss: the 'fort-da' game creates a liminal space in-between here and there, as "it is aimed at what, essentially is not there, *qua* represented" (Lacan's emphasis).³¹⁰ Elizabeth Bronfen also links Lacan's idea to her exploration of the dead female body in

³⁰⁸ See Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in. James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), in 18.vol, vol. 18, pp. 3-64.

³⁰⁹ Jacques Lacan, "Tuche and Automaton" in Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (New-York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981), p. 62.

³¹⁰ Ibid, p. 63.

Victorian culture and its subjectivity, and suggests that the child identifies itself “with the notion of disappearance, aphanasis, referred to as representation” (Bronfen’s emphasis) and confirms that the “symbolic game here is both mastery over negation and grounded on negation.”³¹¹ This negation in Rossetti’s poetry is translated into her speaker’s veiling her split and being unwilling to let the reader join her struggle. Instead, the speaker involves the reader in a guessing game.

There are two possible ways to approach this game. One, favoured by many Rossettian scholars, is to explore the “secrecy” and the poet’s resolve to deal in subterfuges, as if the speech is truncated and halted by “the paralysis of failed desire.”³¹² This approach is often linked to the Tractarian poetics of reserve and focuses on the fears of “overstepping the limit” in what is possible to know and reach towards things beyond our knowledge.³¹³ The other approach, suggested by Adam Mazel in his PhD thesis on Victorian riddle culture, is to read Rossetti’s poetry in the context of riddles in the nineteenth century.³¹⁴ According to Mazel, the guessing game “operates as the generator of the verse; it is the engine that drives the verse forward.”³¹⁵ Indeed, Rossetti

³¹¹ Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (New York and Manchester: Routledge, 1992), p. 26-27.

³¹² Constance Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* (Charlottesville, Va. : University of Virginia Press, 2005), p. 55. See, for example, Anthony Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988); Angela Leighton, “‘When I am Dead, My Dearest’: The Secret of Christina Rossetti” in *Modern Philology* 87.4 (May 1990): 373-388; Anne Jamison, *Poetics en Passant* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

³¹³ See, for example, G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981); Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993); Diane D’Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999); Emma Mason, “Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve” in *Journal of Victorian Literature* 7:2 (2002): 196-219; Mary Arseneau, *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Andrew D. Armond, “Limited Knowledge and the Tractarian Doctrine of Reserve in Christina Rossetti’s The Face of the Deep” in *Victorian Poetry* 48:2 (Summer 2010): 219-241; Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

³¹⁴ For a detailed study of riddles, see Gregg Hecimovich, *Puzzling the Reader: Riddles in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

³¹⁵ Adam Martin Mazel, *The Work and Play of Rhyme in Victorian Verse Cultures, 1850-1900* (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Michigan, 2014), p. 86.

seems to be interested in the process rather than the result: instead of offering her readers a list of clues, she teases them with inexhaustible lists of solutions that do not give a definite answer. At best, they create a space of unfulfillment where the objects are defined through what they are not. I believe that by listing solutions without giving an answer directly, Rossetti creates a deliberate moment of rupture with spatio-temporal unity. There is no subsequent reconnection in the form of an answer that would have settled the secret for both the reader and the speaker and thus ended their liminal suspension in-between possible answers. In other words, the possibility offered by the guessing game is turned down.

In discussing the symbolic meaning of rituals, Victor Turner notes how they are often “multivocal” and “polysemous, i.e. they stand for many things at once,”³¹⁶ including concepts from different semantic fields. This is a technique not uncommon in Rossetti’s writing. As I have demonstrated in analysing “Spring” and other seasonal poems: Rossetti’s “spring” is manifested geologically (layers of land growing through) and eschatologically (the dead growing through the living). So from the liminal perspective Rossetti’s lists, where each of the references is in itself an abridgment of a whole system of concepts, create a place of re-integration in order to re-establish the speaker’s connections to the real world, a pre-requisite for the future reintegration into reality. But as I will show in this chapter, despite the creation of all the necessary conditions, Rossetti is unwilling to fulfil the speaker’s liminal stage, and instead prolongs it for an indefinite time. It often results in her references being confusing and mutually exclusive, as if there were no unifying principle behind them. In the previous chapter I have referred to this disintegrating reference system as “non-space,” or “vacuum.” Mazel also mentions “the vacuum” at the centre of the poem that fulfils, or “produces the plenitude of the poem,”³¹⁷ – a reference that I would like to develop further as related to negative spaces and renunciation of the self. Thus, the focus of the last part of my thesis shifts towards the subject/object of this moment, as I explore what exactly is the experience of this moment.

³¹⁶ See Victor W. Turner, "Three Symbols of Passage in Ndembu Circumcision Ritual: An Interpretation," in Max Gluckman (ed), *Essays on the Ritual of Social Relations* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 1962), pp. 124-174.

³¹⁷ Mazel, *The Work and Play of Rhyme in Victorian Verse Cultures, 1850-1900*, opus cit., p. 86.

In this chapter I apply the layering approach to Rossetti's speakers' self-awareness and show how they move to self-definition through objectification. Nesting a definition within a story, Rossetti explores how liminal subject, created by unfulfilled actions, demands the presence of an unfulfilled subject. The fragmentation created by layered definitions is characterised by simultaneity and discontinuity, and the text works as a trap to hold all the definitions together. Among the poems I approach in this chapter, two ("What" (1853) and "Winter: My Secret" (1857)) are examples of layering guesses and disguising the seemingly empty secret in a pile of definitions. In "Another Spring" (1853), the I is lost in the contradicting temporal layers, denying her past and her future and re-living through her present as if stuck in a temporal loop. My reading of "The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children" (1865), a poem with a secret of identity disclosed from the beginning, raises the question of narratorial layers displacing the 'truth.' The last poem, "The Thread of Life" (1882), stands apart as here I objectify the "I" of the poem and show how it can be perceived as a restricting non-thing. It might be the only poem where layering is not immediately evident, and I show how it follows a familiar pattern through variated repetition and overlapping narrative spaces.

As I have traced it in the previous chapters, in her objectifying technique Christina Rossetti often resorts to layering; this both hides her unwillingness to disclose the object and offers a number of possible developments. This peculiarity of her writing has been noted by other critics. Adam Mazel emphasizes Christina Rossetti's fascination with chance and explores the ways "she structures the proliferation of guesses by putting the 'hap' in her mastertrope, 'perhaps.'"³¹⁸ This "hap" is not only a game of chance – it is the "hap" of the "happening," that sustains the links with the present, thus creating a displaced temporality between the true present and the present-that-might-have-been. It might remind us of a riddle or a nursery rhyme, prompting the reader to try out innumerable possibilities.

An early poem, "What", written in May 1853, is constructed following a similar pattern and manifests its indeterminacy from its very title. There is no possible way to give a

³¹⁸ Adam Martin Mazel, *The Work and Play of Rhyme in Victorian Verse Cultures, 1850-1900*, opus cit., p. 84.

summary of the poem, as it seems to be little but a pile of definitions inviting the reader to join the guessing game. The reader follows a maze of possibilities, but the core of the poem always stays out of reach. It seems that the poet plays with us the same way as the child playing the fort-da game: as soon as the object seems to become closer, it is immediately sent away. As soon as one of the answers is given, we are plunged into a different possibility, and the true object of the poem remains nameless. To secure this effect, the first four stanzas are based on a string of unrelated adjectives and similes, tied together by the rhythm and the alliterative rhyme scheme of the verse. Thus the first stanza – “Strengthening as secret manna,/ fostering as clouds above” (1-2) – seems to explore the strong and giving side of the unidentified object of the poem. All adjectives imply plenitude and sharing – “strengthening” (1), “fostering” (2), “kind” (3), “full” (4) - culminating in an almost religiously exalted “our glory and our banner” (5). At the same time the nouns used to refer to the object of the poem do not represent a coherent picture. Even if there might be a stretched link between “manna” (1) and “clouds” (2) (high, elated) or “clouds” and “dove” (3) (soft, white) or “river” (4) and “glory” (5) (magnitude), all together they seem to be thrown at random. Susan Stewart in her book on nonsense in folklore and literature, in relation to alliteration and rhyme discusses a “lyric unfolding to the infinity” as one of the possible ways of creating overlapping temporalities and spaces. By appealing to nonsense poems and jump rope rhymes she notes that in those texts the infinite variations “dissolve in and out of each other.” Thus, elements that were never supposed to be brought together are joined to create new combinations, similar to the liminal deconstruction and restitution. The boundaries of the space of the nonsense rhyme are “arbitrary in relation to what is enclosed within them, yet definitive and examinable at each instance of performance.”³¹⁹ In this way Rossetti’s poem is indeed approaching nonsense. Combining different unrelated elements within one frame, Rossetti disrupts continuity in our efforts to understand the poem. The same disruption is evident in the rhyming pattern: in addition to the obvious “above” (2), “dove” (3), “manna” (1), “banner” (5), “river” (4), “ever” (6) provide dubious and inexact pairings.

³¹⁹ Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 158.

With only two similes each, the second and the third stanzas appear more organised as they appeal to the object's attractiveness with "dear" and "fair", "sunny," "soft" and "gay." This gives us alliterated pairings of "fair as flowers" (9) and "dear as a dying cadence.../ In the drowsy night." (7-8), "soft as a sunny shadow" (15). Still, they bring us no closer to understanding the object of the poem. All Rossetti's favourite liminal markers are present, though. There is a reference to the fleetingness of the world (flowers are plucked and then forgotten); drowsiness in the second stanza implies a shift of consciousness similar to that we have seen in chapter two; and the dichotomy of the third stanza which is paused between the "fresh opening to the sun" (13) and "sunny shadow/ When day is almost done" (15-16) is a direct invitation to the uncertainty of the liminal. It also echoes Rossetti's ideas of spring (the cowslip is an early spring flower) as poised in-between life and death; moreover, if we read the reference to the sun in the context of "the Sun of Righteousness," then the secret of the poem would be a human life, "opening" to the faith and withering as "a sunny shadow" when approaching death. A further nuance is hidden in a cowslip-meadow metaphor (round and yellow) which can be read as an earthly mirror image to the sun, and thus, a shadow of the paradise and the enclosed space of the garden; as we have seen earlier, for Rossetti gardens are liminal. It also reminds us of the gardens in "Shut out" and "From House to Home," as discussed in the previous chapters. If the only reference system we have is that of liminality, we are tempted to think that in the end we will be gratified with a new combination of familiar elements, preparing us for the new knowledge of the world. But Rossetti is true to herself in terms of disrupting the stately order of her imagery.

The fourth stanza adds to the mess of definitions by seemingly unrelated references – "twilight", "tree", "islet", "rose." The epithets "glorious," (17) "pleasant," (18) "untouched," (19), "unknown" (20), "fragrant" (21) and "sweet" (21) seem to invoke a feeling similar to the description of Laura's tempting fruit in "Goblin Market." The haunting presence of the goblin bait is felt despite the simile expanding into "sweet and fruitless;" as if it is the absence of the goblin fruit that is the driving force of the poem. Moreover, the object is "untouched," "unknown" and "fruitless" – thus the knowledge of it is not to be physically explored, nor understood by reason, nor can it bear any fruit. All levels of interaction are erased; the triple denial seems to anticipate the

disillusionment of the last stanza. In this sense the poem is approaching nonsense in a way that it uses surplus of significations to deflect our attention away from its core.

Indeed, Rossetti's work presents a balance between a surplus of signification (created by repetitions and multiple/ superfluous descriptions) and its deficiency (none of the descriptions actually defines the subject). We are given too many definitions, but contrary to all expectations they do not settle down into a coherent picture. And despite its similarity with nonsense nursery rhymes, there is still an evident difference. If in a proper riddle "the answer... is not to be derived from a complicated performance," but rather found through common sense, in Rossetti's texts it is common sense that becomes a nuisance for the layered realities. We cannot reconstruct any parts of the poem to find the true answer: both past and future are diluted by possibilities. Indeed, the fifth stanza dismisses all previous clues as nothing but "a bitter dream" (23) and "poisoned fount" (25). The intrinsic contradiction between "dream" as a symbol of passivity and "stream" as a symbol of change only stresses the vicious circle of unfulfillment. The ending of the poem also reminds us of the "bitterness without a name" ("Goblin Market", 510), where, as noted by Isobel Armstrong, the bitterness of the medicine provides the antidote and purification for the dreamlike state of Laura.³²⁰

Mazel argues that through listing riddles without answers, Rossetti "develops a different kind of 'cunning': not 'knowing' ... but the suspension of knowing in guessing ... between like-sounding words and similar-seeming choices."³²¹ The whole purpose of this guessing game is not to give us an answer. The situation is complicated even further if we read it against Rossetti's ideas about the impossibility of fulfilment as explored in the previous chapter. If the wholeness (and the answer) is not to be attained, then the riddle itself is rendered void. Even if logical thinking drives us towards the conclusion that the more details we are given, the easier it is to find the answer, given the framework of unfulfillment we are left with a list of empty clues leading nowhere. Rossetti – and I have previously noted this characteristic of her vision – prefers a

³²⁰ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 351.

³²¹ Adam Mazel, *The Work and Play of Rhyme in Victorian Verse Cultures, 1850-1900*, opus cit., p. 30. This phrasing also reminds us of Rossetti's own *Speaking Likenesses* – a collection of prose for children.

kaleidoscopic view where no unity exists. It is, in other words, the ultimate unfulfillment of both the object and the subject, the speaker – and the secret she wants to hide. Victor Turner suggests that “[t]he subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally if not physically invisible.”³²² The transitional personae are not only invisible – they are also nameless in a sense that they have no unique name, but are referred to by a set of symbols which are “complex and bizarre.” In Rossetti texts, the subject (or the secret) is invisible, hidden behind numerous yet unrevealing solutions. And in her guessing game, having too many names dissolves the reference system and is equalled to having no name, as none of those names actually pins down the essence. The peculiarity of Rossetti’s reference system is in its loop – instead of having acquired the new knowledge and having resurged out of the liminal space, her characters are shut in there without even trying to get through. As in the ‘fort-da’ game, the momentum of suspension between being sent away and being brought back is continuously repeated; the speaker is unable either to part with the secret, or to keep it, and as such, the tension is unresolved.

A similar patchwork of metres and references which engages the reader in a guessing game is characteristic of “Winter: My Secret,” (1857), one of the most recognizable and widely cited poems of Rossetti. Scarcely any critic avoided giving its opinion on it so that it prompted Isobel Armstrong to call it “a summa of her <Rossetti’s> work;”³²³ but I believe that liminality provides us with a new means of reading the poem. As a matter of introduction, I will highlight a few previous readings here. Many Rossetti scholars focus on the secret trying to figure out its symbolic and functional significance. Thus, appealing to Coventry Patmore’s metric theories, Yopie Prins in her analysis of this poem suggests that the secret is non-existent physically and symbolically, and lies with the metre game as Rossetti is toying “with the idea of an empty space” and inviting the reader to fill it with abstract constructions just to fit the rhythm. In this case the answer to the riddle is hidden in the number of accents per line which leads us to an uneven pattern with hectic expansion from four to five and contraction from four to three (23-

³²² Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (ed), *Reader in Comparative Religion* (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1979), p. 235.

³²³ Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics*, opus cit., pp. 357-358.

27). Prins juxtaposes it to the metrical pattern of the month of February in Edmund Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* where each month has a different metric characteristic, and argues that "what speaks here is neither a person nor a voice but a temporal unit, an "I" measured by the calendar and spatialized in a series of metrical marks."³²⁴ Thus, the answer to the riddle is neither an object, nor a subject, but a setting – the temporal change that is happening around both the riddler and the riddle.

Prins' seasonal rhythmical reading can be supported by the rhyming scheme. The overarching importance of "knowledge" – in a promising "[p]erhaps some day, who knows?" (2) – is linked to the weather changes through rhymes as "it froze, and blows, and snows" (3). On the verbal level again we are tempted into taking those physical descriptions as related to the 'secret.' The same rhymes come back as agents fighting against the reader/ holder of the secret ("who ever shows/ His nose to Russian snows/ To be pecked at by every wind that blows?" (18-20)) This logic of intrusion and violence is further emphasized by the taboo to open the door to let the asker, and the draughts in ("I cannot ope to everyone who taps" (4)). The opening taboo is more often broken than not; as we have seen in "The Convent Threshold" and other poems, the danger of the knowledge unleashed is imminent.

In this poem a withdrawal from sharing the secret becomes an instrument of disguise and transfiguration. Angela Leighton reads this poem as "a game of reference." A game, according to its most famous theorist Johan Huizinga, breaks the logic of events and reconfigures its constituents.³²⁵ This simultaneous deconstruction and reconstruction confirms Leighton's reading of the poem as "both a haunting loss and a teasing strategy of 'fun'" of never revealing one's true Self – "the 'muffled', wayward, delighting time of fantasy, the haunted, lily-covered place of memory, and the flaming, fork-tailed dragon of all ... mischievous cover-ups."³²⁶ By refusing to tell a secret, Rossetti refuses

³²⁴ Yopie Prins, "Victorian Meters" in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Literature*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 108-109.

³²⁵ For more information, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

³²⁶ Angela Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), pp. 158-160.

both to name (and hence be named, be objectified) and to pronounce, to sound, to make her voice known. Leighton's argument is close to Victor Turner's description of the liminal acquisition of knowledge: "elements are withdrawn from their usual settings and combined with one another in a totally unique configuration, the monster or dragon;"³²⁷ both the monster and the dragon refer to the recombination of familiar symbols in the liminal space. This rearrangement of the elements enables the neophytes to doubt the existing order and things they were taking for granted, in the same way as fragmented discourse in "Winter: My Secret" seems to redefine the relationship between the speaker and the secret.

In "Winter: My Secret", the speaker is desperately trying to find a way of not giving away the secret, but through listing various possibilities she almost invites the reader to step in. As Armstrong notes,

[t]he secret, guarded as it is by the two 'I's which lock the first line at both ends, is at once part of the privacy and silence of identity, the 'I', and yet comes into being as the creation of curiosity from outside - 'you're too curious'. The decision not to 'tell' would be a violation of self, 'not I', and yet that 'not I' defines the self, since the refusal to tell betrays the existence of the secret.³²⁸

This paradoxical circular pattern once again hides a vacuum inside as it repeats the familiar structure of the previous poem. No matter how many layers of possibilities are wrapped around the core, the object of the poem defies definition. It is a two-edged process of accumulating possibilities and at the same time denying all that we have achieved through our guessing efforts. Identities of the 'intruder' (the addressee of the poem) and the 'defendant' (the speaker) are being fused through their reported dialogue, as the speaker is both questioning and answering the questions. In "Winter: My Secret" the speaker, the intruder, and the secret are in a fluid state of exchange of qualities, and thus inseparable from each other, in a sort of a liminal state.

It seems to be a game which consists of covering/wrapping the self with sentences that become a camouflage and a hideout. We are left wondering whether the "I" of the poem

³²⁷ Turner, "Betwixt and Between," opus cit., p. 240.

³²⁸ Armstrong, *Victorian Poetics*, opus cit., p. 357.

is the secret – or yet another cover or wrap. In a similar way, Alison Chapman reads this poem as “the paradigmatic [example of] Rossetti’s resistance to self-representation” within the sentimental and patriarchal ideology and notes “the illusion that there might be no fully present subject that speaks”.³²⁹ And this is the reason why this poem cannot be seen as a proper riddle. A riddle implies a certain powerful riddler who is in charge of reversing the reality; as Stewart suggests, it has “the power to reverse its own context, the context of death, to its inverse, the context of life – from seriousness to play – so long as the arbitrary power of the riddler is not tampered with, so long as it is allowed to be framed as a riddle.”³³⁰ On the contrary, in “Winter: My Secret” the riddler is on the defensive, and constantly sliding into the possibility of the secret breaking through or not even being a secret. Through all the layers of guessing and the framing reported (or even assumed) dialogue, we are faced with the void - in the thirty-four lines of the poem there is still no story to tell but that of the climax of unfulfillment. Stretching Billone’s idea further, although the poem “might continue indefinitely to entangle the reader in its own denials and contradictions, without ever giving away what it hides,”³³¹ if we take out all the puns and wraps and misleading descriptions, there will be an empty space. It is also reminiscent of Stewart’s “medley” – a space of mixture and combat, where elements from different domains clash and establish new links, but at the same time are self-referential: “the medley signifies nothing beyond itself.”³³² The space of “Winter: My Secret” is a closed violent space of a medley.

At the same time “Winter: My Secret” shows us an unusual set of agents of violence – neither personified, nor embodied. The draughts will “[c]ome whistling thro’ my hall;/ Come bounding and surrounding me, / Come buffeting, astounding me, / Nipping and clipping thro’ my wraps and all” (14-17). On the one hand, the draughts are reminiscent of the ways of acquiring knowledge through the liminal process. As Turner showed, the communication of sacra is often brought about in a violent way: after all, it is “not a

³²⁹ Chapman, *Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*, opus cit., pp. 6, 9, 15.

³³⁰ Stewart, *Nonsense*, opus cit., p. 65.

³³¹ Amy Christine Billone, *Little Songs: Women, Silence and the Nineteenth-century Sonnet* (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 2007), p. 89.

³³² Stewart, *Nonsense*, opus cit., p. 173.

mere acquisition of knowledge, but a change in being”³³³ that will allow the neophyte re-integration into the society in a new function. Violence is aimed not at intimidating or maiming the neophytes, but rather represents destruction of their previous status and initiation into their new responsibilities. And this might be the reason why these draughts reminds us of Rossetti’s goblins – their actions suggest a violent assault. From the liminal perspectives, both draughts and goblins are Turner’s monstrous communicators of the sacral knowledge, erasing previous meanings and bringing about the change in the liminal persona. Following a similar logic, Billone associates the revelation of the secret with “an unwanted openness to sexual violence” and loss of virginity, and parallels it to the goblins attacking Laura and Lizzie in “Goblin Market.”³³⁴ It seems that Rossetti’s reaction to answering riddles is always tainted with violence. Violent is Spring, trying to bring out the secrets of the underworld, violent are the goblins, both defending and imposing their secret upon Laura and Lizzie. Both the speaker and the reader/ intruder are also violent, the same as the forces surrounding them.

Meanwhile there is a curious dichotomy in the direction of these actions: they either go “thro” (and thus pierce, get in, violate, explore and in the end find out the secret) or go around (and thus, surround and wrap, as if for protection). In the previous rhyming list the secret ‘it’ was presented as a protective cover – “one wants a shawl, / A veil, a cloak, and other wraps.” (11-12). We can suggest that the intruding draughts want to replace the wraps of the speaker with themselves, in a similar way that the reader, by setting on the task to find out a secret, wants to replace the speaker – the current owner of the secret – with himself. Moreover, the ‘secret’ is to be guessed when “golden fruit is ripening to excess” (30) – a line which reminds the reader of the goblin fruit; it might be as well that the “goblin incident” reference is one of the answers to the riddle. Then once again the poem glorifies unfulfillment: “Winter: My Secret” is a list of lost opportunities for the reader to guess the secret, and of the speaker to protect herself by not telling the secret.

³³³ Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p. 239.

³³⁴ Billone, *Little Songs*, opus cit., p. 86.

In a similar way, "Another Spring" (1862) also articulates "a sense of missed chances, of the terrible cost of repressing the self for the sake of an undefined and uncertain future fulfilment."³³⁵ Constance Hassett compares this poem with Tennyson's sensual and almost superfluous descriptions by saying that Rossetti's "most precise details are pressed into the service of evasion, converging around some reticence in the lyric, some mystery not easily comprehended."³³⁶ As with "Winter: My Secret", it leaves a certain void as far as the personality of the speaker is concerned; and in a similar way, it is also constructed upon potentialities rather than established facts as every stanza starts with "if."

At first sight it seems that those potentialities are a logical continuation of accomplishment or acquisition of things and feelings (flowers in the first stanza, sounds in the second) that the speaker deems necessary to a perfect springtime. But a closer look reveals that this acquisition is actually the "negative affirmative," as in Rossetti's own definition I quoted in the previous chapter, or even apophatic. The speaker refuses to plant summer flowers (2) in favour of spring ones, yet, her spring flowers have a distinct reference to death and evanescence - "leafless" mezereons (4) and "chill-veined" snowdrops (5) (not to mention the idea of spring as the time of death-growing-through-life, almost omnipresent in Rossetti). The first of those epithets is immediately neutralized by "leaf-nested" primroses (7). This very expression, though, leads us to the idea of layers. We have already seen how spring for Rossetti is a time of bringing together the dead and the living, and "Another Spring" is not an exclusion, and domains of life and death are overlapped again. This tension of differences is echoed in the second stanza where "leafless" grows into "mateless" (12) and "leaf-nested" is paired with "nests." Their opposition is further played upon: nests are built by daylight birds who "pair" (11), while "mateless" refers to a nightingale and "chill-veined snowdrops" are transferred onto "lambs as white as snow" (14). The reference to blowing is repeated in the closing lines of both stanzas. Blowing as a process is reminiscent of the God's presence (as we have seen in the previous chapters). It is also a reference to violent acquisition of the secret – a repeated pattern in Rossetti's poems. Here, a

³³⁵ Brad Sullivan, "'Grown Sick with Hope Deferred': Christina Rossetti's Darker Musings", *Papers on Language and Literature* 32.3 (1996): 227-243, p.227.

³³⁶ Constance Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style*, opus cit., p.56.

possible discovery of the ‘true’ temporality is strengthened by the speaker’s eager acceptance of “anything/ To blow at once, not late” (7-8) and “music in the hail/ And all the winds that blow” (15-16). Both imply energetic intrusion, to be embraced as much as to be cautious about - a violent action that is echoed in the third stanza with a “sting” in the “stinging comment.” (18)

Another curious feature of the poem’s temporality lies with its evident emphasis on hastiness. The speaker is not prepared to wait for summer flowers, nor even for the night (“nor wait for mateless nightingale” (12)), renouncing any hint of growth, development, maturity. It becomes evident that the importance is not in lengthening one’s life (having another spring as an indication of living longer), but with repeating the same temporal loop in-between youth and death. The frozen temporality of *carpe diem* has a distinct link to unfulfillment as it presents a space that does not follow the usual temporal continuity.

Structurally the third stanza falls into a tercet and a quintain, each starting with the opening “if I might see another spring.” The tercet mocks the past and the whole potential reference of the poem, whilst the quintain glorifies the present by negating potentiality with repeating “to-day.” This “to-day” actually lies in the same potentiality as the past and the future it is opposed to, and has no valid links with the present. There is no today – we are only offered a possibility of “to-day” to be enjoyed in “another spring,” It is unfulfillment and empty dreams that are repeated every time in an almost perfect iambic form, thus rendering repetition void on the level of sense. If something never happened, it cannot be repeated. Rossetti acknowledges this in the third stanza – with a bitter “oh stinging comment on my past/ That all my past results in “if”” (18:19). At the same time, it also poses a curious riddle: what past is the speaker referring to, if the first two stanzas describe a possibility in the future, and the third one closes with a possible today?

The only answer would be that the “stinging” past is the past of lost opportunities – the ones where she never enjoyed spring flowers, nor listened to daylight birds. The past that was left unsaid, the past surrounded by silence, and it is only by unwrapping all the empty, never-to-happen repetitions that we are able to guess what lies behind this reserve. In *The Theory of Absence* (1995), Patrick Fuery suggests that one of the

essential sites of subjectivity is that of “the desiring subject determined by absence” and this “operates as a repository for different types of absences (including desire) as well as the scene of production and consumption of desire as an absence.”³³⁷ It also marks the speaker as a liminal being: according to Turner, “[a] structurally negative characteristic of transitional beings is that they have nothing.”³³⁸ Indeed, the speakers of “Winter: My Secret” and “Another Spring” have nothing to share with the reader – all their layers lead to absence of development, completely shut out from reality and dilution of boundaries of self.

In this way their formal opposite would be “The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children” (1865), a poem about a secret disclosed and knowledge shared. If “Winter: My Secret” or “What” are a game of guessing the absent core, “The Iniquity” is constructed as the disclosure of a secret that is supposed to be buried in silence for social reasons, but is nevertheless laid out bare. At the same time Rossetti resorts to layering again, and layers are devised as conflicting stories, rather than guessing lists or solutions. The poem starts with a poetic metaphor brought to literal and material meaning – “Oh the rose of keenest thorn! / ... / Under the rose I was born,” (1-3) – especially as the original title of the poem “Under the Rose” is a translation from Latin *sub rosa* and implies something done in secret.³³⁹ We are given three roses – the rose of secrecy, the fairy-tale reference to the child’s birth, and the real location of being born, another instance of Rossetti’s layering. Not only is the rose multiplied, but the thorn as well – a thorn for the mother, a thorn for the child. Rossetti plays with the same “wrapping” system as in “Winter: My Secret” and turns it into a palimpsest, as she weaves together multiple narratives, those that were told and that were guessed. As Kathryn Burlinson indicates, Rossetti “is playing with euphemistic linguistic codes that hide the biological origin of birth by simultaneously invoking and refusing such

³³⁷ Patrick Fuery, *The Theory of Absence: Subjectivity, Signification and Desire* (Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1995), p.11.

³³⁸ Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p. 237.

³³⁹ Dolores Rosenblum makes an ironic parallel between rose as the symbol of womanhood and the fall and fate of women. See Dolores Rosenblum, “Christina Rossetti and Poetic Sequence” in David A. Kent (ed.), *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 142.

rhetoric,”³⁴⁰ at the same time, the reference to the “real story” is as ephemeral as that to a fairy-tale, as it is communicated by a person who was left out of the secret.

Moreover, the “hidden summer morn” reminds us of the seeds and roots and shoots “telling of the hidden life” (Spring; 7). From the very first line we are given a hint that the “hidden life” (or truth) is going to break through – yet another reference to the violent initiation into knowing. The triple rhyming [ou] of “throes” (15)-“woes” (16) – “rose” (17) highlights the cruel side of the story, bringing together the softness of the rose and a reference to its thorns. In the liminal space initiants are faced with symbols deconstructed and taken out of their settings, so that they stop taking the surroundings for granted and re-inscribe it with meaning. In a similar way, the speaker in Rossetti’s text has to reconstruct her own identity and reinvent her conditions. Although the speaker, Margaret, is given a name midway through the poem (or rather, addressed by it by her assumed mother, almost as if baptised for the second time), she will renounce it and call herself “nameless” in the end, similar to all actors of the liminal stage who sever their links with the world.

The quickening uneven rhythms stress the entwining multitude of narratives, including those that could not have been known to the speaker (such as the one that happened right after her birth, or the one that is left unsaid by the nurse). Yet she does not question it: “Whether I know or guess,/ I know this not the less.” (26-27) As Burlinson suggests, this acceptance both “indicates an awareness that she has invented the dialogue” and “undermines the distinction between epistemological or empirical certainty and speculation or fantasy. To “guess” in this scenario has the same status as to “know.””³⁴¹ It also confirms Mazel’s reading of Rossetti’s texts as riddles inventing a new type of knowing, as I have previously mentioned. In this context the mocking ending of “Winter: My Secret” acquires more sense, as “I may say” and “you may guess” (WMS, 33-34) – a statement which comes true for most poems written by Rossetti – is taken literally. Yet we are still aware that none of the narratives is

³⁴⁰ Kathryn Burlinson, *Speaking Silences: Indeterminate Identities in the Writings of Christina Rossetti*, (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Birkbeck, 1994), p. 73, full analysis of the poem pp. 72-85.

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 74.

officially confirmed. Although the speaker does not doubt her statement, we have seen that guessing games in Rossetti's texts rarely reveal the truth.

At the same time, those lines act as a premonition of a clash between various narratives within the story. If in "Winter: My Secret" the layeredness comes from the speaker's attempts to cover up and the reader's attempts to get to the core of the story, here the power balance is reversed. It is the guesser who tells the story, not the riddler: "I do not guess his name/ Who wrought my Mother's shame" (4-5). Delivered by an illegitimate child who is deprived of both the father's name and the social and cultural sense of belonging, the whole story is a reconstruction of events (the parents' circumstances), and an invention of a new identity. A proud refusal to guess the father's name (note "I do not guess" instead of "can not guess"), implies a hint that the name can be guessed, but would not be disclosed. The stories of the Lady of the Hall as heard by the villagers, and the troubled relationship of the child with others are also a reconstructed narrative presented as absolute truth, both being consciously re-enacted later on in the poem. Moreover, we soon learn that Margaret spoke a different language when she was young, thus jeopardizing the credibility of the story even further: "Men spoke a foreign tongue/ There where we used to be.../ I don't know where it was,/ But I remember still." (85-93) For once, the girl's understanding is flawed – she is in a foreign setting, and she repeats stories she heard, instead of sharing her immediate recollections. Moreover, we are to discover that she is expected neither to know nor to guess the story:

Nurse never talked to me

.....

... as if she knew

Some secret I might gather

And smart for unawares (114; 120-122)

Again, this lack of previous knowledge and her likely alienation from society stresses her liminal status – she is, using Turner's definition, "at once no longer classified and not yet classified."³⁴² At the same time, despite her solemn promise of "Never to speak, or show/ Bare sign of what I know" (413-414), she is, herself, a "speaking likeness."

³⁴² Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between," opus cit., p. 235.

Her secret is betrayed by her looks even without her saying it. As we have already seen, guessing can equal knowing.

The question of knowledge said versus knowledge guessed becomes even more complicated as the nurse dies “with words she gasped to say which had to stay unsaid” (129-130) and leaves Margaret a ring. For Turner, the symbols that represent liminal personae are “drawn from the biology of death... and other physical processes that have a negative tinge.”³⁴³ Thus Margaret’s initiation is marked by her nurse’s death. The girl’s reaction to it is similar to Laura being poisoned by the goblin juice: she loses all recollection of “[h]ow long I stayed alone/ With the corpse I never knew, / For I fainted dead as stone./ When I came to life once more/ I was down upon the floor.” (144-148). This shock experience literally changes her life when the Lady of the Hall takes an active part in the girl’s fate and moves from the marginal and mostly imaginary position (as in the first part of the poem she was not taking active part in the girl’s life appearing occasionally and disrupting everyday life) to the centre of the story.

There are numerous clues about the true identity of the Lady of the Hall as Margaret’s mother, although it is never stated directly. At first she is depicted almost as an otherworldly creature crossing the thresholds, with Margaret opening the door for her as a child (109-110) or letting her sit at her bed. During their first meeting, she sat with the girl for “more than a mortal hour” (211) without saying a word. There are two things I want to highlight in this part. The “mortal hour” is a hint to a different temporal reality (“mortal” being a reference to both the hour between life and death, and the hour in the human perception of measuring time), and it also corresponds to Turner’s anti-temporal structures in ritual as I have previously discussed them. The inability of both sides to utter a word (lines 203; 206; 215) is also an important marker of the liminal. When the Lady finally speaks, her voice becomes a catalyst and a spell-breaker for the child – what Burlinson reads as the unrepresentable primal memory of the mother without “finding a linguistic anchor” in shared words.³⁴⁴ This passage creates a temporal loop similar to that in “Another Spring,” where past is not past and yet is a fragment of memory, and future is not future yet a moment not to forget:

³⁴³ Ibid, p. 236.

³⁴⁴ Kathryn Burlinson, *Speaking Silences*, opus cit., p. 76.

A something in her voice
Forced my tears to fall at last,
Forced sobs from me thick and fast;
Something not of the past,
Yet stirring memory;
A something new, and yet
Not new, too sweet to last,
Which I never can forget. (220-227)

As it is usual with Christina Rossetti, the most important things are marked by a disturbance of the rhythm, as if she pointedly wants to draw our attention to them. “A something” – the unnameable feeling – reminds us of Rossetti’s other indeterminate objects of desire, and also of the object sent away and brought back in Lacan’s explanation of the ‘fort-da’ game. It marks the moment when the self is split into the object of desire, and the I that is feigning control over it. This “something” is akin to the goblins’ fruit – the sweetness that will not last and that will meddle with temporality and perception of the speaker, simultaneously giving her the voice and depriving her of it. At the same time, this “something” speeds up the transformation of the girl by forcing tears (and here again, the violent acquisition of knowledge that I have noted) and reconstructing her memories. The mother’s role here has also similarities with goblins’ violent behaviour – her cheeks are “hollow-pale” (229), her hair “screened her like a veil” (232), and she looks at the girl with “with a long long look/ Of hunger on her face” (241-242). There is less of a mother than of a vampire in this image. She would come to the girl to bring her “fruit or wine, / Or sometimes hothouse flowers.” (272-273) Those visits are to change the girl’s temporal and spatial perception to the extent that “the day seemed long/ And home seemed scarcely home/ If she did not come” (281-282), as if she is being shut out of the real world into the shared memory that the Lady “half hoped, half feared, to find.” (245)

Margaret’s life with her assumed mother, indeed, is similar to withdrawal from the world. There’s a curious connection between the two gardens: one where the mother and the daughter withdraw to regain their privacy and where the latter tells the story of her ring (321-329) and the other where the girl grows tall and strong (280-290), changing physically in addition to changing mentally and emotionally. This garden

imagery is similar to that of the garden of pleasure and enchantment, as I have explored in previous chapters. The link is strengthened even further when the girl describes how she hides in the garden under the rose: “It’s charming to break bounds,/ Stolen waters are sweet” (356-357) It is here, in this enchanted place and her assumed birthplace, that she brings the fragments of the narrative together to create her own story: “[n]ow I have eyes and ears/ And just some little wit” (361-363). This description matches closely the process that Turner’s liminal personae go through when they go through the liminal passage. It is often linked to birth and death, - and in Rossetti’s text, the rosebush is also linked to both.

Yet another marker of the girl’s liminality is the behaviour of people around her. For Turner, “[s]ince neophytes are not only structurally ‘invisible’ (though physically visible) and ritually polluting, they are very commonly secluded, partially or completely, from the realm of culturally defined and ordered states and statuses.”³⁴⁵ The way Margaret describes how she hates being around other people seems to be a close match. She is either asked to withdraw not to be seen, or she is the centre of attention as being “different” or she is completely ignored as being “different”: people “sit as struck with blindness,/ As if I wasn’t there.” (339-340).³⁴⁶ Her pollution is also a given – “bred in dust/ And brought up in the mud” (386-387); moreover, as a proper initiand, she is contagious and is most likely to mar the Lady’s social standing if the secret is confirmed: “set her in the dust,/ .../ Her glorious hair defiled/ And ashes on her cheek” (401-404).

The reunion of the mother (acting as the messenger of the liminal sacra) and the daughter is ruinous for both. If Margaret can pollute the Lady’s world, then the Lady, instead of securing the girl’s sense of belonging, splits her personality even further, thereby creating a reality of multiple identities.³⁴⁷ After all, Rossetti is a master of fragmentation. Further to that, the mother seems also to be a mirror image of the girl

³⁴⁵ Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p.236.

³⁴⁶ It also reminds us of Rossetti’s play with seeing/ looking taboos as we have seen in the first two chapters.

³⁴⁷ On the relationship between mother and daughter, see Kathryn Burlinson, *Speaking Silences*, opus cit., pp. 77-78.

(the imagery here is a textual equivalent of Lady Hawarden's photographs we have seen in chapter two) as she says, referring to the deceased nurse, "She might have told me much/ Which now I shall never know,/ Never never shall know." (256-258). The knowledge is accepted neither by the mother nor by the daughter, so their narratives are fragmented and uncertain. They both mirror each other's secret – and yet both refuse to disclose it to the other. The secret itself is polluted (Rossetti states it directly: "Let the blot pass unseen;/ Yea, let her never guess/ I hold the tangled clue/ She huddles out of view." (415-418)) – moreover, it is the secret that is known to everyone ("All know and sting me wild;/ Till I am almost ready/ To wish that I were dead" (491-493). This passage through the ritual death is the only option to break the enchantment, be it the mother's social death (disclosure of the secret that will set the daughter free) or the daughter's physical death (burial of the secret that will lift the burden from the mother). Yet no steps are taken.

Rossetti shows us characters trapped within the liminal space with neither will nor power to quit it; they are lost in the process of reconstructing their identity, naming it, pinning it down, - but they fail in their quest and find no words to describe it. There is a significant number of poems in Rossetti's corpus of texts that seem to be delivered on the border of silence – expressing the inexpressible through layering unrelated details. The quest is never fulfilled, - and the unsaid self is either absent or alienated through objectification. Layers of narratives become the wall that shuts the speaker out. One of her later poems, "The Thread of Life" (before 1882), can serve as a good example of this technique. The poem is written as three interconnected sonnets, a formally Trinitarian argument – the first sonnet poses the questions, and the second and the third start with an answer, thus providing certain parallels with Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" (1867). The similarity can be found in both arrangement and imagery.³⁴⁸ Arnold's poem uses a similar technique of different lengths of iambic line; and the triple opposition of nature-human being-faith intensifies the feelings of loneliness and patient acceptance. The sea of faith has a human limit – the sands of Dover Beach, and at the same time, as John Schad notes, it is a sea of "strangely negative faith – negative

³⁴⁸ It is not for the first time that similarities between Rossetti's texts and Arnold's texts seem evident.

For example, John Schad in *Queer Fish: Christian Unreason from Darwin to Derrida* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004) parallels imagery of "Dover Beach" and Rossetti's *Time Flies*.

to the point of enacting a kind of revenge on humanity itself”³⁴⁹ – and the battle in the end of the poem is the battle of confusion, as we can neither avoid it, nor find the side we belong to. Rossetti keeps the uncertainty, the clash and the negation - meanwhile if there’s an addressee in Arnold’s poem, Rossetti disguises her speaker in layers of possibilities.

Previous critics have noted that Rossetti “extracted the sonnet from its incessant coupling, and found loneliness and the hauntings of selfhood and the ultimate tautology of self-expression.”³⁵⁰ Ludlow also makes it a point how the poet moved away “from the lamenting speakers of her early poetry … towards the joyful and patient believers.”³⁵¹ Yet I do not find that Rossetti’s speaker is filled with joy and patience; rather she realizes the limits of her own prison yet, similar to other Rossettian speakers, sees no use in breaking its barriers, drifting instead in internal interrogation.

The first part of the poem starts with a “speaking silence”, or, rather, an anaphoric description of silence and sound through the images of natural forces – land and sea. Both are indifferent and reminiscent of the barren, bleak and featureless landscape of “Cobwebs.” Repeated twice, “irresponsive” (1, 2) impedes the possibility of a dialogue, and the message is perceived as fragmented and possibly a palimpsest, rather than directly addressed to the speaker. The opening rueful message echoes the moan of all Rossetti’s liminal characters, from the heroine of “Autumn” to the speaker of “From A Bird’s View”:

Aloof, aloof, we stand aloof; so stand
Thou too aloof bound with the flawless band
Of inner solitude (I, 4-6)

³⁴⁹ John Schad, *Victorians in Theory. From Derrida to Browning* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 44.

³⁵⁰ *The Cambridge Companion to the Sonnet*, ed. A. D. Cousins and Peter Howarth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 220; full analysis of the poem, pp. 220-221.

³⁵¹ Elizabeth Ludlow, ‘We Can but Spell A Surface History’ : The Biblical Typology of Christina Rossetti, (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2008), p. 53. Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

Amy Billone offers a curious reading of this poem as a double opposition, one between the nature and humanity. The first part can be read as if it were spoken by land and sea lamenting their solitude: they refer to themselves as “we” and to the human speaker as “thou.” On the other hand, it also could be the speaker pronouncing the words, and Billone suggests that in this case “we” would refer to humanity, and “thou” – to a higher power, perhaps, even Christ.³⁵² To those two variants of the speaker, I can add a third layer. The speech could be pronounced by the split self of Rossetti’s speaker: on one hand, a blind and nameless liminal persona shut out in the liminal passage (and hence the enigmatic “we”, as in the liminal all are equal in the fraternity of initiation), and the alienated pre-liminal Self. In this reading there is a connection to Rossetti’s idea of being shut out by one’s own wilful decision, as we have previously explored. The forces that surround the speaker are neither bound, nor binding. This “self-chain” (7) of the speaker is described as “the flawless band of inner solitude” (5). With the triple reference to “aloof,” it shows us both inner and outer alienation. It also reminds us of the secret of Margaret in the “Iniquity”: being silenced by her own pride and out of love for her mother, she still asks for a chance to get out of her self-imposed prison (“Give me a longer tether, / Or I may break from it” (360-361)) or the speaker of “Shut Out.” No matter how thick the wall is, Rossetti’s speakers still probe its boundaries. That is why in response to the questioning forces of nature, Rossetti switches to her pre-bound ‘I’ and gets lost in reminiscences about old days when “fellowship seemed not so far to seek/ .../ And hope felt strong and life itself not weak” (11; 14).³⁵³

By rhyming “me,” “thee,” and “see,” Rossetti creates a connection between the speaker, the auditor and the sound. As Billone suggests, “The speaker [...] not only blends with (or even appropriates) the auditor’s personality, but the two figures become paradoxically associated with both freedom and constraint, both sound and silence.”³⁵⁴ In this sense, their symbiosis is similar to that between the secret, the riddler and the

³⁵² Billone, *Little Songs*, opus cit, p. 90.

³⁵³ Billone observes how this last sextet is constructed upon “me” in “so-me-ti-me-s proud and so-me-ti-me-s me-ek, / and so-me-ti-me-s I re-me-m-ber days of old”: “The lines are set to resemble each other... as the first begins with a word that rhymes with the final word in the second [of the poem overall]. In this way, “speak” also simulates “me” – the same word that appears in “message” and as the ending of the line.”

³⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 90.

intruder in “Winter: My Secret” – the same dialogic fluidity and temporal and emotional layeredness, only here there’s no direct indication as to the secret shared. If in the previous poems I highlighted the absence of the core of the riddle, here a similar relationship between the speaker and its intended reader seems to be embodied in the mysterious “I” of the poem – “I” or rather its multiple “I’s.”

If the first sonnet is structured around “me,” in the second part the main stress falls on the rhymes with “I”. The contrast between freedom and constraint in one figure is further developed in the second sonnet, as it starts with a strikingly bitter statement: “Thus am I mine own prison.” (II, 1) and ends with a familiar negative affirmative: “I am not what I have nor what I do;/ But what I was I am, I am even I.” (II, 13-14) The middle part of the poem is filled with idyllic landscapes, hauntingly reminiscent of Rossetti’s seasonal poems and hence irrevocably sinister. We know that Rossetti’s idylls never end with a declaration of life, but, at best, with death resurging through life. The closing lines could have been a definition of a liminal persona. There is a denial of action (both ‘have’ and ‘do’ are in the negative) in favour of the state of being. This last line at once declares unequivocally the presence of self and its permanent qualities, although the “I am even I” prompts different and often contradictory readings. Thus Joseph Phelan suggests that the repetitious use of ‘I’s in the last two lines is a means to objectify the self “so that it seems no longer a mere cipher for the self but a mould into which the self must fit;”³⁵⁵ while Billone hastens to suggest that this proliferation of “I” is the ultimate proof of the speaker’s inner freedom. I believe that those lines stand neither for freedom nor for prison, but for the indescribable void which is the centre of Rossetti’s poetics of secrecy. It is the I that is not yet determined by its possessions or its doings, but which is stripped of everything and faced with rediscovery of self. Hence the necessity of “wrapping” layers of meaning around it – they act both as “covers” and as raw material for “rediscovery.” As much as rites of passage always imply a transformation, a transition, a process, they also refer to entrapment, stagnation, isolation. As Turner suggests, an appropriate analogy would be water in the process of being heated or a pupa transforming into a butterfly.³⁵⁶ Rossetti is focused on the

³⁵⁵ Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth Century Sonnet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 97.

³⁵⁶ Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p. 234.

perception of the shut-out space and the process of reconstruction of the self. And as the I of the past is equal to the I of the present, the transformation might have failed.

Hence the contradictions that arise from Rossetti's descriptions of the landscape of former selfhood, where "sounds are music; and where silences/ Are music of an unlike fashioning" (II, 7-8). It is vaguely reminiscent of the garden left behind in "Shut Out," albeit the balance of power is reversed. If in the former the speaker is the object of action (the spirit constructing the wall around him), in "The Thread of Life" the speaker is simultaneously the agent, the object and the prison itself. Elizabeth Ludlow reads the poem in parallel to St Augustine and suggests that "Rossetti's delineation of the individual... - which articulates the battle between the 'I' which is imprisoned by the fleshly bounds and the 'I' which is individual's sole possession"³⁵⁷ is the ultimate movement of liberation from the earthly bound self towards the eternal self, accepted by God. True as it may be, I believe that instead of acceptance, the speaker faces unfulfillment and inability to reconstruct the self because it is only a utopian possibility.

In the third sonnet of the poem, the empty "it" of the self is reinforced once again: "Therefore myself is that one only thing/ I hold to use or waste, to keep or give." (III, 1-2) It can be argued that the "I-thing" in "The Thread of Life" is a key to the passage of liminality. After all, the reason of entering the liminal space is to first renounce all definitions and be shaped by something that one is not, in order to acquire a new personality and be reintegrated into the world again as a new self. As long as the speaker is clinging to the shell of her empty past self, her transformation is impossible.

Although Rossetti's speaker claims that she gives her eternal self to Christ, the repetitious description she employs makes us doubt her ability to do it. The possessive "mine" and its derivatives are repeated in every line, as if taken from "Winter: My Secret." Curiously enough, the seasonal setting is the opposite of the latter. If in the earlier poem the speaker battles snow and cold, here all descriptions refer to plenitude, pleasantness and changes for the better: the time is "winnowing" (III, 4) and moons and seasons lead from crudeness to "ripeness mellow and sanative" (III,6). The culmination

³⁵⁷ Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 48.

of this transformation is the act of giving oneself to Christ - yet we see that this exchange is most likely never carried out, as the speaker is still alive and clinging to her self. The questions posed in the very end of the poem – “O death, where is thy sting?” (III, 13) and “O grave, where is thy victory” (III, 14) – have two scenarios and two layers of understanding. On one hand, we can suppose that the speaker has reunited with Christ and thus overcome death. On the other, that she is not yet dead, and thus in her temporal reality those questions are yet unanswerable and void. By structuring the stanzas as echoing each other, Rossetti encourages the reader to read it a mirrored pattern. It brings us back to the beginning of the first poem, where the land and the sea are both irresponsible. It is not only their inability to transgress themselves that Rossetti hints at. The speaker is similarly aloof and irresponsible. Thus my reading is parallel both to Mary Arseneau’s suggestion that the third sonnet anticipates “a new song beyond earthly mutability” in such a way that “the eternal self is offered to Christ in reciprocal sacrifice,”³⁵⁸ and to Billone who argues that this sacrifice is never fulfilled. The poem ends with a request to recover from silence and sing, but ending the jubilant song with a question, Rossetti prompts us to question its reality. The speaker has not passed the threshold of the liminal space. The awakening from the dream is as bitter as ever.

One of the most tense moments in this poem, however, lies not with the actual fulfilment or unfulfillment of the unity with Christ, but the gradual alienation of Self, culminating with the opening of the third part – “Therefore myself is that one only thing/ I hold to use or waste.” (1-2). The self is not absent as, for example, in “Winter: My Secret” or “Another Spring”, where the boundaries of the speaker are diluted to the extent that we cannot distinguish between the speaker and the intruder, or the speaker and the seasonal setting, where the speaker is so marginal that their actions are left out of our focus. In “The Thread of Life,” the speaker is an active agent, but a part of her is fragmented and objectified, and this leads to her failure at fulfilment and unity with God. The reference to the “thing” becomes a foundation upon which Rossetti builds her displaced liminal persona. As Elizabeth Ludlow notes, there is a certain positive movement when she consciously confines herself to inner solitude (which reminds us of

³⁵⁸ Mary Arseneau, *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); p. 184.

the choices of entrapment discussed in the previous chapters), overcomes her individuality and becomes “able to reach a realization of herself as an indestructible part of God’s kingdom that supersedes the onslaught of ‘Time’s winnowing’ (III, 4)” and “join in the ‘sweet new song of His redeemed set free’ (III, 11-12).”³⁵⁹ Yet there is a certain part of her, objectified and alienated, that seems to be resisting complete dissolution. And what Ludlow believes to be Rossetti’s “increasing interest to map the parameters of selfhood onto a Trinitarian model” is also marked by a certain hesitation. Her use of “we” is not only a reflection on a communal identity, or “a being-in-communion,”³⁶⁰ but a fragmentation of self before possible realization of this union.

As this chapter has indicated, Rossetti’s technique of layering can disguise either an absence or a surplus of self. In the next chapter, I trace this fragmentation further in order to understand how it corresponds to the communication of the sacra and how this mirroring and duplication of self-images breeds monsters. Rossetti’s texts are filled with stretched or split temporal identities that present conflicting identities. Revising ideas of Turner’s *communitas* and building upon Ludlow’s analysis of the fellowship of the saints, and bringing in the analysis of the function of the monstrous in the liminal, I focus on the ways in which Rossetti re-defines the limits of self through the encounter with the liminal Other, be it in the form of goblins, revenants or saints. I will come back to her use of narratorial plural that I have previously noted and discuss in more detail her ideas of unity with God and the saints, and tackle the question of memory as one of the ways to regulate the relationship with the Other.

³⁵⁹ Elizabeth Ludlow, ‘We Can but Spell A Surface History’: *The Biblical Typology of Christina Rossetti*, opus cit., p. 62.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 55.

Chapter 6: Sacred Monsters and Liminal Masks

My small heroines perpetually encounter “speaking
(literally *speaking*) likenesses” or embodiments or
caricatures of themselves or their faults...

Christina Rossetti, letter to Macmillan, 1874

On 4 March, Christina Rossetti writes the following entry in *Time Flies*:

My first vivid experience of death (if so I may term it) occurred in early childhood in the grounds of a cottage.

This little cottage was my familiar haunt: its grounds were my inexhaustible delight. They then seemed to me spacious, though now I know them to have been narrow and commonplace.

So in this grounds, perhaps, in the orchard, I lighted upon a dead mouse. The dead mouse moved my sympathy: I took him up, buried him comfortably in a mossy bed, and bore the spot in mind.

It may have been a day or two afterwards that I returned, removed the moss coverlet, and looked... A black insect emerged. I fled in horror, and for long years ensuing I never mentioned this ghastly adventure to anyone.³⁶¹

In a way, this passage could serve an illustration of Rossetti's own initiation into the liminal – the changing spatial and temporal setting (spacious grounds turning out to be narrow, and Rossetti refers to it as haunting and delightful at the same time); the orchard (one of those enclosed spaces that are so close to liminality); the encounter with the dead and the burial; and finally, the ultimate and unnerving transformation from death to life. And even the movement of first shutting the dead body out in the grave and then uncovering it to discover a black monster emerging from it reads like another variant of Rossetti's spring, albeit this time with animate and embodied forces. It also emphasizes the traumatic shock and ensuing loss of speech (she never related this experience to anyone), and the inevitable change it brought about within her (by the end of the entry she confirms that with years she changed her attitude towards death, from

³⁶¹ Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies* (London: Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, 1897), p. 45.

physical disgust to relief). All those key moments in their various aspects I have explored in the previous chapters, and in this last chapter, I would like to develop in more detail the moment of the encounter with the supernatural elements and explore its transformative effect on Rossetti's characters. I argue that transformation in Rossetti's characters comes about in two ways, objectification of the self and likening it to the void and the unfulfillment, and projection of the self onto the monstrous figure, producing a split that is never to be healed. Any encounters in the liminal space are usually linked to transformation of the neophyte through understanding (or at least, questioning) new knowledge about the world. As Victor Turner puts it, “[t]his arcane knowledge...obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him [sic], as a seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state.”³⁶² Thus, as we have seen with Rossetti's speakers, they are changed by the experiences they retell. Though Turner distinguishes between three ways of communicating this new knowledge - notably, exhibitions (what is shown), actions (what is done) and instructions (what is said) - in relation to Rossetti's poetry I set out two different patterns of communication: direct interaction with “the heart of the liminal matter” (objectification) and the encounter with the communicator of liminal knowledge.

The texts describing this transformative liminal experience from the first person singular always have an inherent split of identity within them, be it linked to the speaker's sleeping/ dying/ dead state, crossing the threshold or being shut out of the world. The moment they are poised between life and death, silence and sound, or even sleep and awakening, is also a moment of their encounter with the mirrored image of discarded self, the one given up when a choice is made between the two options. As I have observed in the second chapter, at the moment of awakening there is a certain split in the sleeping person, allowing it to be both an active observer of the world and a passive body stripped of all connection with reality. This dichotomy of absence/ presence of consciousness and will, self and self, observing each other, appears in a number of Rossetti's texts. It appeals to split and rivalry of identities within one body,

³⁶² Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage,” in William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt (eds), *Reader in Comparative Religion* (New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1979), p. 239.

and yet also repeats the imagery of sacred and homoerotic doubling, that is referred to in Turner's twinship rites as we have seen in chapter two. In the same way as the thresholds and mirrors in Lady Hawarden's photographs, this doubling acts as a point of invitation and departure. Yet for Rossetti it has always the hesitation, the longing, the momentary unity before the separation that attracts her attention. From the liminal point of view, she re-enacts in her speakers the inherent duality of a liminal persona: "[t]he essential feature of these symbolizations is that the neophytes are neither living nor dead from one aspect, and both living and dead from another. Their condition is one of ambiguity and paradox". Yet this duality is also ideal for resurgence of all possible configurations. As the "threshold people" are at the same time pre-structured and de-structured, they represent nothing but a random combination of fragments. At various instances in Rossetti's work, we have a feeling that her overlapping narratives are almost random, but nevertheless, combined into a structurally coherent development throughout the whole span of her writing, as they re-enact the choices of the liminal stage shutting the protagonists out of the "real" world.

The other major point of this chapter that is also related to overlapping identities deals with the monstrous. Before proceeding further with tracing the monstrous in Christina Rossetti's writings, I need to determine my idea of the monstrous here, because, if anything, Rossetti definitely was not engaged in defining the nineteenth-century gothic monster, racial or scientific, that was important for many of her contemporaries. The monstrous was, indeed, a major preoccupation in the nineteenth century which, according to Miranda Gill, initiated "a cultural re-evaluation of monstrosity in all its forms."³⁶³ The monster was becoming "invisible and potentially ubiquitous"³⁶⁴ and its guises increasingly protean as monstrous features were discovered in ordinary and respectable people. The monster is *per se* a liminal creature, since it not only inhabits the margins of the accepted world presenting an impediment to national, social, political, and scientific progress, but is often structurally undefined, being cast as a new,

³⁶³ Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 211.

³⁶⁴ Abigail Lee Six and Hannah Thompson, "From Hideous to Hedonist: The Changing Face of the Nineteenth-century Monster" in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham: Ashgate 2012), 237-257, p. 238.

unknown re-combination of familiar elements. The idea of monstrosity in the nineteenth century is centred on the dichotomy of the visible (physical) and the invisible (moral, genetic), which brings us back to the ideas expressed in the first chapter. As Kearney puts it, monsters are in the end “tokens of fracture within the human psyche. They speak to us of how we are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other.”³⁶⁵ The deeper the split in our inner self, produced by the changing environment, the more it tells about our fears and convictions.

On the other hand, the monster being the embodiment of culturally specific fears, desires, anxieties and fantasies,³⁶⁶ it is an inductor of culture-specific knowledge in the way that Turner defines its function in a rite of passage. And although one can find in Rossetti’s texts visible monsters, such as apocalyptic beasts or the goblins, I am mostly interested in the invisible monsters, those who hide behind the familiar masks and settings. Appealing to Kearney again, monsters operate “as a limit-experience for humans trying to identify themselves over and against others” and signal “borderline experience of uncontrollable excess, reminding the ego that is never wholly sovereign.”³⁶⁷ The more grotesque the monster, the more it reflects ourselves.

I concluded the previous chapter with the analysis of “The Thread of Life,” noting the inexplicable and haunting crystallisation of a part of the individual self which becomes the objectified abject. In this chapter I focus on the final stage of the liminal passage, the encounter with the mirrored image of the self which will bring about the ultimate transformation, and the distortion it produces. I have noted that mirrors in Victorian texts are rarely true to the original; instead, they “communicate” the world to the one who looks into them, and as such, they introduce the performative aspect of every transformation. In this way, they become projections of the interior self. On the contrary, the moments when the speaker is facing a monster or visited by a spirit, are cases of exterior projection of the self, the bifurcation into the ‘I’ and the Other, where the

³⁶⁵ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 4.

³⁶⁶ See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 4.

³⁶⁷ Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, opus cit., p. 3.

monster is both “a multivocal [symbol], a semantic molecule with many components” (implying its ragged and unwholesome nature) and “an object of reflection.”³⁶⁸ Contrary to the expected, monsters are neither intrinsically threatening, nor unyielding in their difference from us, but instead represent a constructed entity with a transformative power, that helps the speaker to transgress herself.

“A Pause of Thought” (1848, two other parts of the triptych 1849, 1854) and “Memory” (1857, 1865) explore interior “left-overs” – the objectified essence of selfhood as opposed to Rossetti’s emerging communal sense. Be it vestiges of pre-liminal memories or suppressed emotions, Rossetti solidifies them into material form to dwell in and control the speaker so that those memories become the mirror against which the speaker measures up the world and herself. The Self can also be alienated through being projected into a figure of a monster or a saint, and Rossetti rarely differentiates between the two. In my reading of her poetry, both stand as the opposite of human and thus simultaneously a threat and a tool of education.

To illustrate this point, I analyse “So I Grew Half-Delirious and Quite Sick” (1849) and “Who Shall Deliver Me” (1864) in order to show Rossetti’s speakers approaching and self-projecting onto the monsters. Space does not permit including a close reading of her short stories for children in this thesis, yet I would like to confirm that her grotesque transformations, when she allows their existence, follow the same rules in her prose – trying to fit angles into circles, and circles into squares, as she once explained. At the same time, stepping aside from the gothicized writing, she makes her monsters wear a more acceptable mask, turning them into sleepers, saints or people on the verge of death, that is, categories of marginalized existence which incorporate a not-exactly-human perspective at the same time as they conforms with the human form. In this function they are both the threshold dwellers and the supernatural forces brought to deliver a message to the speaker and the reader. Yet even whilst being ‘humanized,’ her liminal monsters keep their functions of warning and awakening the speaker’s true selves from the unspiritual routine of everyday life.

³⁶⁸ Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p. 239.

In the previous chapter, using the example of the “fort-da” game, I showed how the object of desire can initiate a split and objectification of self, while the constant movement back and forth between sending it away and bringing it back produces a liminal experience that is hard to overcome. “A Pause of Thought” (1848) embodies this experience almost literally as verbs of non-fulfilment in the poem - “I looked for that which is not, nor can be” - draw our attention to otherworldly liminal experiences of the speaker. The poem was initially entitled “Lines” – “In memory of Schiller’s ‘Der Pilgrim’” and published in *The Germ* No 2 (February 1850) under the title “A Pause of Thought.” However, in my analysis I will use it as a part of the triptych “Three Stages,” as published in William Michael’s posthumous collection of his sister’s work.

The Schiller original, written in 1803, is literally about the failure of a quest. The “higher things” that the pilgrim wants to reach remain unattainable for him, and thus fit Turner’s definition of pilgrimage and ensuing liminality. But where Schiller concentrates on the figure of the pilgrim and his quest, Rossetti seems to focus on the nature of the thing her speaker strives to attain. Kathryn Burlinson suggests “that the object is not human, but related to Schiller’s spiritual or metaphysical ‘higher things’”; I would go further and suggest that Rossetti evokes neither a human nor a being of a higher order, but describes a liminal non-thing, similar to the void centres and empty spaces I have analysed in the previous chapters. As I have argued in chapters four and five, the non-space of the liminal denies all previous identifications and cancels out all attempts to re-establish one’s identity. Burlington links Rossetti’s passive watching and waiting to the gender reworking; following Rosenblum, she believes that the “tenacious and obsessed watcher” is Rossetti’s idea of women’s ability to fight back. I see no direct reference to the gender of the speaker in “A Pause of Thought.” What I suggest instead is that writing a poem “in memory” of another poem exemplifies the recovery of language which I referred to in my previous chapter. The speaker is not only passive and watching, but also deprived of language. It is the existence of this unattainable non-thing that empowers her to speak, and hence the whole poem is not about the quest to attain, but the quest to define.

“A Pause of Thought” starts with a startling description which defies both physical perception and sense of reality - “I looked for that which is not, nor can be,/ And hope deferred made my heart sick in truth” (1-2) – and moves on to state the futility of hope.

The liminal lagging of hope is expressed through the juxtaposition of “hope deferred” and years “passed” (3). On one hand, we have this tenacious will to hope; on the other, hope is equalled to sickness of the heart. There are two main points that interest me here from the point of view of liminality – the process of waiting and the object of desire. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that the poem is scarce in verbs, but most of them are not verbs of action. Together with the speaker, we are locked from the contact with the outer world, being too engrossed in the object of desire. Hence little changes around us (or little do we notice). There is no hint as to whether the speaker is actively trying to get the mysterious thing. Rossetti refers to the speaker as “watching and waiting,” the only active verb of movement – “flee” – refers to the object.

There co-exist various frames in the poem. On one hand, the object is framed in the gaze of the speaker – we are tempted to think that there is no escape from this gaze; no matter how far the object flees, the speaker is still fixated on it and thus fixes it in space. On the other, the speaker’s existence is framed by the object – whatever is done, is done with the object in mind. This feeling of entrapment is emphasized through the organization of the poem by various levels of repetition. In stanza two, we have epanaleptical “I watched and waited,” repeated in the first and in the last lines. Stanzas three and four start with anaphoric “sometimes I said” and end with a haunting repetition of “give” in opposite meanings: “never gave it over” (12) and “gave it all the same” (16). This all intensifies the limits and futility of this suspense – and, as is usual with Rossetti’s poetics of layering, gives us no clue as to the nature of “it.”

The poem rightfully belongs to the network of Rossetti’s other non-scapes and unfulfillments. The reference to the passage of years reminds us of “May” – “as it is it came to pass.” In a similar way as in “Cobwebs,” Rossetti starts piling up negative characteristics of the inconceivable object: “This thing shall be no more” (9), “It is an empty name” (13). Burlinson stresses Rossetti’s use of “object” and “thing” in stanzas three and four: “although ‘thing’ could not be read as the object of desire, since it is already possessed (‘shall be no more’),” the boundaries between the desiring subject and the desired objects are blurred all the same.³⁶⁹ With this in mind, I still suggest that

³⁶⁹ Kathryn Burlinson, ‘Speaking Silences: Indeterminate Identities in the Writings of Christina Rossetti,’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Birbeck University, 1994), pp. 58-59.

the act of possession is questionable and most likely fleeting and unfulfilled – in a similar manner to the goblins’ possession of Laura or the Princess’ framing of the Prince which I have discussed previously. The threshold between possessing and being possessed is no longer respected. True, the speaker seems to have known “the thing,” but this knowledge does not give her power over it. From here we get the impossibility to cease, to resign; actually to stop desiring it would mean dying in the same way as Laura was dying when deprived of the goblin fruit. The unnameability of “the thing” also stresses the speaker’s liminality, as transitional beings have nothing, possess nothing and are defined by no structural relationships of the everyday world.

In the fourth stanza the physical “thing” is taken out and we are left with “an empty name” (13). Once again, similar to Margaret’s situation in “The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children,” the empty name seems to acquire vampiric characteristics as it sucks “the peace of all the days I have to live” (15), and yet stays void, lifeless and incomplete. It is, by definition, a non-thing, as all its characteristics are based on negation. Jamison reads it as “a specific bounded impossibility,” its main function being “to extend desire over time”; if the speaker gave up on the “thing”, it would have ended the state of indeterminacy (and the poem).³⁷⁰ Yet for the speaker her life is in this indeterminacy of both absence and presence of the object; similar to the “fort-da” game I have previously discussed, she feigns control over the object of her desire. No matter how much she longs to give it up, she never resigns – “Though knowest the chase useless, and again/ Turnest to follow it” (19-20) – which allows Rosenblum to call this poem “the anatomy of pure desire without object or end” and the speaker “a parody of heroic quester.”³⁷¹

The poem ends with an address to an undefined ‘thou’ (self? God? the inconceivable thing?) and acceptance of the chase that is never to be fulfilled. This “chase” seems strangely out of place here, as in the second stanza the speaker “watched and waited”: repeated twice, as the first and the last line of the stanza, the confirmation of passive observation stresses the resolution of the speaker to wait in ambush rather than pursue a

³⁷⁰ Anne Jamison, *Poetics En Passant* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 198-199.

³⁷¹ Dolores Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), p. 186

fleeing thing. Still, once again we are not given the start of the chase – the speaker is only (re)turning back to the thing that she was desperate to leave.

In this sense, the third part of the triptych, written several years later, reads more as a direct continuation of the story than the second part. It employs similar parallel constructions (“I thought” – “I said”), and documents almost impassively the return to the land of the living and suffering from the land of dream or (social?) death. The speaker states their former will to sever all links with the world:

I thought to deal the death-stroke at a blow:
To give all, once for all, but never more: -
Then sit to hear the low waves fret the shore,
Or watch the silent snow. (1-4)

In a way, this reads like a reversed dialogue with the first part. While in the latter the speaker “watched and waited with a steadfast will,” (5) in the third part she only wants to “watch the silent snow” (after everything else ends). If in the third part she speaks about her desire “to give all, once for all, but never more,” the first part mocks this desire by acknowledging that she “never gave it o'er.” (12) The years that “must pass before a hope of youth/ Is resigned utterly” in “A Pause of Thought” correspond to “much there is to suffer, much to do,/ Before the time be past” (11-12). In a similar way, the line “alike unfit for healthy joy and salutary pain” in the earlier poem is parallel to the “gone dead alike to pulses of quick pain/ And pleasure's counterpoise” (15-16) in the later one. But what made Rossetti come back to the same idea after so many years? Could it be that something has changed in her perception of the experience? To my mind, if in the earlier poem Rossetti explores the futility of not giving up, the later variant is about the futility of withdrawing.

The first five stanzas are all about the decision to shut oneself out from the world. The constructed space of alienation is strangely reminiscent of a grave (“in silence and the dark:/ Oh rest, if nothing else, from head to feet” (5-6)): as I have explored earlier, death for Rossetti does not imply a ceasing of physical perception (see, for example, “Life and Death”), so hearing and watching in the first stanza do not seem too out of place. Moreover, both ways of perception are partial and symbolic – waves and snow,

despite their transient nature, are perceived as things unchangeable/unchanged, while “poppied wheat” or “a sunny soaring lark” (7, 8) – changeable and making part of the world of the living – are not to be seen. The chimes that “are slow, but surely strike at last” are the chimes of life,³⁷² thus we can reconstruct the picture of a person waiting for imminent death in a limbo. The “slowness” repeated twice prompts a parallel with futile waiting in “A Pause of Thought.” The resolute desperation is projected into the sound patterns with the emphasis on hissing low [s] and [th] in “silent snow” (4), “rest if nothing else” (6), “slow but surely strike at last” (9), strengthening the feeling of passivity and resignation. The speaker himself believes to have given up hope in order “to shut myself and dwell alone/ Unseeking and unsought” (19-20) – a typical Rossettian liminal dreamer, like the speakers of “Autumn” or “From a Bird’s View.” Indeed, Rossetti even uses the same phrase to describe their lives.

Starting from the sixth stanza the story is reversed. Rossetti explores the possibility of breaking out of this liminal dream – as she goes on with a resurgence of desire with a number of spring-inspired images. Still, from the first word we feel that this awakening will be as futile as the chase in “A Pause of Thought.” The description seems to reverse that in “May”: where in the latter, poppies are left unborn and birds have not found their mates, in the former “All birds awoke” (25) and “all buds awoke” (26). Even the heart of the speaker “woke unawares, intent / On fruitful harvest-sheaves” (27-28) to the “full pulse of life” (29) and “full throb of youth”(30). Still, there is no happy resolution to this awakening – the last two stanzas of the poem list the things that are not going to happen. Rossetti concludes on a similar note with the first part of the triptych:

I may pursue, and yet may not attain
Athirst and panting all the days I live:
Or seem to hold, yet nerve myself to give
What once I gave, again. (37-40)

The ‘thing’ here recalls the other ‘unnamed things’ – the one that rises up after Margaret hears her mother’s voice, the one that comes out of nowhere in “From House

³⁷² About the imagery of the chimes, see Elizabeth Ludlow, “‘We Can But Spell a Surface History’: The Biblical Typology of Christina Rossetti,’ (unpublished PhD, University of Warwick: 2008).

to Home” (“But,’ says my friend, ‘what was this thing and where?’” (5)) and the mysterious ‘it’ in “Memory” (“I nursed it in my bosom while it lived / I hid it in my heart when it was dead” (1-2)). Those mysterious entities that are held so dear by the speaker, chased or possessed, have neither name nor definition, – with critics linking them to fame or social standing, gender or sexuality. Still I suggest that the real object of desire is empty. Jamison writes, “the absolute abstraction of the poem, together with its position in the cluster of poems that compress prominence into grammatical particles rather than ‘names’ or nouns, suggests the desire for pure language devoid of content – a name unfettered, without meaning – pure sign without fixed signification.”³⁷³ At the same time, I would add that it is not just a “name without meaning”, but an abstraction that *per se* has a negative connotation, as it belongs to the liminal sphere, what Turner calls “emptiness at the centre.”³⁷⁴

In a similar way, in both parts of “Memory” Rossetti meticulously describes her almost ritualistic love-hate relationship with a dead undefined ‘it’ inside her. Trowbridge notes that the poem prompts either biographical reading with its emphasis on lovers parting, or a theological reading which focuses on the possible reunion after death.³⁷⁵ Dolores Rosenblum reads this poem as the epitome of “the monotone of suffering” and equals the mysterious “it” to “the inert entity in relation to which the speaker makes a series of ritual gestures.”³⁷⁶ I avoid the biographical references of “it” in favour of a more symbolic and layered interpretation. The first poem of the diptych is constructed as a series of images forming different patterns and locking upon each other. Each stanza is constructed as an inverted loop of events, as pairs of notions from different fields echo each other. The first stanza starts with an idea of childhood (“I nursed it”) to end with death; this movement from birth to grave coincides with emotional loop from joy to grief. This continuity is made of contrasted movements up (“nursed in my bosom” (1) which implies bringing up) and down/ inside (“hid it in my heart” (2)), which Rosenblum refers to as “a strange reverse gestation...which sounds strangely like a miscarriage or an abortion.” Meanwhile both imply passivity on behalf of the “thing”

³⁷³ Jamison, *Poetics en Passant*, opus cit., p. 200.

³⁷⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 127.

³⁷⁵ Serena Trowbridge, *Christina Rossetti’s Gothic* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 66.

³⁷⁶ Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance*), opus cit., p. 196.

(being nursed, being hid), and action on behalf of the speaker. Besides, it is not counted as a “being” or company – as the speaker stresses, she is alone in joy and in sorrow.

The second stanza is contrasted to the first as the speaker changes its position from sitting (3) to standing (6); if the first stanza implies hiding and secrecy, the second is about opening up and performance (“till first and last were shown” (8); the idea of showing implies having an audience), and also questions her assumed solitude. At the same time, the inner organization of the poem is based on images of bareness (the truth is “naked” (5), the speaker is “stripped bare of self-regard or forms or ruth” (6). The rolling [s]-[r] in “stripped”-“bare”-“self-regard”-“forms”-“ruth” which weaves all the images together adds to the tension. With a minor stress adjustment, we have two ways of reading the third line as related to the truth or to the speaker; either one of them, or both are stripped bare. The second stanza also marks the liminality, starting with crossing the barrier (“I shut the door” (5)) and getting rid of previous identity; both the speaker and their secret are “tabulae rasae” in the sense that they are, similar to Turner’s liminal personae, laid bare of their previous names and experiences. Although to have a secret implies having had an experience from which that secret is the product, having been stripped of all previous ties renders this experience (and this secret) void. As Turner states, “[t]he neophyte in liminality must be a tabula rasa, a blank state,”³⁷⁷ on which the new knowledge is to be inscribed.

In the third stanza, the speaker turns from passive watching (“sat” and “stood”) to action: she weighs and tries to define her object of desire as a marker of the new reality. The stanza is constructed through the opposition of balance (“I took the perfect balances and weighed” (9), “poise” (10)) and (although unfulfilled, but we know that absence is often read as presence in Rossetti) disturbance (“No shaking of my hand disturbed the poise” (10)). The balance is broken though – the speaker “found it wanting” (11); the choice of verb of unfulfillment also produces a certain misreading as an echo of the first stanza. If the mysterious “it” was nursed as a child, then “wanting” could be both read as its absence and as its desire. This double reference, strengthened by the emphasis on silence created with a double inversion (“not a word I said” (11), “silent made my choice” (12)) creates an atmosphere of tenseness. Although the

³⁷⁷ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 103.

“balance” is broken, the speaker is still frozen on the brink of the “poise”: her resolution is still unfulfilled.

The fourth stanza picks up where the previous stanza ended: with the moment of choice made. By anaphoric “None know the choice I made” Rossetti seems to wilfully break the spell of entrapment still without breaking the spell of secrecy; although at the same time such an appeal returns us to the question of performance (as Rossetti’s favourite technique of stating presence through absence). The triple repetition of “choice” makes it sound desperate, as if, after all, she is not secure in it. The emphasis on the breaking repeated twice in “broke my heart, breaking mine idol” (14-15) is juxtaposed with the following action of “bracing” the will since bracing implies the moment of strengthening resolve and getting fixed. The alliteration of [br] in “break” and “brace” only stresses the link between them. The relationship between the idol, the heart and the “it” is also not clear: as the speaker “nursed” it and then “hid it” in her heart, it would be possible to suggest that “the idol” refers to the “it.” At the same time, the nagging repetition allows us to suggest that as the “it” died and is buried in the speaker’s heart, the heart becomes speaker’s idol. Certainly, at this point, this reading seems probable. In the next stanza the reader is encircled in the temporal loop of liminality together with the speaker, as Rossetti strengthens this claim of violence – “I broke it at a blow, I laid it cold, / Crushed in my deep heart where it used to live” (17-18). The poem links to its own beginning, as the speaker describes how she delivered a blow to “it” that was already proclaimed dead in the first stanza. The juxtapositions of the first stanza are echoed in the last one, as through aural associations (so common for Rossetti) one might expect “a blow” to be light and aerial, while “crushed” implies something heavy and refers to the heart as a burial place as exposed in the second line. The death of “it” is transferred onto the heart as it “dies inch by inch.” The poem finishes with the reference back to the times of grieving as proclaimed in the beginning.

The painful transformation of self through its separation with “it” follows the pattern of liminal passage, as the neophyte transforms through severance of social ties and deathlike experience or sacrifice. The same pattern is continued in the second poem, written eight years later. It starts again in the privacy of the enclosed space, and although this time it is defined as “a room,” we are given no other spatio-temporal characteristics. Moreover, this room seems to be a projection of an imaginary enclosed

“home” onto one’s body – in a similar way as the hiding/ burial place is projected onto the heart in the first part of the diptych. Still, the lesson is not carried through – there is no transformation, nor liberation of the speaker. Once again, Rossetti refuses her protagonists the option of fulfilling the rite of initiation. In an almost parodic co-habitation with the dead, characteristic of the liminal phase, her speaker is stuck there watching, waiting and dreaming. In this sense, she is no different to the Lady of Shallot, fixated on her mirror– she is tied to the emptiness of the centre, and has no will to break through.

It seems that with a little help from the outside in the monstrous shape of communicators of *sacra*, Rossetti’s characters have more chances of leaving the liminal entrapment. As I have shown in previous chapters, some of them, at least, re-emerge victorious and supposedly free. In “So I Grew Half-Delirious and Quite Sick” (1849) the speaker of the poem describes a dream where she finds herself surrounded by monsters, with one of them welcoming her and others mocking. The moment she comes to the realization of this friendliness from the monster, she wakes up and weeps. This exercise in spontaneous writing (initially sent to William Michael Rossetti as bouts-rimes) seems to be structured around those similar themes and imagery that Christina Rossetti returns to throughout her whole life: fantasy, spiritual redemption, states of in-betweenness, separation from the loved one. This poem has not received much critical attention, although Susan Waldman reads it parallel with Revelation 13:1 and Dante’s description of Malbowges, the eighth circle of hell, with its image of Geryon, a version of the sea-dwelling apocalyptic beast. Waldman also engages in a psychoanalytic discussion of it: “the speaker’s history when her lingering attraction to her condition of primary narcissism caused her to resist the symbolic subjection that nonetheless contained the seeds of her salvation.”³⁷⁸ Further on, she suggests that this poem is proof of a childhood trauma. I chose to stay away from biographical and Freudian readings as those suggested by Jan Marsh, where she details every reference to goblins and other monsters as proof of sexual molestation.³⁷⁹ While Marsh’s observations are interesting,

³⁷⁸ Susan Waldman, *The Demon and the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens, Ohio : Ohio University Press, 2008), pp. 59-60.

³⁷⁹ Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Writer’s Life* (New York: Penguin, 1995)

there is a certain fusion of the poet and the object of a biographical study. Instead, I suggest reading the poem through the lens of liminality.

From the very first line we are aware that the speaker is crossing the border into some unknown experience. Both “delirious” and “sick” imply a different consciousness, changed due to illness and dream; moreover, “half-sick” immediately makes us wonder whether this “half” is intentional and implies a certain imbalance, lingering in-between two socially and psychologically acknowledged states – sound and sick (and thus non-sound, not accountable to the laws of the ordinary world any more).³⁸⁰ Together with the speaker we stop in anticipation, imagining (but not yet living through) the succession of events that is going to happen. This lingering on the borderline makes the emotional impact stronger. As David Williams notes, “there is nothing unusual in the fact that negative spaces breed monsters; after all, monstrosity is apophatic by nature.”³⁸¹ But even if the fascination with the negative space explains Rossetti’s interest in the monstrous, she is still faithful to the unfulfillment that the negative space suggests.

Indeed, once again the final step of transgression is never taken by Rossetti’s speaker. The way she describes her experience – “through the darkness [I] saw strange faces grin” (2) – implies peering through a loophole, a window, a frame, thus not active participation but a projected experience. The spatio-temporal unity is immediately disrupted as one of the monsters initiates contact:

One put forth a fin,
And touched me clammily. I could not pick
A quarrel with it; it began to lick
My hand, making meanwhile a piteous din,
And shedding human tears : it would begin
To near me, then retreat. I heard the quick
Pulsation of the heart, I marked the fight

³⁸⁰ It may be interesting to note that in the medical context liminality refers to the experience of illness.

³⁸¹ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), p. 23.

Of life and death within me (3-10)

Every detail in this passage speaks liminality. On the level of sounds, the sentences stop mid-line and break the sound flow of the narration. It makes the reader stumble midway, baffled at a mirrored sound repetition [k]-[r/l]-[it]-[it]-[l]-[k] in “a quarrel with it; it began to lick.”⁵ The long pleading [i:] of “meanwhile” – “tear” – “near” – “retreat” creates an illusion of clinging longing and desperation. The overall circled motion of nearing-and-retreating makes us think about the beast being unable to stand proximity to a human being, - or rather, to cross the threshold of humanity. This feeling is only strengthened by the long vowels. But almost immediately it is fragmented into the quick and incoherent succession of actions that challenges the continuity of narration (after all, the speaker was half-delirious), as the narration literally jumps from “began to lick” to “begin to near.” At the same time there is an ambiguous rapprochement of outside human-meeting-monster (one of the beasts touching the speaker) and the inside monster-meeting-human (the beast “shedding human tears”). All the protagonists of the poem are fused (which may be caused by the announced delirium): the cautious “I heard the quick/ Pulsation of the heart” could refer to the monster, to the speaker herself, or both. The quickening pulse registers emotional engagement – and the easiest way to read the situation would be to suggest that the monster is wooing the speaker, and she is about to succumb. It is similarly easy to reverse the feeling and see the quickening pulse of aversion; and despite all the sexual connotations, the rules of liminality are still observed – there’s a certain chastity in this wooing, as if “the indifferentiated character of liminality is reflected by... the absence of marked sexual polarity.”³⁸²

At the same time, the speaker seems to stay aside instead of engaging in the exchange directly - “I heard,” (8) “I marked the fight” (9). It almost seems that she is the one who is conducting the initiation, not the monster. Lines breaking the sentences in the middle add to the ambiguity, so that at first the reader does not realise that the changes are happening inside the speaker as if she has been projecting those feelings on the outer world. Simultaneously there is also an interior projection. There is a subtle clash of context between the speaker not wanting to “quarrel” with the monster and life and

³⁸² Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 104.

death fighting within the speaker, as if the opposition between the human and the beast was projected and played out within the speaker.

The fight between life and death refers us to liminality again, as within the liminal framework participants are placed between life and death. What happens to the speaker in this poem is ultimately the ritual death after the illness and delirium stated in the beginning. According to Turner, the subject of the ritual “is, in the liminal phase, structurally, if not physically, “invisible,””³⁸³ hence the distance taken by the speaker. Moreover, as the neophyte in Turner’s description may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the burial posture or “forced to live for a while in the company of masked and monstrous mummers representing, *inter alia*, the dead, or worse still, the un-dead,” Rossetti’s speaker is being polluted by the illness and thus ousted into the liminal world where she is surrounded by monster beings that mock her. According to Turner, it is not uncommon among the neophytes to form friendships, hence this indecisive reach of one of the monsters towards her - the *communitas* I have previously mentioned. The *communitas* is spontaneous, “representing “the quick” of human interrelatedness,”³⁸⁴ but is characterised by strength of ties – resembling that which we have seen in Rossetti’s unity with saints or angels in the previous chapter. In this poem, however, the speaker is unable to form proper ties; moreover, as soon as the liminal trial is over, she is alone to be withdrawn back to reality.

The withdrawal from reality comes through partial blindness to the speaker and a period of immobility and dumbness (similar to other threshold states I have previously discussed): “Then sleep threw/ Her veil around me.” (10-11) This veil of the sleep is both a symbol of temporary inability to see and yet another boundary to transgress. When the speaker awakes, the sun is “at its height,” as a symbol of coming back to life and the world of the living (same as to Laura in “Goblin Market”). The sun at its height may also serve a reference to God, so that the ultimate experience for the speaker is to deny her former connections (with the monsters) for the solitary unity with God. This is far from a definitive happy ending, though. The poem is complete with the speaker weeping and “knowing that one new/ Creature had love for me, and others spite.” (13-

³⁸³ Victor W. Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” opus cit., p.235.

³⁸⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 127.

14) Curiously enough, in the variant she sent to William Michael Rossetti on 24 September 1849, there is “I slept” crossed out before “wept,” a hint that implies that at least in the first version the sleep was continued – as if the speaker never woke up. It reminds us of the liminal sleep experience as explored in the beginning of this thesis, and emphasizes the ambiguity of her awareness of what really happened.

There are two moments I would like to highlight in this line. On one hand, there is the gradual change in the degree of awareness as the speaker wakes and “knows.” The poem starts with the speaker dreaming and thus her knowledge is dimmed by imagination and fallacy. Then she is “veiled” by sleep, and by questioning the truth of her dream she tries to reinstate her validity (“but this thing is true” (11)) despite her perception being clouded. In the last line the experience is no longer doubted. There are a number of possibilities as to why the speaker insists upon and then accepts the truth of her experience. Walden names the theological side of this dream, as she evokes Leviathan and Geryon. I would also stress its importance in terms of accepting the liminal experience, which is linked to Turner’s “communication of *sacra*” and its monstrous messengers. It might be curious to note that at least one of the beasts, Leviathan, is female; it prompts the reader to see it as a mirror image of the speaker herself and her self-acceptance.

The other thing, “one new creature,” implies that there had been others. Either it is not the first liminal experience of the speaker, or the speaker is projecting her own after-liminal situation onto the monster. They are both reaching towards something that is unachievable and lost for them, and both are rejected by society. In *Time Flies* Rossetti asks, “is it quite certain that no day will ever come when even the smallest, weakest, most grotesque, wronged creature will not in some fashion rise up in the Judgement with us to condemn us, frighten us effectively once for all?”³⁸⁵ The creature rises, but instead of having the power to judge and frighten, Rossetti bestows it with the right to love and forgive even faced with antagonism of the crowd. In this sense the monster with the outstretched fin is a projection of Christ and his all-forgiving sacrifice.

³⁸⁵ *Time Flies*, p. 129.

In his study of monstrous discourse, David William remarks that “[l]ike language, the monster is a sign of unity now lost, the unity of being dispersed in the multiplicity of forms.... And like language, the monster is the possibility of the reconstitution of the very thing that it, itself, has deconstructed.”³⁸⁶ In this sense, the bonding with the monstrous implies a creation of a new language, an attempt to transgress the boundaries of the human. Yet although the speaker manages to get back to the human world, the transformation, again, is unfinished. Moreover, in this episode the monster and the speaker almost reverse their places, and it is the monster which is being tested and levelled up by the speaker. And this description of the speaker’s behaviour is closely related to Rossetti’s preoccupation with her inner relationship with Christ.

There is a curious passage in *Time Flies* where Rossetti describes the beautiful union of two halves of a shell: “Each separate half is beautiful ... Yet each by itself remains obviously imperfect and purposeless. Join them together and notch fits into notch; each brings out, proves, achieves, the perfection of the other.” She finishes this description with a reference to St Paul’s words about Christ and the Church, only to add on the following day: “That it is so far selfless as to be only one harmonious part of a better whole. That it is faithful, fitting into nothing except its own other self. And that unless it sets Christ before us at least as in a glass darkly, it were good for it not to have been born.”³⁸⁷ This double-imagery, leading to the ultimate reference to Christ as the only true wholeness possible for a fractured being, is especially relevant in terms of transformation/ threshold points. The often strangely eroticised relationship with Christ in Rossetti’s devotional poetry has been an object of attention by other critics, notably John Schad who writes about Rossetti’s “almost incestual twist” and “strange inversions of the Holy Family” and suggests that “in her poetry the Christ at the door is always, in a sense, herself.”³⁸⁸ I have already written about the doubling on the threshold and bifurcation of one personality into twin images of the neophyte and the observer in the second chapter. I would like to come back to this idea here. In “Who Shall Deliver Me?” Rossetti once again occupies the space of the communicator of

³⁸⁶ David Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, opus cit., p. 63.

³⁸⁷ *Time Flies*, pp. 131-132.

³⁸⁸ John Schad, *Victorians in Theory. From Derrida to Browning* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 23-24, p.11.

sacra and becomes the monstrous figure for herself. Susan Waldman notes this self-division when she writes that “the speaker portrays her Christian commitment as one side of her being through which she can whittle down another side,” and then refers to “the Freudian notion of the ego as a limiting aspect of the self that constrains the subject’s self-expansion.”³⁸⁹

Not only the speaker, but the poem itself, falls structurally into two parts. The first invites comparison with “Shut-Out,” although this time it is the speaker who occupies the active position and locks the door to bar all others out. The possessive “my” in “I lock my door” (5 and 7) shows that despite this attempt at closing the world for herself, she is unable to renounce it. There is also a displacement of self onto the place of entrapment when she explains, “All others are outside myself;/ I lock my door and bar them out (4-5). It can be read as if she is both inside the space she inhabits and is herself this space, as she ambiguously places others outside of her (body). This idea is strengthened by the use of “inalienable” in the previous line, and furthered by her suggesting that she needs to “wall/ Self from myself” (8-9). Thus, at least structurally, we are faced with a conflicting statement: on one hand, there are two battling “I’s in the speaker; on the other, they are “inalienable” and undivided. It is reminiscent of the sacred twin imagery I discussed in the second chapter, where the single personality of twins belongs to the sacred order, and their physical duality to the secular order. In Rossetti, as I have mentioned, this pattern is often reversed, and it is in the sacred/liminal order that we have a split personality - that is, physically in one body. Thus we get a sort of psychological conjoined twins, a sort of a ‘monster’ in itself. Alex Sharpe, in discussing legal implications of what might be perceived by some as “bodily monstrosities,” suggests that “[c]onjoined twins... are seen as prisoners of their bodies. The body, rather than being seen as home, and as corporeal integrity, is seen as encasement.”³⁹⁰ This understanding seems to parallel Rossetti’s ideas of herself being the prisoner of her body, entrapped with her other “I.” Lona Mosk Parker reads this poem in parallel to a passage in *Time Flies*, describing “a self-haunted spider....[that]

³⁸⁹ Waldman, *The Demon & the Damozel*, opus cit., p. 25-26.

³⁹⁰ Alex Neville Sharpe, *Foucault’s Monsters and the Challenge of Law* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 116.

remains isolated irretrievably with his own horrible loathesome self,”³⁹¹ and sees evidence of Rossetti’s own depression in it.³⁹² While I am unwilling to establish biographical connections, this image belongs here due both to its monstrosity and its split personality, even though there the split is even more evident, as represented by the threshold between the physical self and its shadow.

In the second part of the poem, the speaker relegates her active position waiting for the delivery of her abominable state. The last two stanzas give us a rather contradictory reading. “Myself, arch-traitor to myself” (19) is a mirror phrase that can be addressed to both “I’s of the speaker. The following line - “My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe” (20) - not only equals friend to foe and adds a sinister touch to the sequence, but also reminds us of the mysterious “friend” in “From House to Home” or the “shadowless spirit” in “Shut-Out.” Moreover, the “hollowest friends” provides a parallel to “Despised and Rejected” (1864), where the speaker closes the doors “that hollow friends may trouble me no more.” (7) The last stanza provides even further inconsistency. It starts with a proclamation that there is ‘One’ to “curb myself” (22), thus imposing a check, a limit on the other I, and at the same time this friend he is supposed to “break off the yoke and set me free” (24) – both structurally and spatially the opposite of “curbing”. All three verbs in the stanza – “curb” (22), “roll” (23) and “break” (24) – imply very different movements: limitation, movement in particular direction by turning over and over, and separation by force. This discrepancy introduces a layered discontinuity into the poem, and makes us doubt the closing claim that the speaker will be set free - especially as we note that the title of the poem, “Who Shall Deliver Me,” changes the focus from the object to the subject of the poem.

In *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti contemplates how “the uncomforted faithful shall at last be comforted. They shall be delivered from all they ever endured, relieved from all they ever suffered. Their emptiness shall be fed and filled.”³⁹³ But in turning to the

³⁹¹ *Time Flies*, p. 122.

³⁹² Lona Mosk Parker, *Christina Rossetti* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963) pp. 175-176.

³⁹³ Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*, second edition (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1893), p. 237.

subject of the action in “Who Shall Deliver Me?”, Rossetti seems to be pausing on the threshold of being saved. The ultimate unfulfillment of the poem lies with the fact that, answering the title question of “Who shall deliver me?”, the speaker is too focused on herself. Unable to let herself go, she is consequently unable to transform.

A familiar disruption happens in “Despised and Rejected,” which explores a similar moment from a different perspective. Here the speaker is less concerned with her own split self than with the deliverance from the outside; yet again she fails to recognize the necessary steps to be taken. The poem starts with a description that fixes all liminal traits and could equally relate to the womb or the grave: it evokes darkness, death, blindness and solitude. The sun has set (and as I have previously noted, the absence of the sun and stars for Rossetti implies loss of hope), and the speaker dwells (which *per se* implies a prolonged action) “in darkness as a dead man out of sight” (2). This is reminiscent of Turner’s description of liminality as “frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon”³⁹⁴ - all of which, as we have seen, are recurrent in Rossetti’s poetry. Having visually established the place as liminal, the speaker first defines and then renounces all links with the outer world (“none remains, not one, that I should tell to him” (3) and “I will make fast my door” (6)). The door is shut and we are waiting for the transformation to begin, and yet the process is interrupted.

Rossetti’s layering technique juxtaposes the imposed silence of “not one, that I should tell” (3) and the sudden breakthrough of an address: “‘Friend, open to me’ – ‘Who is this that calls?’” (8). The immediate repetition of “friend” after “hollow friends may trouble me no more” (7) makes us cautious as to the nature of this unexpected visitor, especially if we remember the violent communicators of the liminal. By all means he must be one of the hollow friends, and the speaker is quick to produce a parallel: “Others were dear,/ Others forsook me” (12-13). We are slightly confused as to who is the culprit of the speaker’s alienation – if she previously stated that she is the one to make fast her door, now she complains of being forsaken. By providing an extensive explanation as to why she will not hear the plea, she almost undermines her resolution. Starting with “I am deaf as are my walls” (9), she makes an attempt to objectify herself,

³⁹⁴ Turner, *The Ritual Process*, opus cit., p. 95.

and similar to the speaker of “Who Shall Deliver Me,” identifies herself with the space she inhabits. Yet her interlocutor ignores this objectification and invites the speaker to guess his identity:

Then is it nothing to thee? Open, see
Who stands to plead with thee.
Open, lest I should pass thee by, and though
One day entreat my Face
And howl for grace,
And I be death as though art now.
Open to Me. (23-29)

This passage is reminiscent of a reversed “Winter: My Secret” both in rhythm and rhyme, only in the former the speaker tries to disguise her identity and here he insists on his secret being guessed. Meanwhile, the speaker of “Despised and Rejected” is keen on following the pattern of “Winter: My Secret” where “I cannot ope to everyone who taps, / And let the draughts come whistling though my hall” (13-14). I have previously noted the presumed violence in “Winter: My Secret” – it is reiterated here with an evident threat, that underlies the pleading of the threshold visitor. A continuous reference to bleeding throughout the poem only strengthens this feeling as the visitor becomes more and more verbose and the pleas escalate from the short “Open to Me” (39) to “Rise, let Me in” (41) and “Open to Me, that I may come to thee” (43) to the crescendo of “My Feet bleed, see My Face, / See My Hands bleed that bring thee grace, / My Heart doth bleed for thee, -/ Open to Me.” (45-48) The long and sharp [i:] and [ei] add a touch of despair to the scattered lines of this monologue (we assume that after her outburst in the previous stanza, the speaker keeps silent). The visitor asks for an opening, yet lists his open wounds; all the verbs he uses (same as in “Winter: My Secret”) imply intrusion into the speaker’s private space (“let me in”, “come to thee”, “bring”). If, as I have mentioned, the speaker equals herself with her space, then this plea implies physical violence, which is strengthened on the lexical level by the denouement of “break” and “death” in “So till the break of day:/ Then died away” (49-50).

The retreat comes with the break of dawn and is as gradual as the assault was (and

reminiscent of seasonal imagery, such as the tide or the waxing/waning moon); and the slow lingering footsteps “echoing like a sigh” (52) pass the speaker (as if the sounds managed to transgress the wall and materialize on the other side of the threshold). The pattern is reminiscent of the taboo imposed on supernatural creatures who cannot pass the threshold of a human dwelling uninvited. The “bloody” imagery of the last stanza – “I saw upon the grass/ Each footprint marked in blood, and on my door/ The mark of blood for evermore” (56-58) – emphasizes the feelings of missed opportunity, regret and danger. Ernest Fontana notes how “Rossetti’s door, because of its acoustical power to rhyme with an adverb of duration, ‘evermore,’ becomes a foregrounded and expressive image”.³⁹⁵ At the same time, as a *true* threshold, it can be read in a number of ways. On one hand, it celebrates safe delivery from death and danger coming at night and threatening to break through into the domestic space – the setting that fairy-tales warn us against. On the other, we understand that by not opening the door to the night visitor – likened to Christ - the speaker might have committed an offence against her future salvation, confirming the accusation expressed in “Who Shall Deliver Me”: “Myself, arch-traitor to myself.” It would not be going too far to suggest that the Christ-like figure is her other self, and hence the two poems becomes mirrored replicas of the same episode.

The parallel between the two poems is not coincidental. Schad reads this poem in relation to Rossetti sitting as the model for Christ’s face in William Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World* (1851-1853):

In allowing her dark, female features to be converted into the fair, male face of Hunt’s Christ, Rossetti plays the part of...woman as the mirror in which man sees only a negative of himself.³⁹⁶

This mirror imagery can be continued further if we remember Lady Hawarden’s photographs and the threshold split of personality into self and reflection discussed earlier. Indeed, in the poems the speaker describes a split within the self between two versions of I, one of which is embodying Christ.

³⁹⁵ Ernest L. Fontana, “Victorian Doors” in *Philosophy and Literature* 30.1 (2006): 227-288.

³⁹⁶ Schad, *Victorians in Theory*, opus cit., p. 10.

The association between Christian feminine devotion and the temptations of fleshly love is not original: for women mystics, both medieval and Victorian, Christ is the Bridegroom of the feminized Soul, the perfect Lover. At the same time, in Rossetti's writings this often acquires a darker imagery that makes Christ akin to a tempting fairy/demonic lover whose function is not to purify but rather to question the human experience. Indeed, a typical supernatural lover is "a demon who, like the prototypical Satan, brings chaos and death to the innocent and naïve,"³⁹⁷ similar to the behaviour of the night visitor in "Despised and Dejected." This nuance produces a certain layering to Rossetti's treatment of Christ – less Christian in the orthodox sense of this world, but more fairy-tale like, standing outside the traditional categories that the church can offer. It is reminiscent of a fairy lover as described by James Wades in *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (2011). He points out how fairies come from the Otherworld and do not conform to the physical laws of normal time and space; neither do they fall into the standard logic/moral categories, which allows me to classify them as liminal creatures.³⁹⁸ As Julia Kristeva rightfully explains, in the twelfth century theological writing (at least in its mystical aspects) allowed itself "to be lured into the trap of a blessed loving madness"³⁹⁹ and the gap between erotic love and spiritual yearning for God was not irreconcilable. Moreover, some later writers, such as Jeanne Guyon in the seventeenth century, continued to contribute to the love-for-Christ-as-desire paradigm.

But Rossetti goes even further, and she not only projects the mundane, if elevated, idea of love onto Christ, but her speakers and protagonists take upon themselves the role of Christ – the most critically considered example here being Lizzie in "Goblin Market."⁴⁰⁰ This leads to the ultimate unfulfilment of the self, as it impedes the speaker

³⁹⁷ Toni Reed, *Demon Lovers and Their Victims in British Fiction*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), p. 22.

³⁹⁸ James Wades in his *Fairies in Medieval Romance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

³⁹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, (New York and Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1987), p.8.

⁴⁰⁰ See, for example Linda E. Marshall, "'Transfigured to His Likeness': Sensible Transcendentalism in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 63.3 (Spring 1994): 429-540; Barbara Fass, "Christina Rossetti and St. Agnes' Eve" in *Victorian Poetry* 14.1 (Spring 1976): 33-46; Susan Waldman, *The Demon and the Damozel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti*

from transgressing this final boundary of individual self oblation in the face of God. Ludlow notes Rossetti's "increasing interest to map the parameters of selfhood onto a Trinitarian model"⁴⁰¹ of unity in diversity and argues that she accepted this communal ideal of living life "as Church (which is communion with Christ and in Christ with all creation)." ⁴⁰² This idea of community is similar to Turner's *communitas*, as I have demonstrated. Moreover, I suggest, even if Rossetti tested this fulfilled unity out, in her narratorial poems it was still unfulfilled. Her speakers seem to be caught up in the liminal space, watching, dreaming yet never daring to cross the border that any model of selfhood would have demanded from them. At best, they struggle to express their identity. At worst, they embrace the void.

and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008). For a more general discussion of Rossetti's perception of Christ's Bride, see Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁴⁰¹ Ludlow, "'We can but spell a surface history': The Biblical Typology of Christina Rossetti," a PhD thesis (University of Warwick: 1993), p. 54.

⁴⁰² Nicholass Loosky, "The Oxford Movement and the Revival of Patristic Theology," quoted in Ludlow, "'We can but spell a surface history,'" p. 55.

Conclusion

This thesis situates the texts of Christina Rossetti within the framework of liminality. Liminality is a space in-between that is characterized, in the first place by its instability and open potential. “Liminality tries to capture the permanent inescapability of transitions and the existential as well as cultural consequences of such destabilizations.”⁴⁰³ As such, it is a space of active transformation that is forced upon its participants. On the contrary, the subject of the liminal passage is “structurally, if not physically, invisible,” passive and undistinguished. His ties with the real world are severed, and he has neither name nor possession to refer to. In this sense, the metamorphosis is born out of the clash between the active space of possibility and the void of personality. It is characterized by reversal of power balance: the passive human is being acted upon violent transformative forces, and at the same time gains the ability to comment upon the society left behind, no longer tied by obligations or limitations of the life left behind. But if Turner’s concept of liminality implies that this transformation is going to be fulfilled, and the participant of the rite will be reintegrated into the society vested with new powers, Christina Rossetti is unlikely to follow this pattern. Her characters, being ousted into the marginal, are fascinated with the threshold and seek neither return, nor evolution. They stay forever in-between the world, and are strangely fulfilled in their unfulfillment.

This halted transformation seems like a bitter ending to even the seemingly light and positive poems, that are often read as a celebration of unity with God. “Resurgam” (1882), a poem that introduces the allegory of a climber set on conquering a mountain, seems to carry an elated tone even in its title – “I shall rise again” reads as a promise and a fulfilment. Ludlow argues that Rossetti’s vision is marked by “convergence of time with eternity” made possible by Incarnation, and thus, “as a metaphor for spiritual journey, his climb is indicative of the necessity of submitting to spiritual purgation and

⁴⁰³ Jochen Achilles, “Modes of Liminality in American Short Fiction. Condensations of Multiple Identities” in eds. Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann, *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian and British Writing* (Routledge, 2014), p. 35.

looking beyond the limits of reason and vision".⁴⁰⁴ Ludlow's "beyond the limits of reason and vision" can be applied to the liminal space, and thus confirm my point about the intrinsic liminality of Rossetti's texts. Yet I will add a different dimension to her reading. For me, the setting of the poem is intrinsically liminal, but the focus is on its unfulfillment. The climber is a threshold persona, unable to either transgress the boundary, reach the top and the unity with the divine, or to come back to the world of the living. But the consummation of the metamorphosis is not required from him.

All the details confirm its fluidity and uncertainty. The instability of the liminal space is transferred by "lingering sunbeams" (3) and "halting place" (3). The intuitive opposition between "depth" and "loftier height" (1), "sets his foot and sets his face" (2) is resolved as the movement upwards (we know that the protagonist is climbing up), yet we know that this ascent is checked by the setting sun – "Darkness descends for light he toiled to seek" (9). Although the climber is described as the one who "runs a race with Time and wins the race" (6), yet his victory is ambiguous and conditional. Similar to the Prince from "The Prince's Progress" he has neither reason, nor will to start this race (which might be read as a hint about his subsequent unfulfillment). A figure akin to the sailors in Rossetti's apocalyptic poems, he is inspired, yet passive. He "sets his foot and sets his face," yet there's no urgency in his resolution. This feeling of hesitation is transferred through further insecurity and imbalance. He "stumbles on the darkened mountain-head" (10), and both the movement ("stumble") and the changing light ("darkened") show him being overwhelmed by the dark. He passes "through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state,"⁴⁰⁵ yet it is unlikely that the passage will be concluded. Indeed, Rossetti is not going to let him out of the liminal space.

Indeed, in the second part of the poem he gradually acquires all characteristics of a neophyte. This "stumble" marks the beginning of his liminal transformation – he is "emptied and stripped of all save only Grace,/ Will, Love, a panoply of might" (7-8),

⁴⁰⁴ Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 138.

⁴⁰⁵ Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage," in William A. Lessa, Evon Z. Vogt, *Reader in Comparative Religion*. New York: Harper and Row Publications, 1979, p. 235.

similar to Turner's initiands who are stripped of all connections with their previous life, all possessions and characteristics. We know that initiands are structurally considered dead – "the neophyte may be buried, forced to lie motionless in the posture and direction of customary burial... or may be forced to live... in the company of... the dead, or worse still, the undead." The same thing actually happens to Rossetti's climber: he finds himself left to die – "left breathless in the unbreathable thin air" (11). More still, he is "made freeman of the living and the dead" (12) – parallel to Turner's "no longer classified and not yet classified"⁴⁰⁶ liminal personae who are stuck in-between the world of the dead and the world of the living. It is also reminiscent of the coexistence of the dead and the living we have traced in Rossetti's seasonal poems such as "Spring." The use of archaic "wot" (13) stresses the climber's being out of time; and his not knowing he has reached the top signals that his spatial awareness is disrupted as well.

It would have been too easy to read the closing line of the poem as happy ending and fulfilment, yet Rossetti would never allow us to accept it unequivocally. Indeed, the climber has reached the top and won the race against Time, and "the returning sun will find him there" (14). Sun being associated with God, this line refers to the ultimate encounter with the divine. But if we look more closely, it is not the climber who initiates this encounter. In full acceptance of his liminal status, he stays passive – it is the sun that will find him, neither dead nor alive and shut out in the liminal unawareness. The sun will find him and most likely register him as yet another failed quest. As we know, in Rossetti's world the ultimate union with God is a very unlikely possibility.

Yet, even so, Rossetti suggests that the race with Time is won. And I would like to suggest that it proves her apophasic understanding of religion, where God is known through negation and unfulfillment. Her decision to shut her protagonists out of the world silences the possibility of revelation and in the end renders communication invalid, not too unexpected for a poet embracing silence. Instead, she opens up a space of potentiality – the ambiguous achievement of the climber, his ultimate failure and entrapment between the worlds (or rather, his final absence from both the world of the

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 236.

living and the unity with the divine) create a feeling of hope, that liminal and never confirmed hope that keeps us all fighting. After all, nothing is definite in the liminal world.

I would like to leave my thesis open-ended – as a liminal space of possibility. It is my strong belief that reading Christina Rossetti’s texts parallel to the concept of liminality allows new and challenging understanding of her life and her views and opens new dimensions in the critical work exploring her texts. I would like to think that further exploration of these ideas will follow. There are many texts and many parallels that were left out of the space of my thesis due to lack of space. For example, it would be interesting to develop how traumatic or liminal state affects the speech, whether the speech is altered or inherited from the communicators of the sacral knowledge and the supernatural forces. Another question lies with memory and its transformations: what is being retained in the liminal space and how it is related to the previous experience. A completely different set of references would be useful for understanding bodily transformations and fragmentation of speech and the possible connections between those transformations and the new recontextualization of the old elements (Rossetti’s monstrous creations seem to be an obvious choice, yet tracking down subtle physical changes in her speakers seems to be an interesting option as well). Yet another big topic that seems worth studying is a detailed analysis of absence and presence in the liminal space. Further work in this area could fruitfully examine the concept of the liminal in other Rossetti texts such as *Sing Song* and *Speaking Likenesses*, or her semi-autobiographical “Maude.” The concept of poetics of layering should not be limited to Rossetti’s guessing games, but find a wider application: it could be worth reading her devotional texts and her nursery rhymes by detaching different layers, similar to the work I did with a number of poems in this thesis. Other, more specific definitions of liminality, could also be used as a counterbalance for reading Rossetti’s texts. As a space “betwixt and between,” liminality always surpasses the ideas mapped out by a researcher.

Appendix 1

Chapter 1

Symbols

I watched a rosebud very long
Brought on by dew and sun and shower,
Waiting to see the perfect flower:
Then, when I thought it should be strong,
It opened at the matin hour
And fell at evensong.

6

I watched a nest from day to day,
A green nest full of pleasant shade,
Wherein three speckled eggs were laid:
But when they should have hatched in May,
The two old birds had grown afraid
Or tired, and flew away.

12

Then in my wrath I broke the bough
That I had tended so with care,
Hoping its scent should fill the air;
I crushed the eggs, not heeding how
Their ancient promise had been fair:
I would have vengeance now.

18

But the dead branch spoke from the sod,
And the eggs answered me again:
Because we failed dost thou complain?
Is thy wrath just? And what if God,
Who waiteth for thy fruits in vain,
Should also take the rod?

24

7 January 1849

A Bird Song

It's a year almost that I have not seen her:
Oh, last summer green things were greener,
Brambles fewer, the blue sky bluer.

3

It's surely summer, for there's a swallow:
Come one swallow, his mate will follow,
The bird race quicken and wheel and thicken.

6

Oh happy swallow whose mate will follow
O'er height, o'er hollow! I'd be a swallow,
To build this weather one nest together.

9

Before 1873

Goblin Market

Morning and evening
Maids heard the goblins cry:
“Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy:
Apples and quinces,
Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpeck'd cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheek'd peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries;—
All ripe together
In summer weather,—
Morns that pass by,
Fair eves that fly;
Come buy, come buy:
Our grapes fresh from the vine,
Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces,
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries,
Taste them and try:
Currants and gooseberries,
Bright-fire-like barberries,
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South,
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;
Come buy, come buy.”

10

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Evening by evening
Among the brookside rushes,
Laura bow'd her head to hear,
Lizzie veil'd her blushes:
Crouching close together
In the cooling weather,
With clasping arms and cautioning lips,
With tingling cheeks and finger tips.
“Lie close,” Laura said,
Pricking up her golden head:
“We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?”

40

"Come buy," call the goblins
Hobbling down the glen.

"Oh," cried Lizzie, "Laura, Laura,
You should not peep at goblin men."
Lizzie cover'd up her eyes,
Cover'd close lest they should look;
Laura rear'd her glossy head,
And whisper'd like the restless brook:
"Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,
Down the glen tramp little men.

One hauls a basket,
One bears a plate,
One lugs a golden dish
Of many pounds weight.

How fair the vine must grow
Whose grapes are so luscious;
How warm the wind must blow
Through those fruit bushes."

"No," said Lizzie, "No, no, no;
Their offers should not charm us,
Their evil gifts would harm us."
She thrust a dimpled finger
In each ear, shut eyes and ran:
Curious Laura chose to linger
Wondering at each merchant man.

One had a cat's face,
One whisk'd a tail,
One tramp'd at a rat's pace,
One crawl'd like a snail,
One like a wombat prowld obtuse and furry,
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

She heard a voice like voice of doves
Cooing all together:
They sounded kind and full of loves
In the pleasant weather.

Laura stretch'd her gleaming neck
Like a rush-imbedded swan,
Like a lily from the beck,
Like a moonlit poplar branch,
Like a vessel at the launch
When its last restraint is gone.

Backwards up the mossy glen
Turn'd and troop'd the goblin men,
With their shrill repeated cry,
"Come buy, come buy."
When they reach'd where Laura was
They stood stock still upon the moss,

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90

Leering at each other,
Brother with queer brother;
Signalling each other,
Brother with sly brother.
One set his basket down,
One rear'd his plate;
One began to weave a crown
Of tendrils, leaves, and rough nuts brown
(Men sell not such in any town);
One heav'd the golden weight
Of dish and fruit to offer her:
“Come buy, come buy,” was still their cry
Laura stared but did not stir.

100

Long'd but had no money:
The whisk-tail'd merchant bade her taste
In tones as smooth as honey,
The cat-faced purr'd,
The rat-faced spoke a word
Of welcome, and the snail-paced even waa
One parrot-voiced and jolly
Cried "Pretty Goblin" still for "Pretty Pol
One whistled like a bird.

110

But sweet-tooth Laura spoke in haste:
"Good folk, I have no coin;
To take were to purloin:
I have no copper in my purse,
I have no silver either,
And all my gold is on the furze
That shakes in windy weather
Above the rusty heather."
"You have much gold upon your head,"
They answer'd all together:
"Buy from us with a golden curl."
She clipp'd a precious golden lock,
She dropp'd a tear more rare than pearl,
Then suck'd their fruit globes fair or red:
Sweeter than honey from the rock,
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
Clearer than water flow'd that juice;
She never tasted such before,
How should it cloy with length of use?
She suck'd and suck'd and suck'd the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She suck'd until her lips were sore;
Then flung the emptied rinds away
But gather'd up one kernel stone,
And knew not was it night or day
As she turn'd home alone.

120

130

140

Lizzie met her at the gate
Full of wise upbraidings:
“Dear, you should not stay so late,
Twilight is not good for maidens;
Should not loiter in the glen
In the haunts of goblin men.
Do you not remember Jeanie,
How she met them in the moonlight,
Took their gifts both choice and many,
Ate their fruits and wore their flowers
Pluck’d from bowers
Where summer ripens at all hours?
But ever in the noonlight
She pined and pined away;
Sought them by night and day,
Found them no more, but dwindled and grew grey;
Then fell with the first snow,
While to this day no grass will grow
Where she lies low:
I planted daisies there a year ago
That never blow.
You should not loiter so.”
“Nay, hush,” said Laura:
“Nay, hush, my sister:
I ate and ate my fill,
Yet my mouth waters still;
To-morrow night I will
Buy more;” and kiss’d her:
“Have done with sorrow;
I’ll bring you plums to-morrow
Fresh on their mother twigs,
Cherries worth getting;
You cannot think what figs
My teeth have met in,
What melons icy-cold
Piled on a dish of gold
Too huge for me to hold,
What peaches with a velvet nap,
Pellucid grapes without one seed:
Odorous indeed must be the mead
Whereon they grow, and pure the wave they drink
With lilies at the brink,
And sugar-sweet their sap.”

Golden head by golden head,
Like two pigeons in one nest
Folded in each other’s wings,
They lay down in their curtain’d bed:
Like two blossoms on one stem,
Like two flakes of new-fall’n snow,

150

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170

180

Like two wands of ivory
Tipp'd with gold for awful kings.
Moon and stars gaz'd in at them,
Wind sang to them lullaby,
Lumbering owls forbore to fly,
Not a bat flapp'd to and fro
Round their rest:
Cheek to cheek and breast to breast
Lock'd together in one nest.

190

Early in the morning
When the first cock crow'd his warning,
Neat like bees, as sweet and busy,
Laura rose with Lizzie:
Fetch'd in honey, milk'd the cows,
Air'd and set to rights the house,
Kneaded cakes of whitest wheat,
Cakes for dainty mouths to eat,
Next churn'd butter, whipp'd up cream,
Fed their poultry, sat and sew'd;
Talk'd as modest maidens should:
Lizzie with an open heart,
Laura in an absent dream,
One content, one sick in part;
One warbling for the mere bright day's delight,
One longing for the night.

200

210

At length slow evening came:
They went with pitchers to the reedy brook;
Lizzie most placid in her look,
Laura most like a leaping flame.
They drew the gurgling water from its deep;
Lizzie pluck'd purple and rich golden flags,
Then turning homeward said: "The sunset flushes
Those furthest loftiest crags;
Come, Laura, not another maiden lags.
No wilful squirrel wags,
The beasts and birds are fast asleep."
But Laura loiter'd still among the rushes
And said the bank was steep.

220

And said the hour was early still
The dew not fall'n, the wind not chill;
Listening ever, but not catching
The customary cry,
"Come buy, come buy,"
With its iterated jingle
Of sugar-baited words:
Not for all her watching
Once discerning even one goblin

230

Racing, whisking, tumbling, hobbling;
Let alone the herds
That used to tramp along the glen,
In groups or single,
Of brisk fruit-merchant men.

240

Till Lizzie urged, "O Laura, come;
I hear the fruit-call but I dare not look:
You should not loiter longer at this brook:
Come with me home.
The stars rise, the moon bends her arc,
Each glowworm winks her spark,
Let us get home before the night grows dark:
For clouds may gather
Though this is summer weather,
Put out the lights and drench us through;
Then if we lost our way what should we do?"

250

Laura turn'd cold as stone
To find her sister heard that cry alone,
That goblin cry,
"Come buy our fruits, come buy."
Must she then buy no more such dainty fruit?
Must she no more such succous pasture find,
Gone deaf and blind?
Her tree of life droop'd from the root:
She said not one word in her heart's sore ache;
But peering thro' the dimness, nought discerning,
Trudg'd home, her pitcher dripping all the way;
So crept to bed, and lay
Silent till Lizzie slept;
Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
And gnash'd her teeth for baulk'd desire, and wept
As if her heart would break.

260

Day after day, night after night,
Laura kept watch in vain
In sullen silence of exceeding pain.
She never caught again the goblin cry:
"Come buy, come buy;"—
She never spied the goblin men
Hawking their fruits along the glen:
But when the noon wax'd bright
Her hair grew thin and grey;
She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
To swift decay and burn
Her fire away.

270

One day remembering her kernel-stone
She set it by a wall that faced the south;

280

Dew'd it with tears, hoped for a root,
Watch'd for a waxing shoot,
But there came none;
It never saw the sun,
It never felt the trickling moisture run:
While with sunk eyes and faded mouth
She dream'd of melons, as a traveller sees
False waves in desert drouth
With shade of leaf-crown'd trees,
And burns the thirstier in the sandful breeze.

290

She no more swept the house,
Tended the fowls or cows,
Fetch'd honey, kneaded cakes of wheat,
Brought water from the brook:
But sat down listless in the chimney-nook
And would not eat.

Tender Lizzie could not bear
To watch her sister's cankerous care
Yet not to share.

300

She night and morning
Caught the goblins' cry:
"Come buy our orchard fruits,
Come buy, come buy;"—
Beside the brook, along the glen,
She heard the tramp of goblin men,
The yoke and stir
Poor Laura could not hear;
Long'd to buy fruit to comfort her,
But fear'd to pay too dear.
She thought of Jeanie in her grave,
Who should have been a bride;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died
In her gay prime,
In earliest winter time
With the first glazing rime,
With the first snow-fall of crisp winter time.

310

Till Laura dwindling
Seem'd knocking at Death's door:
Then Lizzie weigh'd no more
Better and worse;
But put a silver penny in her purse,
Kiss'd Laura, cross'd the heath with clumps of furze
At twilight, halted by the brook:
And for the first time in her life
Began to listen and look.

320

Laugh'd every goblin When they spied her peeping: Came towards her hobbling, Flying, running, leaping, Puffing and blowing, Chuckling, clapping, crowing, Clucking and gobbling, Mopping and mowing, Full of airs and graces, Pulling wry faces, Demure grimaces, Cat-like and rat-like, Ratel- and wombat-like, Snail-paced in a hurry, Parrot-voiced and whistler, Helter skelter, hurry skurry, Chattering like magpies, Fluttering like pigeons, Gliding like fishes,— Hugg'd her and kiss'd her: Squeez'd and caress'd her: Stretch'd up their dishes, Panniers, and plates: “Look at our apples Russet and dun, Bob at our cherries, Bite at our peaches, Citrons and dates, Grapes for the asking, Pears red with basking Out in the sun, Plums on their twigs; Pluck them and suck them, Pomegranates, figs.”—	330
	340
	350
	360
“Good folk,” said Lizzie, Mindful of Jeanie: “Give me much and many: — Held out her apron, Toss'd them her penny. “Nay, take a seat with us, Honour and eat with us,” They answer'd grinning: “Our feast is but beginning. Night yet is early, Warm and dew-pearly, Wakeful and starry: Such fruits as these No man can carry: Half their bloom would fly,	370

Half their dew would dry,
Half their flavour would pass by.
Sit down and feast with us,
Be welcome guest with us,
Cheer you and rest with us."—
"Thank you," said Lizzie: "But one waits
At home alone for me:
So without further parleying,
If you will not sell me any
Of your fruits though much and many,
Give me back my silver penny
I toss'd you for a fee."—
They began to scratch their pates,
No longer wagging, purring,
But visibly demurring,
Grunting and snarling.
One call'd her proud,
Cross-grain'd, uncivil;
Their tones wax'd loud,
Their looks were evil.
Lashing their tails
They trod and hustled her,
Elbow'd and jostled her,
Claw'd with their nails,
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,
Tore her gown and soil'd her stocking,
Twitch'd her hair out by the roots,
Stamp'd upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeez'd their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat.

380

White and golden Lizzie stood,
Like a lily in a flood,—
Like a rock of blue-vein'd stone
Lash'd by tides obstreperously,—
Like a beacon left alone
In a hoary roaring sea,
Sending up a golden fire,—
Like a fruit-crown'd orange-tree
White with blossoms honey-sweet
Sore beset by wasp and bee,—
Like a royal virgin town
Topp'd with gilded dome and spire
Close beleaguer'd by a fleet
Mad to tug her standard down.

400

410

420

One may lead a horse to water,
Twenty cannot make him drink.
Though the goblins cuff'd and caught her,
Coax'd and fought her,

Bullied and besought her,
Scratch'd her, pinch'd her black as ink,
Kick'd and knock'd her,
Maul'd and mock'd her,
Lizzie utter'd not a word;
Would not open lip from lip
Lest they should cram a mouthful in:
But laugh'd in heart to feel the drip
Of juice that syrups'd all her face,
And lodg'd in dimples of her chin,
And streak'd her neck which quaked like curd.

430

At last the evil people,
Worn out by her resistance,
Flung back her penny, kick'd their fruit
Along whichever road they took,
Not leaving root or stone or shoot;
Some writh'd into the ground,
Some div'd into the brook
With ring and ripple,
Some scudded on the gale without a sound,
Some vanish'd in the distance.

440

In a smart, ache, tingle,
Lizzie went her way;
Knew not was it night or day;
Sprang up the bank, tore thro' the furze,
Threaded copse and dingle,
And heard her penny jingle
Bouncing in her purse,—
Its bounce was music to her ear.
She ran and ran
As if she fear'd some goblin man
Dogg'd her with gibe or curse
Or something worse:
But not one goblin scurried after,
Nor was she prick'd by fear;
The kind heart made her windy-paced
That urged her home quite out of breath with haste
And inward laughter.

450

She cried, "Laura," up the garden,
"Did you miss me?
Come and kiss me.
Never mind my bruises,
Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
Squeez'd from goblin fruits for you,
Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
Eat me, drink me, love me;
Laura, make much of me;
For your sake I have braved the glen

460

470

And had to do with goblin merchant men."

Laura started from her chair,
Flung her arms up in the air,
Clutch'd her hair:
"Lizzie, Lizzie, have you tasted
For my sake the fruit forbidden?
Must your light like mine be hidden,
Your young life like mine be wasted,
Undone in mine undoing,
And ruin'd in my ruin,
Thirsty, canker'd, goblin-ridden?"—
She clung about her sister,
Kiss'd and kiss'd and kiss'd her:
Tears once again
Refresh'd her shrunken eyes,
Dropping like rain
After long sultry drouth;
Shaking with aguish fear, and pain,
She kiss'd and kiss'd her with a hungry mouth.

480

Her lips began to scorch,
That juice was wormwood to her tongue,
She loath'd the feast:
Writhing as one possess'd she leap'd and sung,
Rent all her robe, and wrung
Her hands in lamentable haste,
And beat her breast.
Her locks stream'd like the torch
Borne by a racer at full speed,
Or like the mane of horses in their flight,
Or like an eagle when she stems the light
Straight toward the sun,
Or like a caged thing freed,
Or like a flying flag when armies run.

500

Swift fire spread through her veins, knock'd at her heart,
Met the fire smouldering there
And overbore its lesser flame;
She gorged on bitterness without a name:
Ah! fool, to choose such part
Of soul-consuming care!
Sense fail'd in the mortal strife:
Like the watch-tower of a town
Which an earthquake shatters down,
Like a lightning-stricken mast,
Like a wind-uprooted tree
Spun about,
Like a foam-topp'd waterspout
Cast down headlong in the sea,

510

520

She fell at last;
Pleasure past and anguish past,
Is it death or is it life?

Life out of death.

That night long Lizzie watch'd by her,
Counted her pulse's flagging stir,
Felt for her breath,
Held water to her lips, and cool'd her face
With tears and fanning leaves:
But when the first birds chirp'd about their eaves,
And early reapers plodded to the place
Of golden sheaves,
And dew-wet grass
Bow'd in the morning winds so brisk to pass,
And new buds with new day
Open'd of cup-like lilies on the stream,
Laura awoke as from a dream,
Laugh'd in the innocent old way,
Hugg'd Lizzie but not twice or thrice;
Her gleaming locks show'd not one thread of grey,
Her breath was sweet as May
And light danced in her eyes.

530

540

Days, weeks, months, years
Afterwards, when both were wives
With children of their own;
Their mother-hearts beset with fears,
Their lives bound up in tender lives;
Laura would call the little ones
And tell them of her early prime,
Those pleasant days long gone
Of not-returning time:
Would talk about the haunted glen,
The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,
Their fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood;
(Men sell not such in any town):
Would tell them how her sister stood
In deadly peril to do her good,
And win the fiery antidote:
Then joining hands to little hands
Would bid them cling together,
"For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands."

550

560

567

27 April 1859

The Dead City

Once I rambled in a wood
With a careless hardihood,
Heeding not the tangled way;
Labyrinths around me lay,
But for them I never stood.

On, still on, I wandered on,
And the sun above me shone;
And the birds around me winging
With their everlasting singing
Made me feel not quite alone.

10

In the branches of the trees,
Murmured like the hum of bees
The low sound of happy breezes,
Whose sweet voice that never ceases
Lulls the heart to perfect ease.

Streamlets bubbled all around
On the green and fertile ground,
Thro' the rushes and the grass,
Like a sheet of liquid glass,
With a soft and trickling sound.
And I went, I went on faster,
Contemplating no disaster;
And I plucked ripe blackberries,
But the birds with envious eyes
Came and stole them from their master:

20

For the birds here were all tame;
Some with bodies like a flame,
Some that glanced the branches thro'
Pure and colourless as dew;
Fearlessly to me they came.

30

Before me no mortal stood
In the mazes of that wood;
Before me the birds had never
Seen a man, but dwelt for ever
In a happy solitude;

Happy solitude, and blest
With beatitude of rest;
Where the woods are ever vernal,
And the life and joy eternal,
Without Death's or Sorrow's test.

40

Oh most blessed solitude!

Oh most full beatitude!
Where are quiet without strife,
And imperishable life,
Nothing marred, and all things good.

And the bright sun, life begetting,
Never rising, never setting,
Shining warmly overhead,
Nor too pallid, nor too red,
Lulled me to a sweet forgetting

50

Sweet forgetting of the time:
And I listened for no chime
Which might warn me to be gone;
But I wandered on, still on,
'Neath the boughs of oak and lime.

Know I not how long I strayed
In the pleasant leafy shade;
But the trees had gradually
Grown more rare, the air more free,
The sun hotter overhead.

60

Soon the birds no more were seen
Glancing thro' the living green;
And a blight had passed upon
All the trees; and the pale sun
Shone with a strange lurid sheen.

Then a darkness spread around:
I saw nought, I heard no sound;
Solid darkness overhead,
With a trembling cautious tread
Passed I o'er the unseen ground.

70

But at length a pallid light
Broke upon my searching sight;
A pale solitary ray,
Like a star at dawn of day
Ere the sun is hot and bright.

Toward its faintly glimmering beam
I went on as in a dream;
A strange dream of hope and fear!
And I saw as I drew near,
'Twas in truth no planet's gleam;

80

But a lamp above a gate
Shone in solitary state
O'er a desert drear and cold,

O'er a heap of ruins old,
O'er a scene most desolate.

By that gate I entered lone
A fair city of white stone;
And a lovely light to see
Dawned, and spread most gradually
Till the air grew warm and shone.

90

Thro' the splendid streets I strayed
In that radiance without shade,
Yet I heard no human sound;
All was still and silent round
As a city of the dead.

All the doors were open wide;
Lattices on every side
In the wind swung to and fro;
Wind that whispered very low;
Go and see the end of pride.

100

With a fixed determination
Entered I each habitation,
But they were all tenantless;
All was utter loneliness,
All was deathless desolation.

In the noiseless market-place
Was no care-worn busy face;
There were none to buy or sell,
None to listen or to tell,
In this silent emptiness.

110

Thro' the city on I went
Full of awe and wonderment;
Still the light around me shone,
And I wandered on, still on,
In my great astonishment,

Till at length I reached a place
Where amid an ample space
Rose a palace for a king;
Golden was the turreting,
And of solid gold the base.

120

The great porch was ivory,
And the steps were ebony;
Diamond and chrysoprase
Set the pillars in a blaze,
Capitalled with jewelry.

None was there to bar my way—
And the breezes seemed to say:
Touch not these, but pass them by,
Pressing onwards: therefore I
Entered in and made no stay

130

All around was desolate:
I went on; a silent state
Reigned in each deserted room,
And I hastened thro' the gloom
Till I reached an outer gate.

Soon a shady avenue
Blossom-perfumed, met my view.
Here and there the sun-beams fell
On pure founts, whose sudden swell
Up from marble basins flew.

140

Every tree was fresh and green;
Not a withered leaf was seen
Thro' the veil of flowers and fruit;
Strong and sapful were the root,
The top boughs, and all between.

Vines were climbing everywhere
Full of purple grapes and fair:
And far off I saw the corn
With its heavy head down borne,
By the odour-laden air

150

Who shall strip the bending vine?
Who shall tread the press for wine?
Who shall bring the harvest in
When the pallid ears begin
In the sun to glow and shine?

On I went, alone, alone,
Till I saw a tent that shone
With each bright and lustrous hue;
It was trimmed with jewels too,
And with flowers; not one was gone

160

Then the breezes whispered me:
Enter in, and look, and see
How for luxury and pride
A great multitude have died:--
And I entered tremblingly.

Lo, a splendid banquet laid

In the cool and pleasant shade.
Might tables, every thing
Of sweet Nature's furnishing
That was rich and rare, displayed;

170

And each strange and luscious cate
Practised Art makes delicate;
With a thousand fair devices
Full of odours and of spices;
And a warm voluptuous state.

All the vessels were of gold
Set with gems of worth untold.
In the midst a fountain rose
Of pure milk, whose rippling flows
In a silver basin rolled.

180

In a green emerald baskets were
Sun-red apples, streaked, and fair;
Here the nectarine and peach
And ripe plums lay, and on each
The bloom rested everywhere.

Grapes were hanging overhead,
Purple, pale, and ruby-red;
And in panniers all around
Yellow melons shone, fresh found,
With the dew upon them spread.

190

And the apricot and pear
And the pulpy fig were there;
Cherries and dark mulberries,
Bunch currants, strawberries,
And the lemon wan and fair.

And unnumbered others too,
Fruits of every size and hue,
Juicy in their ripe perfection,
Cool beneath the cool reflection
Of the curtains' skyey blue.

200

All the floor was strewn with flowers
Fresh from sunshine and from showers,
Roses, lilies, Jessamine;
And the ivy ran between
Like a thought in happy hours.

And this feast too lacked no guest
With its warm delicious rest;
With its couches softly sinking,

And its glow, not made for thinking,
But for careless joy at best.

210

Many banquetters were there,
Wrinkled age, the young, the fair;
In the splendid revelry
Flushing cheek and kindling eye
Told of gladness without care.

Yet no laughter rang around,
Yet they uttered forth no sound;
With the smile upon his face
Each sat moveless in his place,
Silently, as if spell-bound.

220

The low whispering voice was gone,
And I felt awed and alone.
In my great astonishment
To the feasters up I went—
Lo, they all were turned to stone.

Yea they all were statue-cold,
Men and women, young and old;
With the life-like look and smile
And the flush; and all the while
The hard fingers kept their hold.

230

Here a little child was sitting
With a merry glance, befitting
Happy age and heedless heart;
There a young man sat apart
With a forward look unweeting.

Nigh them was a maiden fair;
And the ringlets of her hair
Round her slender fingers twined;
And she blushed as she reclined,
Knowing that her love was there.

240

Here a dead man sat to sup,
In his hand a drinking cup;
Wine cup of the heavy gold,
Human hand stony and cold,
And no life-breath struggling up.

There a mother lay, and smiled
Down upon her infant child;
Happy child and happy mother
Laughing back to one another
With a gladness undefiled.

250

Here an old man slept, worn out
With the revelry and rout;
Here a strong man sat and gazed
On a girl, whose eyes unraised
No more wandered round about.

And none broke the stillness, none;
I was the sole living one.
And methought that silently
Many seemed to look on me
With strange steadfast eyes that shone.

260

Full of fear I would have fled;
Full of fear I bent my head,
Shutting out each stony guest:--
When I looked again the feast
And the tent had vanished.

Yes, once more I stood alone
Where the happy sunlight shone
And a gentle wind was sighing,
And the little birds were flying,
And the dreariness was gone.

270

All these things that I have said
Awed me, and made me afraid.
What was I that I should see
So much hidden mystery?
And I straightway knelt and prayed.

275

9 April 1847

Shut Out

The door was shut. I looked between
Its iron bars; and saw it lie,
My garden, mine, beneath the sky,
Pied with all flowers bedewed and green:

4

From bough to bough the song-birds crossed,
From flower to flower the moths and bees;
With all its nests and stately trees
It had been mine, and it was lost.

8

A shadowless spirit kept the gate,
Blank and unchanging like the grave.
I peering through said: 'Let me have
Some buds to cheer my outcast state.'

12

He answered not. 'Or give me, then,

But one small twig from shrub or tree;
And bid my home remember me
Until I come to it again.'

16

The spirit was silent; but he took
Mortar and stone to build a wall;
He left no loophole great or small
Through which my straining eyes might look:

20

So now I sit here quite alone
Blinded with tears; nor grieve for that,
For nought is left worth looking at
Since my delightful land is gone.

24

A violet bed is budding near,
Wherein a lark has made her nest:
And good they are, but not the best;
And dear they are, but not so dear.

28

20 January 1856

The Convent Threshold

There's blood between us, love, my love,
There's father's blood, there's brother's blood,
And blood's a bar I cannot pass.
I choose the stairs that mount above,
Stair after golden sky-ward stair,
To city and to sea of glass.
My lily feet are soiled with mud,
With scarlet mud which tells a tale
Of hope that was, of guilt that was,
Of love that shall not yet avail;
Alas, my heart, if I could bare
My heart, this selfsame stain is there:
I seek the sea of glass and fire
To wash the spot, to burn the snare;
Lo, stairs are meant to lift us higher--
Mount with me, mount the kindled stair.

10

Your eyes look earthward, mine look up.
I see the far-off city grand,
Beyond the hills a watered land,
Beyond the gulf a gleaming strand
Of mansions where the righteous sup;
Who sleep at ease among their trees,
Or wake to sing a cadenced hymn
With Cherubim and Seraphim;
They bore the Cross, they drained the cup,
Racked, roasted, crushed, wrenched limb from limb,

20

They the offscouring of the world.
The heaven of starry heavens unfurled,
The sun before their face is dim.
You looking earthward, what see you?
Milk-white, wine-flushed among the vines,
Up and down leaping, to and fro,
Most glad, most full, made strong with wines,
Blooming as peaches pearled with dew,
Their golden windy hair afloat,
Love-music warbling in their throat,
Young men and women come and go.

30

You linger, yet the time is short:
Flee for your life, gird up your strength
To flee; the shadows stretched at length
Show that day wanes, that night draws nigh;
Flee to the mountain, tarry not.
Is this a time for smile and sigh,
For songs among the secret trees
Where sudden blue birds nest and sport?
The time is short and yet you stay:
To-day, while it is called to-day,
Kneel, wrestle, knock, do violence, pray;
To-day is short, to-morrow nigh:
Why will you die? why will you die?

40

You sinned with me a pleasant sin:
Repent with me, for I repent.
Woe's me the lore I must unlearn!
Woe's me that easy way we went,
So rugged when I would return!
How long until my sleep begin
How long shall stretch these nights and days?
Surely, clean Angels cry, she prays;
She laves her soul with tedious tears:
How long must stretch these years and years?

50

I turn from you my cheeks and eyes,
My hair which you shall see no more--
Alas for joy that went before,
For joy that dies, for love that dies.
Only my lips still turn to you,
My livid lips that cry, Repent.
O weary life, O weary Lent,
O weary time whose stars are few.

How shall I rest in Paradise,
Or sit on steps of heaven alone
If Saints and Angels spoke of love
Should I not answer from my throne:

70

Have pity upon me, ye my friends,
For I have heard the sound thereof:
Should I not turn with yearning eyes,
Turn earthwards with a pitiful pang?
Oh save me from a pang in heaven.
By all the gifts we took and gave,
Repent, repent, and be forgiven:
This life is long, but yet it ends;
Repent and purge your soul and save:
No gladder song the morning stars
Upon their birthday morning sang
Than Angels sing when one repents.

80

I tell you what I dreamed last night:
A spirit with transfigured face
Fire-footed climb an infinite space.
I heard his hundred pinions clang,
Heaven-bells rejoicing rang and rang,
Heaven-air was thrilled with subtle scents,
Worlds spun upon their rushing cars.
He mounted, shrieking, "Give me light!"
Still light was poured on him, more light;
Angels, Archangels he outstripped,
Exulting in exceeding might,
And trod the skirts of Cherubim.
Still "Give me light," he shrieked; and dipped
His thirsty face, and drank a sea,
Athirst with thirst it could not slake.
I saw him, drunk with knowledge, take
From aching brows the aureole crown--
His locks writhe like a cloven snake--
He left his throne to grovel down
And lick the dust of Seraphs' feet;
For what is knowledge duly weighed?
Knowledge is strong, but love is sweet;
Yea, all the progress he had made
Was but to learn that all is small
Save love, for love is all in all.

90

100

I tell you what I dreamed last night:
It was not dark, it was not light,
Cold dews had drenched my plenteous hair
Through clay; you came to seek me there.
And "Do you dream of me?" you said.
My heart was dust that used to leap
To you; I answered half asleep:
"My pillow is damp, my sheets are red,
There's a leaden tester to my bed;
Find you a warmer playfellow,
A warmer pillow for your head,

110

120

A kinder love to love than mine."
You wrung your hands, while I, like lead,
Crushed downwards through the sodden earth;
You smote your hands but not in mirth,
And reeled but were not drunk with wine.

For all night long I dreamed of you;
I woke and prayed against my will,
Then slept to dream of you again.
At length I rose and knelt and prayed.
I cannot write the words I said,
My words were slow, my tears were few;
But through the dark my silence spoke
Like thunder. When this morning broke,
My face was pinched, my hair was grey,
And frozen blood was on the sill
Where stifling in my struggle I lay.
If now you saw me you would say:
Where is the face I used to love?
And I would answer: Gone before;
It tarries veiled in paradise.

When once the morning star shall rise,
When earth with shadow flees away
And we stand safe within the door,
Then you shall lift the veil thereof.
Look up, rise up: for far above
Our palms are grown, our place is set;
There we shall meet as once we met,
And love with old familiar love.

9 July 1858

130

140

149

At Home

When I was dead, my spirit turned
To seek the much-frequented house:
I passed the door, and saw my friends
Feasting beneath green orange boughs;
From hand to hand they pushed the wine,
They sucked the pulp of plum and peach;
They sang, they jested, and they laughed,
For each was loved of each.

8

I listened to their honest chat:
Said one: "To-morrow we shall be
Plod plod along the featureless sands,
And coasting miles and miles of sea."
Said one: "Before the turn of tide
We will achieve the eyrie-seat."

242

Said one: "To-morrow shall be like
To-day, but much more sweet."

16

"To-morrow," said they, strong with hope,
And dwelt upon the pleasant way:
"To-morrow," cried they, one and all,
While no one spoke of yesterday.
Their life stood full at blessed noon;
I, only I, had passed away:
"To-morrow and to-day," they cried;
I was of yesterday.

24

I shivered comfortless, but cast
No chill across the table-cloth;
I, all-forgotten, shivered, sad
To stay, and yet to part how loth:
I passed from the familiar room,
I who from love had passed away,
Like the remembrance of a guest
That tarrieth but a day.

32

29 June 1858

Chapter 2

Song

Two doves upon the selfsame branch,
Two lilies on a single stem,
Two butterflies upon one flower :--
O happy we who look on them.

4

Who look upon them hand in hand
Flushed in the rosy summer light ;
Who look upon them hand in hand
And never give a thought to night.

8

Before 1863

From House to Home

The first was like a dream through summer heat,
The second like a tedious numbing swoon,
While the half-frozen pulses lagged to beat
Beneath a winter moon.

'But,' says my friend, 'what was this thing and where?'
It was a pleasure-place within my soul;
An earthly paradise supremely fair
That lured me from the goal.

The first part was a tissue of hugged lies;
The second was its ruin fraught with pain:
Why raise the fair delusion to the skies
But to be dashed again?

10

My castle stood of white transparent glass
Glittering and frail with many a fretted spire,
But when the summer sunset came to pass
It kindled into fire.

My pleasance was an undulating green,
Stately with trees whose shadows slept below,
With glimpses of smooth garden-beds between
Like flame or sky or snow.

20

Swift squirrels on the pastures took their ease,
With leaping lambs safe from the unfeared knife;
All singing-birds rejoicing in those trees
Fulfilled their careless life.

Woodpigeons cooed there, stockdoves nestled there;
My trees were full of songs and flowers and fruit,
Their branches spread a city to the air
And mice lodged in their root.

My heath lay farther off, where lizards lived
In strange metallic mail, just spied and gone;
Like darted lightnings here and there perceived
But nowhere dwelt upon.

30

Frogs and fat toads were there to hop or plod
And propagate in peace, an uncouth crew,
Where velvet-headed rushes rustling nod
And spill the morning dew.

All caterpillars throng beneath my rule,
With snails and slugs in corners out of sight;
I never marred the curious sudden stool
That perfects in a night.

40

Safe in his excavated gallery
The burrowing mole groped on from year to year;
No harmless hedgehog curled because of me
His prickly back for fear.

Oft times one like an angel walked with me,
With spirit-discerning eyes like flames of fire,
But deep as the unfathomed endless sea,
Fulfilling my desire:

And sometimes like a snowdrift he was fair,
And sometimes like a sunset glorious red,
And sometimes he had wings to scale the air
With aureole round his head.

50

We sang our songs together by the way,
Calls and recalls and echoes of delight;
So communed we together all the day,
And so in dreams by night.

I have no words to tell what way we walked.
What unforgotten path now closed and sealed;
I have no words to tell all things we talked,
All things that he revealed:

60

This only can I tell: that hour by hour
I waxed more feastful, lifted up and glad;
I felt no thorn-prick when I plucked a flower,
Felt not my friend was sad.

'To-morrow,' once I said to him with smiles:
'To-night,' he answered gravely and was dumb,
But pointed out the stones that numbered miles
And miles to come.

'Not so,' I said: 'to-morrow shall be sweet;
To-night is not so sweet as coming days.'
Then first I saw that he had turned his feet,
Had turned from me his face:

70

Running and flying miles and miles he went,
But once looked back to beckon with his hand
And cry: 'Come home, O love, from banishment:
Come to the distant land.'

That night destroyed me like an avalanche;
One night turned all my summer back to snow:
Next morning not a bird upon my branch,
Not a lamb woke below,—

80

No bird, no lamb, no living breathing thing;
No squirrel scampered on my breezy lawn,
No mouse lodged by his hoard: all joys took wing
And fled before that dawn.

Azure and sun were starved from heaven above,
No dew had fallen, but biting frost lay hoar:
O love, I knew that I should meet my love,
Should find my love no more.

'My love no more,' I muttered stunned with pain:
I shed no tear, I wrung no passionate hand,
Till something whispered: 'You shall meet again,
Meet in a distant land.'

90

Then with a cry like famine I arose,
I lit my candle, searched from room to room,
Searched up and down; a war of winds that froze
Swept through the blank of gloom.

I searched day after day, night after night;
Scant change there came to me of night or day:
'No more,' I wailed, 'no more:' and trimmed my light,
And gnashed but did not pray,

100

Until my heart broke and my spirit broke:
Upon the frost-bound floor I stumbled, fell,
And moaned: 'It is enough: withhold the stroke.
Farewell, O love, farewell.'

Then life swooned from me. And I heard the song
Of spheres and spirits rejoicing over me:
One cried: 'Our sister, she hath suffered long.'—
One answered: 'Make her see.'—

One cried: 'Oh blessed she who no more pain,
Who no more disappointment shall receive.'—
One answered: 'Not so: she must live again;
Strengthen thou her to live.'

110

So while I lay entranced a curtain seemed
To shrivel with crackling from before my face;
Across mine eyes a waxing radiance beamed
And showed a certain place.

I saw a vision of a woman, where
Night and new morning strive for domination;
Incomparably pale, and almost fair,
And sad beyond expression.

120

Her eyes were like some fire-enshrining gem,
Were stately like the stars, and yet were tender;
Her figure charmed me like a windy stem
Quivering and drooped and slender.

I stood upon the outer barren ground,
She stood on inner ground that budded flowers;
While circling in their never-slackening round
Danced by the mystic hours.

But every flower was lifted on a thorn,
And every thorn shot upright from its sands
To gall her feet; hoarse laughter pealed in scorn
With cruel clapping hands.

130

She bled and wept, yet did not shrink; her strength
Was strung up until daybreak of delight:
She measured measureless sorrow toward its length,
And breadth, and depth, and height.

Then marked I how a chain sustained her form,
A chain of living links not made nor riven:
It stretched sheer up through lighting, wind, and storm,
And anchored fast in heaven.

140

One cried: 'How long? yet founded on the Rock
She shall do battle, suffer, and attain.'—
One answered: 'Faith quakes in the tempest shock:
Strengthen her soul again.'

I saw a cup sent down and come to her
Brimfull of loathing and of bitterness:
She drank with livid lips that seemed to stir
The depth, not make it less.

But as she drank I spied a hand distil
New wine and virgin honey; making it
First bitter-sweet, then sweet indeed, until
She tasted only sweet.

150

Her lips and cheeks waxed rosy-fresh and young;
Drinking she sang: 'My soul shall nothing want;'
And drank anew: while soft a song was sung,
A mystical slow chant.

One cried: 'The wounds are faithful of a friend:
The wilderness shall blossom as a rose.'—
One answered: 'Rend the veil, declare the end,
Strengthen her ere she goes.'

160

Then earth and heaven were rolled up like a scroll;
Time and space, change and death, had passed away;
Weight, number, measure, each had reached its whole;
The day had come, that day.

Multitudes—multitudes—stood up in bliss,
Made equal to the angels, glorious, fair;
With harps, palms, wedding-garments, kiss of peace
And crowned and haloed hair.

They sang a song, a new song in the height,
Harping with harps to Him Who is Strong and True:

170

They drank new wine, their eyes saw with new light,
Lo, all things were made new.

Tier beyond tier they rose and rose and rose
So high that it was dreadful, flames with flames:
No man could number them, no tongue disclose
Their secret sacred names.

As though one pulse stirred all, one rush of blood
Fed all, one breath swept through them myriad-voiced,
They struck their harps, cast down their crowns, they stood
And worshipped and rejoiced.

180

Each face looked one way like a moon new-lit,
Each face looked one way towards its Sun of Love;
Drank love and bathed in love and mirrored it
And knew no end thereof.

Glory touched glory on each blessed head,
Hands locked dear hands never to sunder more:
These were the new-begotten from the dead
Whom the great birthday bore.

Heart answered heart, soul answered soul at rest,
Double against each other, filled, sufficed:
All loving, loved of all; but loving best
And best beloved of Christ.

190

I saw that one who lost her love in pain,
Who trod on thorns, who drank the loathsome cup;
The lost in night, in day was found again;
The fallen was lifted up.

They stood together in the blessed noon,
They sang together through the length of days;
Each loving face bent Sunwards like a moon
New-lit with love and praise.

200

Therefore, O friend, I would not if I might
Rebuild my house of lies, wherein I joyed
One time to dwell: my soul shall walk in white,
Cast down but not destroyed.

Therefore in patience I possess my soul;
Yea, therefore as a flint I set my face,
To pluck down, to build up again the whole—
But in a distant place.

These thorns are sharp, yet I can tread on them;
This cup is loathsome, yet He makes it sweet:
My face is steadfast toward Jerusalem,
My heart remembers it.

210

I lift the hanging hands, the feeble knees—
I, precious more than seven times molten gold—
Until the day when from his storehouses
God shall bring new and old;

Beauty for ashes, oil of joy for grief,
Garment of praise for spirit of heaviness:
Although to-day I fade as doth a leaf,
I languish and grow less.

220

Although to-day He prunes my twigs with pain,
Yet doth His blood nourish and warm my root:
To-morrow I shall put forth buds again
And clothe myself with fruit.

Although to-day I walk in tedious ways,
To-day His staff is turned into a rod,
Yet will I wait for Him the appointed days
And stay upon my God.

228

19 November 1858

Yet A Little While

I dreamed and did not seek: to-day I seek
Who can no longer dream;
But now am all behindhand, waxen weak,
And dazed amid so many things that gleam
Yet are not what they seem.

5

I dreamed and did not work: to-day I work
Kept wide awake by care
And loss, and perils dimly guessed to lurk;
I work and reap not, while my life goes bare
And void in wintry air.

10

I hope indeed; but hope itself is fear
Viewed on the sunny side;
I hope, and disregard the world that's here,
The prizes drawn, the sweet things that betide;
I hope, and I abide.

15

1879

The Prince's Progress

Till all sweet gums and juices flow,

Till the blossom of blossoms blow,
The long hours go and come and go,
The bride she sleepeth, waketh, sleepeth,
Waiting for one whose coming is slow:—
Hark! the bride weepeth.

'How long shall I wait, come heat come rime?'—
'Till the strong Prince comes, who must come in time'
(Her women say), 'there's a mountain to climb,
A river to ford. Sleep, dream and sleep;
Sleep' (they say): 'we've muffled the chime,
Better dream than weep.'

10

In his world-end palace the strong Prince sat,
Taking his ease on cushion and mat,
Close at hand lay his staff and his hat.
'When wilt thou start? the bride waits, O youth.'—
'Now the moon's at full; I tarried for that,
Now I start in truth.

'But tell me first, true voice of my doom,
Of my veiled bride in her maiden bloom;
Keeps she watch through glare and through gloom,
Watch for me asleep and awake?'—
'Spell-bound she watches in one white room,
And is patient for thy sake.

20

'By her head lilies and rosebuds grow;
The lilies droop, will the rosebuds blow?
The silver slim lilies hang the head low;
Their stream is scanty, their sunshine rare:
Let the sun blaze out, and let the stream flow,
They will blossom and wax fair.

30

'Red and white poppies grow at her feet,
The blood-red wait for sweet summer heat,
Wrapped in bud-coats hairy and neat;
But the white buds swell, one day they will burst,
Will open their death-cups drowsy and sweet—
Which will open the first?'

Then a hundred sad voices lifted a wail,
And a hundred glad voices piped on the gale:
'Time is short, life is short,' they took up the tale:
'Life is sweet, love is sweet, use to-day while you may;
Love is sweet, and to-morrow may fail;
Love is sweet, use to-day.'

40

While the song swept by, beseeching and meek,
Up rose the Prince with a flush on his cheek,

Up he rose to stir and to seek,
Going forth in the joy of his strength;
Strong of limb if of purpose weak,
Starting at length.

Forth he set in the breezy morn,
Crossing green fields of nodding corn,
As goodly a Prince as ever was born;
Carolling with the carolling lark;—
Sure his bride will be won and worn,
Ere fall of the dark.

50

So light his step, so merry his smile,
A milkmaid loitered beside a stile,
Set down her pail and rested awhile,
A wave-haired milkmaid, rosy and white;
The Prince, who had journeyed at least a mile,
Grew athirst at the sight.

60

'Will you give me a morning draught?'—
'You're kindly welcome,' she said, and laughed.
He lifted the pail, new milk he quaffed;
Then wiping his curly black beard like silk:
'Whitest cow that ever was calved
Surely gave you this milk.'

Was it milk now, or was it cream?
Was she a maid, or an evil dream?
Her eyes began to glitter and gleam;
He would have gone, but he stayed instead;
Green they gleamed as he looked in them:
'Give me my fee,' she said.—

70

'I will give you a jewel of gold.'—
'Not so; gold is heavy and cold.'—
'I will give you a velvet fold
Of foreign work your beauty to deck.'—
'Better I like my kerchief rolled
Light and white round my neck.'—

'Nay,' cried he, 'but fix your own fee.'—
She laughed, 'You may give the full moon to me;
Or else sit under this apple-tree
Here for one idle day by my side;
After that I'll let you go free,
And the world is wide.'

80

Loth to stay, but to leave her slack,
He half turned away, then he quite turned back:
For courtesy's sake he could not lack

To redeem his own royal pledge;
Ahead too the windy heaven lowered black
With a fire-cloven edge.

90

So he stretched his length in the apple-tree shade,
Lay and laughed and talked to the maid,
Who twisted her hair in a cunning braid
And writhed it shining in serpent-coils,
And held him a day and night fast laid
In her subtle toils.

At the death of night and the birth of day,
When the owl left off his sober play,
And the bat hung himself out of the way,
Woke the song of mavis and merle,
And heaven put off its hodden grey
For mother-o'-pearl.

100

Peeped up daisies here and there,
Here, there, and everywhere;
Rose a hopeful lark in the air,
Spreading out towards the sun his breast;
While the moon set solemn and fair
Away in the West.

'Up, up, up,' called the watchman lark,
In his clear réveillée: 'Hearken, oh hark!
Press to the high goal, fly to the mark.
Up, O sluggard, new morn is born;
If still asleep when the night falls dark,
Thou must wait a second morn.'

110

'Up, up, up,' sad glad voices swelled:
'So the tree falls and lies as it's felled.
Be thy bands loosed, O sleeper, long held
In sweet sleep whose end is not sweet.
Be the slackness girt and the softness quelled
And the slowness fleet.'

120

Off he set. The grass grew rare,
A blight lurked in the darkening air,
The very moss grew hueless and spare,
The last daisy stood all astunt;
Behind his back the soil lay bare,
But barer in front.

A land of chasm and rent, a land
Of rugged blackness on either hand:
If water trickled its track was tanned
With an edge of rust to the chink;

130

If one stamped on stone or on sand
It returned a clink.

A lifeless land, a loveless land,
Without lair or nest on either hand:
Only scorpions jerked in the sand,
Black as black iron, or dusty pale;
From point to point sheer rock was manned
By scorpions in mail.

A land of neither life nor death,
Where no man buildeth or fashioneth,
Where none draws living or dying breath;
No man cometh or goeth there,
No man doeth, seeketh, saith,
In the stagnant air.

Some old volcanic upset must
Have rent the crust and blackened the crust;
Wrenched and ribbed it beneath its dust
Above earth's molten centre at seethe,
Heaved and heaped it by huge upthrust
Of fire beneath.

Untrodden before, untrodden since:
Tedious land for a social Prince;
Halting, he scanned the outs and ins,
Endless, labyrinthine, grim,
Of the solitude that made him wince,
Laying wait for him.

By bulging rock and gaping cleft,
Even of half mere daylight reft,
Rueful he peered to right and left,
Muttering in his altered mood:
'The fate is hard that weaves my weft,
Though my lot be good.'

Dim the changes of day to night,
Of night scarce dark to day not bright.
Still his road wound towards the right,
Still he went, and still he went,
Till one night he espied a light,
In his discontent.

Out it flashed from a yawn-mouthed cave,
Like a red-hot eye from a grave.
No man stood there of whom to crave
Rest for wayfarer plodding by:
Though the tenant were churl or knave

140

150

160

170

The Prince might try.

In he passed and tarried not,
Groping his way from spot to spot,
Towards where the cavern flare glowed hot:—
An old, old mortal, cramped and double,
Was peering into a seething-pot,
In a world of trouble.

180

The veriest atom he looked,
With grimy fingers clutching and crooked,
Tight skin, a nose all bony and hooked,
And a shaking, sharp, suspicious way;
His blinking eyes had scarcely brooked
The light of day.

Stared the Prince, for the sight was new;
Stared, but asked without more ado:
'My a weary traveller lodge with you,
Old father, here in your lair?
In your country the inns seem few,
And scanty the fare.'

190

The head turned not to hear him speak;
The old voice whistled as through a leak
(Out it came in a quavering squeak):
'Work for wage is a bargain fit:
If there's aught of mine that you seek
You must work for it.

'Buried alive from light and air
This year is the hundredth year,
I feed my fire with a sleepless care,
Watching my potion wane or wax:
Elixir of Life is simmering there,
And but one thing lacks.

200

'If you're fain to lodge here with me,
Take that pair of bellows you see—
Too heavy for my old hands they be—
Take the bellows and puff and puff:
When the steam curls rosy and free
The broth's boiled enough.

210

'Then take your choice of all I have;
I will give you life if you crave.
Already I'm mildewed for the grave,
So first myself I must drink my fill:
But all the rest may be yours, to save
Whomever you will.'

'Done,' quoth the Prince, and the bargain stood,
First he piled on resinous wood,
Next plied the bellows in hopeful mood;
Thinking, 'My love and I will live.
If I tarry, why life is good,
And she may forgive.'

220

The pot began to bubble and boil;
The old man cast in essence and oil,
He stirred all up with a triple coil
Of gold and silver and iron wire,
Dredged in a pinch of virgin soil,
And fed the fire.

But still the steam curled watery white;
Night turned to day and day to night;
One thing lacked, by his feeble sight
Unseen, unguessed by his feeble mind:
Life might miss him, but Death the blight
Was sure to find.

230

So when the hundredth year was full
The thread was cut and finished the school.
Death snapped the old worn-out tool,
Snapped him short while he stood and stirred
(Though stiff he stood as a stiff-necked mule)
With never a word.

240

Thus at length the old crab was nipped.
The dead hand slipped, the dead finger dipped
In the broth as the dead man slipped,—
That same instant, a rosy red
Flushed the steam, and quivered and clipped
Round the dead old head.

The last ingredient was supplied
(Unless the dead man mistook or lied).
Up started the Prince, he cast aside
The bellows plied through the tedious trial,
Made sure that his host had died,
And filled a phial.

250

'One night's rest,' though the Prince: 'This done,
Forth I start with the rising sun:
With the morrow I rise and run,
Come what will of wind or of weather.
This draught of Life when my Bride is won
We'll drink together.'

255

Thus the dead man stayed in his grave,
Self-chosen, the dead man in his cave;
There he stayed, were he fool or knave,
Or honest seeker who had not found:
While the Prince outside was prompt to crave
Sleep on the ground.

260

'If she watches, go bid her sleep;
Bit her sleep, for the road is steep:
He can sleep who holdeth her cheap,
Sleep and wake and sleep again.
Let him sow, one day he shall reap,
Let him sow the grain.

270

'When there blows a sweet garden rose,
Let it bloom and wither if no man knows:
But if one knows when the sweet thing blows,
Knows, and lets it open and drop,
If but a nettle his garden grows
He hath earned the crop.'

Through his sleep the summons rang,
Into his ears it sobbed and it sang.
Slow he woke with a drowsy pang,
Shook himself without much debate,
Turned where he saw green branches hang,
Started though late.

280

For the black land was travelled o'er,
He should see the grim land no more.
A flowering country stretched before
His face when the lovely day came back:
He hugged the phial of Life he bore,
And resumed his track.

By willow courses he took his path,
Spied what a nest the kingfisher hath,
Marked the fields green to aftermath,
Marked where the red-brown field-mouse ran,
Loitered a while for a deep-stream bath,
Yawned for a fellow-man.

290

Up on the hills not a soul in view,
In a vale not many nor few;
Leaves, still leaves, and nothing new.
It's oh for a second maiden, at least,
To bear the flagon, and taste it too,
And flavour the feast.

300

Lagging he moved, and apt to swerve;

Lazy of limb, but quick of nerve.
At length the water-bed took a curve,
The deep river swept its bankside bare;
Waters streamed from the hill-reserve—
Waters here, waters there.

High above, and deep below,
Bursting, bubbling, swelling the flow,
Like hill torrents after the snow,—
Bubbling, gurgling, in whirling strife,
Swaying, sweeping, to and fro,—
He must swim for his life.

Which way?—which way?—his eyes grew dim
With the dizzying whirl—which way to swim?
The thunderous downshoot deafened him;
Half he choked in the lashing spray:
Life is sweet, and the grave is grim—
Which way?—which way?

A flash of light, a shout from the strand:
'This way—this way; here lies the land!'
His phial clutched in one drowning hand;
He catches—misses—catches a rope;
His feet slip on the slipping sand:
Is there life?—is there hope?

Just saved, without pulse or breath,—
Scarcely saved from the gulp of death;
Laid where a willow shadoweth—
Laid where a swelling turf is smooth.
(O Bride! but the Bridegroom lingereth
For all thy sweet youth.)

Kind hands do and undo,
Kind voices whisper and coo:
'I will chafe his hands'—'And I'—'And you
Raise his head, put his hair aside.'
(If many laugh, one well may rue:
Sleep on, thou Bride.)

So the Prince was tended with care:
One wrung foul ooze from his clustered hair;
Two chafed his hands, and did not spare;
But one held his drooping head breast-high,
Till his eyes oped, and at unaware
They met eye to eye.

Oh, a moon face in a shadowy place,
And a light touch and a winsome grace,

310

320

330

340

And a thrilling tender voice that says:
'Safe from waters that seek the sea—
Cold waters by rugged ways—
Safe with me.'

While overhead bird whistles to bird,
And round about plays a gamesome herd:
'Safe with us'—some take up the word—
'Safe with us, dear lord and friend:
All the sweeter if long deferred
Is rest in the end.'

Had he stayed to weigh and to scan,
He had been more or less than a man:
He did what a young man can,
Spoke of toil and an arduous way—
Toil to-morrow, while golden ran
The sands of to-day.

Slip past, slip fast,
Uncounted hours from first to last,
Many hours till the last is past,
Many hours dwindling to one—
One hour whose die is cast,
One last hour gone.

Come, gone—gone for ever—
Gone as an unreturning river—
Gone as to death the merriest liver—
Gone as the year at the dying fall—
To-morrow, to-day, yesterday, never—
Gone once for all.

Came at length the starting-day,
With last words, and last words to say,
With bodiless cries from far away—
Chiding wailing voices that rang
Like a trumpet-call to the tug and fray;
And thus they sang:

'Is there life?—the lamp burns low;
Is there hope?—the coming is slow:
The promise promised so long ago,
The long promise, has not been kept.
Does she live?—does she die?—she slumbers so
Who so oft has wept.

'Does she live?—does she die?—she languisheth
As a lily drooping to death,
As a drought-worn bird with failing breath,

350

360

370

380

As a lovely vine without a stay,
As a tree whereof the owner saith,
"Hew it down to-day."

Stung by that word the Prince was fain
To start on his tedious road again.
He crossed the stream where a ford was plain,
He climb the opposite bank though steep,
And swore to himself to strain and attain
Ere he tasted sleep.

390

Huge before him a mountain frowned
With foot of rock on the valley ground,
And head with snows incessant crowned,
And a cloud mantle about its strength,
And a path which the wild goat hath not found
In its breadth and length.

400

But he was strong to do and dare:
If a host had withstood him there,
He had braved a host with little care
In his lusty youth and his pride,
Tough to grapple though weak to snare.
He comes, O Bride.

Up he went where the goat scarce clings,
Up where the eagle folds her wings,
Past the green line of living things,
Where the sun cannot warm the cold,—
Up he went as a flame enrings
Where there seems no hold.

410

Up a fissure barren and black,
Till the eagles tired upon his track,
And the clouds were left behind his back,
Up till the utmost peak was past,
Then he gasped for breath and his strength fell slack;
He paused at last.

Before his face a valley spread
Where fatness laughed, wine, oil, and bread,
Where all fruit-trees their sweetness shed,
Where all birds made love to their kind,
Where jewels twinkled, and gold lay red
And not hard to find.

420

Midway down the mountain side
(On its green slope the path was wide)
Stood a house for a royal bride,
Built all of changing opal stone,

The royal palace, till now descried
In his dreams alone.

430

Less bold than in days of yore,
Doubting now though never before,
Doubting he goes and lags the more:
Is the time late? does the day grow dim?
Rose, will she open the crimson core
Of her heart to him?

Above his head a tangle glows
Of wine-red roses, blushes, snows,
Closed buds and buds that unclose,
Leaves and moss, and prickles too;
His hand shook as he plucked a rose,
And the rose dropped dew.

440

Take heart of grace! the potion of Life
May go far to woo him a wife:
If she frown, yet a lover's strife
Lightly raised can be laid again:
A hasty word is never the knife
To cut love in twain.

Far away stretched the royal land,
Fed by dew, by a spice-wind fanned:
Light labour more, and his foot would stand
On the threshold, all labour done;
Easy pleasure laid at his hand,
And the dear Bride won.

450

His slackening steps pause at the gate—
Does she wake or sleep?—the time is late—
Does she sleep now, or watch and wait?
She has watched, she has waited long,
Watching athwart the golden grate
With a patient song.

460

Fling the golden portals wide,
The Bridegroom comes to his promised Bride;
Draw the gold-stiff curtains aside,
Let them look on each other's face,
She in her meekness, he in his pride—
Day wears apace.

Day is over, the day that wore.
What is this that comes through the door,
The face covered, the feet before?
This that coming takes his breath;
The Bride not seen, to be seen no more

470

Save of Bridegroom Death?

Veiled figures carrying her
Sweep by yet make no stir;
There is a smell of spice and myrrh,
A bride-chant burdened with one name;
The bride-song rises steadier
Than the torches' flame:--

'Too late for love, too late for joy,
Too late, too late!
You loitered on the road too long,
You trifled at the gate:
The enchanted dove upon her branch
Died without a mate;
The enchanted princess in her tower
Slept, died, behind the grate;
Her heart was starving all this while
You made it wait.

480

'Ten years ago, five years ago,
One year ago,
Even then you had arrived in time,
Though somewhat slow;
Then you had known her living face
Which now you cannot know:
The frozen fountain would have leaped,
The buds gone on to blow,
The warm south wind would have awaked
To melt the snow.

490

'Is she fair now as she lies?
Once she was fair;
Meet queen for any kingly king,
With gold-dust on her hair.
Now these are poppies in her locks,
White poppies she must wear;
Must wear a veil to shroud her face
And the want graven there:
Or is the hunger fed at length,
Cast off the care?

500

'We never saw her with a smile
Or with a frown;
Her bed seemed never soft to her,
Though tossed of down;
She little heeded what she wore,
Kirtle, or wreath, or gown;
We think her white brows often ached
Beneath her crown,

510

Till silvery hairs showed in her locks
That used to be so brown.

'We never heard her speak in haste;
Her tones were sweet,
And modulated just so much
As it was meet:
Her heart sat silent through the noise
And concourse of the street.
There was no hurry in her hands,
No hurry in her feet;
There was no bliss drew nigh to her,
That she might run to greet.

520

'You should have wept her yesterday,
Wasting upon her bed:
But wherefore should you weep to-day
That she is dead?
Lo, we who love weep not to-day,
But crown her royal head.
Let be these poppies that we strew,
Your roses are too red:
Let be these poppies, not for you
Cut down and spread.'

530

11 October 1861 to March 1865

Autumn

I dwell alone—I dwell alone, alone,
Whilst full my river flows down to the sea,
Gilded with flashing boats
That bring no friend to me:
O love-songs, gurgling from a hundred throats,
O love-pangs, let me be.

Fair fall the freighted boats which gold and stone
And spices bear to sea:
Slim, gleaming maidens swell their mellow notes,
Love-promising, entreating—
Ah! sweet, but fleeting—
Beneath the shivering, snow-white sails.
Hush! the wind flags and fails—
Hush! they will lie becalmed in sight of strand—
Sight of my strand, where I do dwell alone;
Their songs wake singing echoes in my land—
They cannot hear me moan.

10

17

One latest, solitary swallow flies
Across the sea, rough autumn-tempest tossed,
Poor bird, shall it be lost?

20

Dropped down into this uncongenial sea,
With no kind eyes
To watch it while it dies,
Unguessed, uncared for, free:
Set free at last,
The short pang past,
In sleep, in death, in dreamless sleep locked fast.

Mine avenue is all a growth of oaks,
Some rent by thunder strokes,
Some rustling leaves and acorns in the breeze; 30
Fair fall my fertile trees,
That rear their goodly heads, and live at ease.

A spider's web blocks all mine avenue;
He catches down and foolish painted flies
That spider wary and wise.
Each morn it hangs a rainbow strung with dew
Betwixt boughs green with sap,
So fair, few creatures guess it is a trap:
I will not mar the web,
Though sad I am to see the small lives ebb.

It shakes—my trees shake—for a wind is roused
In cavern where it housed:
Each white and quivering sail,
Of boats among the water leaves
Hollows and strains in the full-throated gale:
Each maiden sings again—
Each languid maiden, whom the calm
Had lulled to sleep with rest and spice and balm
Miles down my river to the sea
They float and wane,
Long miles away from me.

Perhaps they say: 'She grieves,
Uplifted, like a beacon, on her tower.'
Perhaps they say: 'One hour
More, and we dance among the golden sheaves.'
Perhaps they say: 'One hour
More, and we stand,
Face to face, hand in hand;
Make haste, O slack gale, to the looked-for land!'

My trees are not in flower,
I have no bower,
And gusty creaks my tower,
And lonesome, very lonesome, is my strand.

After Death

The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept
And strewn with rushes, rosemary and may
Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay,
Where through the lattice ivy-shadows crept.
He leaned above me, thinking that I slept
And could not hear him; but I heard him say,
'Poor child, poor child': and as he turned away
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.
He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold
That hid my face, or take my hand in his,
Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:
He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is
To know he still is warm though I am cold.

28 April 1849

10

Chapter 3

Spring

Frost-locked all the winter,
Seeds, and roots, and stones of fruits,
What shall make their sap ascend
That they may put forth shoots?
Tips of tender green,
Leaf, or blade, or sheath;
Telling of the hidden life
That breaks forth underneath,
Life nursed in its grave by Death.

Blows the thaw-wind pleasantly,
Drips the soaking rain,
By fits looks down the waking sun:
Young grass springs on the plain;
Young leaves clothe early hedgerow trees;
Seeds, and roots, and stones of fruits,
Swollen with sap put forth their shoots;
Curled-headed ferns sprout in the lane;
Birds sing and pair again.

10

There is no time like Spring,
When life's alive in everything,
Before new nestlings sing,
Before cleft swallows speed their journey back
Along the trackless track--
God guides their wing,
He spreads their table that they nothing lack,--

20

Before the daisy grows a common flower,
Before the sun has power
To scorch the world up in his noontide hour.

There is no time like Spring,
Like Spring that passes by:
There is no life like Spring-life born to die,—
Piercing the sod,
Clothing the uncouth clod,
Hatched in the nest,
Fledged on the windy bough,
Strong on the wing;
There is no time like Spring that passes by,
Now newly born, and now
Hastening to die.

30

17 August 1859

Advent

Earth grown old, yet still so green,
Deep beneath her crust of cold
Nurses fire unfelt, unseen
Earth grown old.

We who live are quickly told:
Millions more lie hid between
Inner swathlings of her fold.

When will fire break up her screen?
When will life burst thro' her mould?
Earth, earth earth, thy cold is keen,
Earth grown old.

10

Before 1886

Sleep at Sea

Sound the deep waters:—
Who shall sound that deep?—
Too short the plummet,
And the watchmen sleep.
Some dream of effort
Up a toilsome steep;
Some dream of pasture grounds
For harmless sheep.
White shapes flit to and fro
From mast to mast;
They feel the distant tempest

10

That nears them fast:
Great rocks are straight ahead,
 Great shoals not past;
They shout to one another
 Upon the blast.
Oh, soft the streams drop music
 Between the hills,
And musical the birds' nests
 Beside those rills: 20
The nests are types of home
 Love-hidden from ills,
The nests are types of spirits
 Love-music fills.
So dream the sleepers,
 Each man in his place;
The lightning shows the smile
 Upon each face:
The ship is driving, driving,
 It drives apace: 30
And sleepers smile, and spirits
 Bewail their case.
The lightning glares and reddens
 Across the skies;
It seems but sunset
 To those sleeping eyes.
When did the sun go down
 On such a wise?
From such a sunset
 When shall day arise? 40
'Wake,' call the spirits:
 But to heedless ears:
They have forgotten sorrows
 And hopes and fears;
They have forgotten perils
 And smiles and tears;
Their dream has held them long,
 Long years and years.
'Wake,' call the spirits again:
 But it would take 50
A louder summons
 To bid them awake.
Some dream of pleasure
 For another's sake;
Some dream, forgetful
 Of a lifelong ache.
One by one slowly,
 Ah, how sad and slow!
Wailing and praying
 The spirits rise and go: 60
Clear stainless spirits

White as white as snow;
Pale spirits, wailing
For an overthrow.
One by one flitting,
Like a mournful bird
Whose song is tired at last
For no mate is heard.
The loving voice is silent,
The useless word;
One by one flitting
Sick with hope deferred.
Driving and driving,
The ship drives amain:
While swift from mast to mast
Shapes flit again,
Flit silent as the silence
Where men lie slain;
Their shadow cast upon the sails
Is like a stain.
No voice to call the sleepers,
No hand to raise:
They sleep to death in dreaming,
Of length of days.
Vanity of vanities,
The Preacher says:
Vanity is the end
Of all their ways.

70

80

17 October 1853

A Ballad of Boding

There are sleeping dreams and waking dreams;
What seems is not always as it seems.

I looked out of my window in the sweet new morning,
And there I saw three barges of manifold adorning
Went sailing toward the East:
The first had sails like fire,
The next like glittering wire,
But sackcloth were the sails of the least;
And all the crews made music, and two had spread a feast.

The first choir breathed in flutes,
And fingered soft guitars;
The second won from lutes
Harmonious chords and jars,
With drums for stormy bars:
But the third was all of harpers and scarlet trumpeters;
Notes of triumph, then

10

An alarm again,
As for onset, as for victory, rallies, stirs,
Peace at last and glory to the vanquishers.

The first barge showed for figurehead a Love with wings; 20

The second showed for figurehead a Worm with stings;

The third, a Lily tangled to a Rose which clings.

The first bore for freight gold and spice and down;

The second bore a sword, a sceptre, and a crown;

The third, a heap of earth gone to dust and brown.

Winged Love meseemed like Folly in the face;

Stinged Worm meseemed loathly in his place;

Lily and Rose were flowers of grace.

Merry went the revel of the fire-sailed crew,

Singing, feasting, dancing to and fro:

30

Pleasures ever changing, ever graceful, ever new;

Sighs, but scarce of woe;

All the sighing

Wooed such sweet replying;

All the sighing, sweet and low,

Used to come and go

For more pleasure, merely so.

Yet at intervals some one grew tired

Of everything desired,

And sank, I knew not whither, in sorry plight,

40

Out of sight.

The second crew seemed ever

Wider-visioned, graver,

More distinct of purpose, more sustained of will;

With heads erect and proud,

And voices sometimes loud;

With endless tacking, counter-tacking,

All things grasping, all things lacking,

It would seem;

Ever shifting helm, or sail, or shroud,

50

Drifting on as in a dream.

Hoarding to their utmost bent,

Feasting to their fill,

Yet gnawed by discontent,

Envy, hatred, malice, on their road they went.

Their freight was not a treasure,

Their music not a pleasure;

The sword flashed, cleaving through their bands,

Sceptre and crown changed hands.

The third crew as they went

60

Seemed mostly different;

They toiled in rowing, for to them the wind was contrary,

As all the world might see.
They labored at the oar,
While on their heads they bore
The fiery stress of sunshine more and more.
They labored at the oar hand-sore,
Till rain went splashing,
And spray went dashing,
Down on them, and up on them, more and more. 70
Their sails were patched and rent,
Their masts were bent,
In peril of their lives they worked and went.
For them no feast was spread,
No soft luxurious bed
Scented and white,
No crown or sceptre hung in sight;
In weariness and painfulness,
In thirst and sore distress,
They rowed and steered from left to right 80
With all their might.
Their trumpeters and harpers round about
Incessantly played out,
And sometimes they made answer with a shout;
But oftener they groaned or wept,
And seldom paused to eat, and seldom slept.
I wept for pity watching them, but more
I wept heart-sore
Once and again to see
Some weary man plunge overboard, and swim 90
To Love or Worm ship floating buoyantly:
And there all welcomed him.

The ships steered each apart and seemed to scorn each other,
Yet all the crews were interchangeable;
Now one man, now another,
—Like bloodless spectres some, some flushed by health,—
Changed openly, or changed by stealth,
Scaling a slippery side, and scaled it well.
The most left Love ship, hauling wealth
Up Worm ship's side; 100
While some few hollow-eyed
Left either for the sack-sailed boat;
But this, though not remote,
Was worst to mount, and whoso left it once
Scarce ever came again,
But seemed to loathe his erst companions,
And wish and work them bane.

Then I knew (I know not how) there lurked quicksands full of dread,
Rocks and reefs and whirlpools in the water-bed,
Whence a waterspout 110

Instantaneously leaped out,
Roaring as it reared its head.

Soon I spied a something dim,
Many-handed, grim,
That went flitting to and fro the first and second ship;
It puffed their sails full out
With puffs of smoky breath
From a smouldering lip,
And cleared the waterspout
Which reeled roaring round about
Threatening death.
With a horny hand it steered,
And a horn appeared
On its sneering head upreared
Haughty and high
Against the blackening lowering sky.
With a hoof it swayed the waves;
They opened here and there,
Till I spied deep ocean graves
Full of skeletons

120

That were men and women once
Foul or fair;
Full of things that creep
And fester in the deep
And never breathe the clean life-nurturing air.

130

The third bark held aloof
From the Monster with the hoof,
Despite his urgent beck,
And fraught with guile
Abominable his smile;

140

Till I saw him take a flying leap on to that deck.
Then full of awe,
With these same eyes I saw
His head incredible retract its horn
Rounding like babe's new born,
While silvery phosphorescence played
About his dis-horned head.
The sneer smoothed from his lip,
He beamed blandly on the ship;
All winds sank to a moan,

150

All waves to a monotone
(For all these seemed his realm),
While he laid a strong caressing hand upon the helm.

Then a cry well nigh of despair
Shrieked to heaven, a clamor of desperate prayer.
The harpers harped no more,
While the trumpeters sounded sore

An alarm to wake the dead from their bed:
To the rescue, to the rescue, now or never,
To the rescue, O ye living, O ye dead,
Or no more help or hope for ever!—

160

The planks strained as though they must part asunder,
The masts bent as though they must dip under,
And the winds and the waves at length
Girt up their strength,
And the depths were laid bare,
And heaven flashed fire and volleyed thunder
Through the rain-choked air,
And sea and sky seemed to kiss
In the horror and the hiss
Of the whole world shuddering everywhere.

170

Lo! a Flyer swooping down
With wings to span the globe,
And splendor for his robe
And splendor for his crown.
He lighted on the helm with a foot of fire,
And spun the Monster overboard:
And that monstrous thing abhorred,
Gnashing with balked desire,
Wriggled like a worm infirm
Up the Worm
Of the loathly figurehead.
There he crouched and gnashed;
And his head re-horned, and gashed
From the other's grapple, dripped bloody red.

180

I saw that thing accurst
Wreak his worst
On the first and second crew:
Some with baited hook
He angled for and took,
Some dragged overboard in a net he threw,
Some he did to death
With hoof or horn or blasting breath.

190

I heard a voice of wailing
Where the ships went sailing,
A sorrowful voice prevailing
Above the sound of the sea,
Above the singers' voices,
And musical merry noises;
All songs had turned to sighing,
The light was failing,
The day was dying—
Ah me,
That such a sorrow should be!

200

There was sorrow on the sea and sorrow on the land
When Love ship went down by the bottomless quicksand
To its grave in the bitter wave.
There was sorrow on the sea and sorrow on the land
When Worm ship went to pieces on the rock-bound strand,
And the bitter wave was its grave. 210

But land and sea waxed hoary
In whiteness of a glory
Never told in story
Nor seen by mortal eye,
When the third ship crossed the bar
Where whirls and breakers are,
And steered into the splendors of the sky;
That third bark and that least
Which had never seemed to feast,
Yet kept high festival above sun and moon and star. 220

Before 1882

A Better Resurrection

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numb'd too much for hopes or fears;
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimm'd with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk: 10
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk;
My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see:
Yet rise it shall the sap of Spring;
O Jesus, rise in me.

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul
Or cordial in the searching cold; 20
Cast in the fire the perish'd thing;
Melt and remould it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me.

30 June 1857

Whither the Tribes Go Up, even the Tribes of the Lord

Light is our sorrow for it ends tomorrow,
Light is our death which cannot hold us fast;
So brief a sorrow can be scarcely sorrow,
Or death be death so quickly past.

One night, no more, of pain that turns to pleasure,
One night, no more, of weeping weeping sore;
And then the heaped-up measure beyond measure,
In quietness for evermore.

Our face is set like flint against our trouble,
Yet many things there are which comfort us;
This bubble is a rainbow-coloured bubble,
This bubble-life tumultuous.

10

Our sails are set to cross the tossing river,
Our face is set to reach Jerusalem;
We toil awhile, but then we rest for ever,
Sing with all Saints and rest with them.

Circa 1877

Chapter 4

Cobwebs

It is a land with neither night nor day,
Nor heat nor cold, nor any wind, nor rain,
Nor hills nor valleys; but one even plain
Stretches thro' long unbroken miles away:
While thro' the sluggish air a twilight grey
Broodeth; no moons or seasons wax and wane,
No ebb and flow are there among the main,
No bud-time no leaf-falling there for aye,
No ripple on the sea, no shifting sand,
No beat of wings to stir the stagnant space,
And loveless sea: no trace of days before,
No guarded home, no time-worn resting place
No future hope no fear forevermore.

10

October 1855

Where never tempest heaveth

Where never tempest heaveth,
Nor sorrow grieveth,

Nor death bereaveth,
Nor hope deceiveth,
 Sleep.

Where never shame bewaileth,
Nor serpent traileth,
Nor death prevaleth,
Nor harvest faileth,

 Reap.

Before 1893

A Castle-Builder's World

Unripe harvest there hath none to reap it
From the misty gusty place,
Unripe vineyard there hath none to keep it
In unprofitable space.
Living men and women are not found there,
Only masks in flocks and shoals;
Flesh-and-bloodless hazy masks surround there,
Ever wavering orbs and poles;
Flesh-and-bloodless vapid masks abound there,
Shades of bodies without souls.

Before 1886

10

'Hollow-Sounding and Mysterious'

There's no replying
To the Wind's sighing,
Telling, foretelling,
Dying, undying,
Dwindling and swelling,
Complaining, droning,
Whistling and moaning,
Ever beginning,
Ending, repeating,
Hinting and dinning,
Lagging and fleeting -
We've no replying
Living or dying
To the Wind's sighing.

10

What are you telling,
Variable Wind-tone?
What would be teaching,
O sinking, swelling,
Desolate Wind-moan?
Ever for ever

20

Teaching and preaching,
Never, ah never
Making us wiser -
The earliest riser
Catches no meaning,
The last who hearkens
Garners no gleaning
Of wisdom's treasure,
While the world darkens: -
Living or dying,
In pain, in pleasure,
We've no replying
To wordless flying
Wind's sighing.

30

Before 1882

Somewhere or Other

Somewhere or other there must surely be
The face not seen, the voice not heard,
The heart that not yet—never yet—ah me!
Made answer to my word.

Somewhere or other, may be near or far;
Past land and sea, clean out of sight;
Beyond the wandering moon, beyond the star
That tracks her night by night.

Somewhere or other, may be far or near;
With just a wall, a hedge, between;
With just the last leaves of the dying year
Fallen on a turf grown green.

10

Towards November 1863

Life and Death

Life is not sweet. One day it will be sweet
To shut our eyes and die:
Nor feel the wild flowers blow, nor birds dart by
With flitting butterfly,
Nor grass grow long above our heads and feet,
Nor hear the happy lark that soars sky high,
Nor sigh that spring is fleet and summer fleet,
Nor mark the waxing wheat,
Nor know who sits in our accustomed seat.

Life is not good. One day it will be good
To die, then live again;

10

To sleep meanwhile: so not to feel the wane
Of shrunk leaves dropping in the wood,
Nor hear the foamy lashing of the main,
Nor mark the blackened bean-fields, nor where stood
Rich ranks of golden grain
Only dead refuse stubble clothe the plain:
Asleep from risk, asleep from pain.

24 April 1863

May

I cannot tell you how it was;
But this I know: it came to pass
Upon a bright and breezy day
When May was young; ah, pleasant May!
As yet the poppies were not born
Between the blades of tender corn;
The last eggs had not hatched as yet,
Nor any bird forgone its mate.

I cannot tell you what it was;
But this I know: it did but pass.
It passed away with sunny May,
With all sweet things it passed away,
And left me old, and cold, and grey.

October 1855

10

If I Had Words

If I had words, if I had words
At least to vent my misery: —
But muter than the speechless herds
I have no voice wherewith to cry.
I have no strength to life my hands,
I have no heart to lift mine eye,
My soul is bound with brazen bands,
My soul is crushed and like to die.
My thoughts that wander here and there,
That wander wander listlessly,
Bring nothing back to cheer my care,
Nothing that I may live thereby.
My heart is broken in my breast,
My breath is but a broken sigh —
Oh if there be a land of rest
It is far off, it is not nigh.
If I had wings as hath a dove,
If I had wings that I might fly,
I yet would seek the land of love

10

Where fountains run which run not dry;
Tho' there be none that road to tell,
And long that road is verily:
Then if I lived I should do well,
And if I died I should but die.
If I had wings as hath a dove
I would not sift the what and why,
I would make haste to find out love,
If not to find at least to try.
I would make haste to love, my rest;
To love, my truth that doth not lie:
Then if I lived it might be best,
Or if I died I could but die.

20

1 September 1864

30

Easter Day

Words cannot utter
Christ His returning:
Mankind, keep jubilee,
Strip off your mourning,
Crown you with garlands,
Set your lamps burning.

Speech is left speechless;
Set you to singing,
Fling your hearts open wide,
Set your bells ringing:
Christ the Chief Reaper
Comes, His sheaf bringing.

10

Earth wakes her song-birds,
Puts on her flowers,
Leads out her lambkins,
Builds up her bowers:
This is man's spousal day,
Christ's day and ours.

Before 1886

Chapter 5

What?

Strengthening as secret manna,
Fostering as clouds above,
Kind as hovering dove,

Full as a plenteous river,
Our glory and our banner
For ever and for ever.

Dear as a dying cadence
Of music in the drowsy night:
Fair as the flowers which maidens
Pluck for an hour's delight,
And then forget them quite.

10

Gay as a cowslip-meadow
Fresh opening to the sun
When new day is begun:
Soft as a sunny shadow
When day is almost done.

Glorious as purple twilight,
Pleasant as budding tree,
Untouched as any islet
Shrined in an unknown sea:
Sweet as a fragrant rose amid the dew: -
As sweet, as fruitless too.

20

A bitter dream to wake from,
But oh how pleasant while we dream!
A poisoned fount to take from,
But oh how sweet the stream!

May 1853

Winter: My Secret

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I;
Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows and snows,
And you're too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? well:
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

Or, after all, perhaps there's none:
Suppose there is no secret after all,
But only just my fun.
Today's a nipping day, a biting day;
In which one wants a shawl,
A veil, a cloak, and other wraps:
I cannot ope to everyone who taps,
And let the draughts come whistling thro' my hall;
Come bounding and surrounding me,
Come buffeting, astounding me,
Nipping and clipping thro' my wraps and all.

10

I wear my mask for warmth: who ever shows
His nose to Russian snows
To be pecked at by every wind that blows?
You would not peck? I thank you for good will,
Believe, but leave the truth untested still.

20

Spring's an expansive time: yet I don't trust
March with its peck of dust,
Nor April with its rainbow-crowned brief showers,
Nor even May, whose flowers
One frost may wither thro' the sunless hours.

Perhaps some languid summer day,
When drowsy birds sing less and less,
And golden fruit is ripening to excess,
If there's not too much sun nor too much cloud,
And the warm wind is neither still nor loud,
Perhaps my secret I may say,
Or you may guess.

30

23 November 1857

Another Spring

If I might see another Spring
I'd not plant summer flowers and wait:
I'd have my crocuses at once
My leafless pink mezereons,
My chill-veined snow-drops, choicer yet
My white or azure violet,
Leaf-nested primrose; anything
To blow at once, not late.

If I might see another Spring
I'd listen to the daylight birds
That build their nests and pair and sing,
Nor wait for mateless nightingale;
I'd listen to the lusty herds,
The ewes with lambs as white as snow,
I'd find out music in the hail
And all the winds that blow.

10

If I might see another Spring -
Oh stinging comment on my past
That all my past results in 'if' -
If I might see another Spring
I'd laugh today, today is brief
I would not wait for anything:
I'd use today that cannot last,
Be glad today and sing.

20

15 September 1857

'The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children'

Oh the rose of keenest thorn!
One hidden summer morn
Under the rose I was born.

I do not guess his name
Who wrought my Mother's shame,
And gave me life forlorn,
But my Mother, Mother, Mother,
I know her from all other.
My Mother pale and mild,
Fair as ever was seen,
She was but scarce sixteen,
Little more than a child,
When I was born
To work her scorn.
With secret bitter throes,
In a passion of secret woes,
She bore me under the rose.
One who my Mother nursed
Took me from the first:—
'O nurse, let me look upon
This babe that costs so dear;
To-morrow she will be gone:
Other mothers may keep
Their babes awake and asleep,
But I must not keep her here.'—
Whether I know or guess,
I know this not the less.

So I was sent away
That none might spy the truth:
And my childhood waxed to youth
And I left off childish play.
I never cared to play
With the village boys and girls;
And I think they thought me proud,
I found so little to say
And kept so from the crowd:
But I had the longest curls
And I had the largest eyes
And my teeth were small like pearls;
The girls might flout and scout me,
But the boys would hang about me
In sheepish mooning wise.
Our one-street village stood
A long mile from the town,

10

20

30

40

A mile of windy down
And bleak one-sided wood,
With not a single house.
Our town itself was small,
With just the common shops,
And thronged in its small way.
Our neighbouring gentry reared
The good old-fashioned crops,
And made old-fashioned boasts
Of what John Bull would do
If Frenchman Frog appeared,
And drank old-fashioned toasts,
And made old-fashioned bows
To my Lady at the Hall.

50

My Lady at the Hall
Is grander than they all:
Hers is the oldest name
In all the neighbourhood;
But the race must die with her
Though she's a lofty dame,
For she's unmarried still.
Poor people say she's good
And has an open hand
As any in the land,

60

And she's the comforter
Of many sick and sad;
My nurse once said to me
That everything she had
Came of my Lady's bounty:
'Though she's greatest in the county
She's humble to the poor,
No beggar seeks her door
But finds help presently.
I pray both night and day
For her, and you must pray:
But she'll never feel distress
If needy folk can bless.'

70

I was a little maid
When here we came to live
From somewhere by the sea.
Men spoke a foreign tongue
There where we used to be
When I was merry and young,
Too young to feel afraid;
The fisher folk would give
A kind strange word to me,
There by the foreign sea:
I don't know where it was,
But I remember still
Our cottage on a hill,

80

90

- And fields of flowering grass
On that fair foreign shore.
I liked my old home best,
But this was pleasant too:
So here we made our nest
And here I grew. 100
- And now and then my Lady
In riding past our door
Would nod to Nurse and speak,
Or stoop and pat my cheek;
And I was always ready
To hold the field-gate wide
For my Lady to go through;
My Lady in her veil
So seldom put aside,
My Lady grave and pale. 110
- I often sat to wonder
Who might my parents be,
For I knew of something under
My simple-seeming state.
Nurse never talked to me
Of mother or of father,
But watched me early and late
With kind suspicious cares:
Or not suspicious, rather
Anxious, as if she knew
Some secret I might gather
And smart for unawares.
Thus I grew. 120
- But Nurse waxed old and grey,
Bent and weak with years.
There came a certain day
That she lay upon her bed
Shaking her palsied head,
With words she gasped to say
Which had to stay unsaid.
Then with a jerking hand
Held out so piteously
She gave a ring to me
Of gold wrought curiously,
A ring which she had worn
Since the day I was born,
She once had said to me:
I slipped it on my finger;
Her eyes were keen to linger
On my hand that slipped it on; 130
Then she sighed one rattling sigh
And stared on with sightless eye:—
The one who loved me was gone.
How long I stayed alone 140

With the corpse I never knew,
For I fainted dead as stone:
When I came to life once more
I was down upon the floor,
With neighbours making ado
To bring me back to life. 150

I heard the sexton's wife
Say: 'Up, my lad, and run
To tell it at the Hall;
She was my Lady's nurse,
And done can't be undone.
I'll watch by this poor lamb.

I guess my Lady's purse
Is always open to such:
I'd run up on my crutch
A cripple as I am,' 160
(For cramps had vexed her much)

'Rather than this dear heart
Lack one to take her part.'
For days day after day
On my weary bed I lay
Wishing the time would pass;
Oh, so wishing that I was
Likely to pass away:

For the one friend whom I knew
Was dead, I knew no other, 170
Neither father nor mother;
And I, what should I do?
One day the sexton's wife
Said: 'Rouse yourself, my dear:
My Lady has driven down
From the Hall into the town,
And we think she's coming here.
Cheer up, for life is life.'

But I would not look or speak,
Would not cheer up at all. 180
My tears were like to fall,
So I turned round to the wall
And hid my hollow cheek
Making as if I slept,
As silent as a stone,
And no one knew I wept.
What was my Lady to me,
The grand lady from the Hall?

She might come, or stay away,
I was sick at heart that day: 190
The whole world seemed to be
Nothing, just nothing to me,
For aught that I could see.
Yet I listened where I lay:

A bustle came below,
A clear voice said: 'I know;
I will see her first alone,
It may be less of a shock
If she's so weak to-day:'—

A light hand turned the lock,
A light step crossed the floor,
One sat beside my bed:
But never a word she said.
For me, my shyness grew
Each moment more and more:
So I said never a word
And neither looked nor stirred;
I think she must have heard
My heart go pit-a-pat:
Thus I lay, my Lady sat,

More than a mortal hour—
(I counted one and two
By the house-clock while I lay):
I seemed to have no power
To think of a thing to say,
Or do what I ought to do,
Or rouse myself to a choice.
At last she said: 'Margaret,
Won't you even look at me?'

A something in her voice
Forced my tears to fall at last,
Forced sobs from me thick and fast;
Something not of the past,
Yet stirring memory;
A something new, and yet
Not new, too sweet to last,
Which I never can forget.

I turned and stared at her:
Her cheek showed hollow-pale;
Her hair like mine was fair,
A wonderful fall of hair
That screened her like a veil;
But her height was statelier,
Her eyes had depth more deep;
I think they must have had
Always a something sad,
Unless they were asleep.

While I stared, my Lady took
My hand in her spare hand
Jewelled and soft and grand,
And looked with a long long look
Of hunger in my face;
As if she tried to trace
Features she ought to know,

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And half hoped, half feared, to find.
Whatever was in her mind
She heaved a sigh at last,
And began to talk to me.
'Your nurse was my dear nurse,
And her nursling's dear,' said she: 250
'I never knew that she was worse
Till her poor life was past'
(Here my Lady's tears dropped fast):
'I might have been with her,
But she had no comforter.
She might have told me much
Which now I shall never know,
Never never shall know.'
She sat by me sobbing so, 260
And seemed so woe-begone,
That I laid one hand upon
Hers with a timid touch,
Scarce thinking what I did,
Not knowing what to say:
That moment her face was hid
In the pillow close by mine,
Her arm was flung over me,
She hugged me, sobbing so
As if her heart would break,
And kissed me where I lay. 270
After this she often came
To bring me fruit or wine,
Or sometimes hothouse flowers.
And at nights I lay awake
Often and often thinking
What to do for her sake.
Wet or dry it was the same:
She would come in at all hours,
Set me eating and drinking
And say I must grow strong; 280
At last the day seemed long
And home seemed scarcely home
If she did not come.
Well, I grew strong again:
In time of primroses,
I went to pluck them in the lane;
In time of nestling birds,
I heard them chirping round the house;
And all the herds
Were out at grass when I grew strong, 290
And days were waxyen long,
And there was work for bees
Among the May-bush boughs,
And I had shot up tall,

And life felt after all
Pleasant, and not so long
When I grew strong.
I was going to the Hall
To be my Lady's maid:
'Her little friend,' she said to me,
'Almost her child,'
She said and smiled
Sighing painfully;
Blushing, with a second flush
As if she blushed to blush.
Friend, servant, child: just this
My standing at the Hall;
The other servants call me 'Miss,'
My Lady calls me 'Margaret,'
With her clear voice musical.
She never chides when I forget
This or that; she never chides.
Except when people come to stay,
(And that's not often) at the Hall,
I sit with her all day
And ride out when she rides.
She sings to me and makes me sing;
Sometimes I read to her,
Sometimes we merely sit and talk.
She noticed once my ring
And made me tell its history:
That evening in our garden walk
She said she should infer
The ring had been my father's first,
Then my mother's, given for me
To the nurse who nursed
My mother in her misery,
That so quite certainly
Some one might know me, who...
Then she was silent, and I too.
I hate when people come:
The women speak and stare
And mean to be so civil.
This one will stroke my hair,
That one will pat my cheek
And praise my Lady's kindness,
Expecting me to speak;
I like the proud ones best
Who sit as struck with blindness,
As if I wasn't there.
But if any gentleman
Is staying at the Hall
(Though few come prying here),
My Lady seems to fear

- Some downright dreadful evil,
 And makes me keep my room
 As closely as she can:
 So I hate when people come,
 It is so troublesome.
 In spite of all her care,
 Sometimes to keep alive
 I sometimes do contrive
 To get out in the grounds
 For a whiff of wholesome air,
 Under the rose you know:
 It's charming to break bounds,
 Stolen waters are sweet,
 And what's the good of feet
 If for days they mustn't go?
 Give me a longer tether,
 Or I may break from it.
 Now I have eyes and ears
 And just some little wit:
 'Almost my Lady's child;'
 I recollect she smiled,
 Sighed and blushed together;
 Then her story of the ring
 Sounds not improbable,
 She told it me so well
 It seemed the actual thing:--
 Oh, keep your counsel close,
 But I guess under the rose,
 In long past summer weather
 When the world was blossoming,
 And the rose upon its thorn:
 I guess not who he was
 Flawed honour like a glass,
 And made my life forlorn,
 But my Mother, Mother, Mother,
 Oh, I know her from all other.
 My Lady, you might trust
 Your daughter with your fame.
 Trust me, I would not shame
 Our honourable name,
 For I have noble blood
 Though I was bred in dust
 And brought up in the mud.
 I will not press my claim,
 Just leave me where you will:
 But you might trust your daughter,
 For blood is thicker than water
 And you're my mother still.
 So my Lady holds her own
 With condescending grace,

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and fills her lofty place
With an untroubled face
As a queen may fill a throne.
While I could hint a tale—
(But then I am her child)—
Would make her quail;
Would set her in the dust,
Lorn with no comforter,
Her glorious hair defiled
And ashes on her cheek:
The decent world would thrust
Its finger out at her,
Not much displeased I think
To make a nine days' stir;
The decent world would sink
Its voice to speak of her. 400

Now this is what I mean
To do, no more, no less:
Never to speak, or show
Bare sign of what I know.
Let the blot pass unseen;
Yea, let her never guess
I hold the tangled clue
She huddles out of view.
Friend, servant, almost child,
So be it and nothing more 410

On this side of the grave.
Mother, in Paradise,
You'll see with clearer eyes;
Perhaps in this world even
When you are like to die
And face to face with Heaven
You'll drop for once the lie:
But you must drop the mask, not I.
My Lady promises 420

Two hundred pounds with me
Whenever I may wed
A man she can approve:
And since besides her bounty
I'm fairest in the county
(For so I've heard it said,
Though I don't vouch for this),
Her promised pounds may move
Some honest man to see
My virtues and my beauties;
Perhaps the rising grazier,
Or temperance publican,
May claim my wifely duties.
Meanwhile I wait their leisure
And grace-bestowing pleasure, 430

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I wait the happy man;
But if I hold my head
And pitch my expectations
Just higher than their level,
They must fall back on patience:
I may not mean to wed, 450
Yet I'll be civil.
Now sometimes in a dream
My heart goes out of me
To build and scheme,
Till I sob after things that seem
So pleasant in a dream:
A home such as I see
My blessed neighbours live in
With father and with mother,
All proud of one another,
Named by one common name 460
From baby in the bud
To full-blown workman father;
It's little short of Heaven.
I'd give my gentle blood
To wash my special shame
And drown my private grudge;
I'd toil and moil much rather
The dingiest cottage drudge
Whose mother need not blush, 470
Than live here like a lady
And see my Mother flush
And hear her voice unsteady
Sometimes, yet never dare
Ask to share her care.
Of course the servants sneer
Behind my back at me;
Of course the village girls,
Who envy me my curls
And gowns and idleness, 480
Take comfort in a jeer;
Of course the ladies guess
Just so much of my history
As points the emphatic stress
With which they laud my Lady;
The gentlemen who catch
A casual glimpse of me
And turn again to see,
Their valets on the watch
To speak a word with me,
490
All know and sting me wild;
Till I am almost ready
To wish that I were dead,

No faces more to see,
No more words to be said,
My Mother safe at last
Disburdened of her child,
And the past past.
'All equal before God'—
Our Rector has it so,
And sundry sleepers nod:
It may be so; I know
All are not equal here,
And when the sleepers wake
They make a difference.
'All equal in the grave'—
That shows an obvious sense:
Yet something which I crave
Not death itself brings near;
Now should death half atone
For all my past; or make
The name I bear my own?
I love my dear old Nurse
Who loved me without gains;
I love my mistress even,
Friend, Mother, what you will:
But I could almost curse
My Father for his pains;
And sometimes at my prayer
Kneeling in sight of Heaven
I almost curse him still:
Why did he set his snare
To catch at unaware
My Mother's foolish youth;
Load me with shame that's hers,
And her with something worse,
A lifelong lie for truth?
I think my mind is fixed
On one point and made up:
To accept my lot unmixed;
Never to drug the cup
But drink it by myself.
I'll not be wooed for pelf;
I'll not blot out my shame
With any man's good name;
But nameless as I stand,
My hand is my own hand,
And nameless as I came
I go to the dark land.
'All equal in the grave'—
I bide my time till then:
'All equal before God'—
To-day I feel His rod,

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To-morrow He may save:

Amen.

March 1865

The Thread of Life

I

The irresponsible silence of the land,
The irresponsible sounding of the sea,
Speak both one message of one sense to me:--
Aloof, aloof, we stand aloof, so stand
Thou too aloof bound with the flawless band
Of inner solitude; we bind not thee;
But who from thy self-chain shall set thee free?
What heart shall touch thy heart? what hand thy hand?--
And I am sometimes proud and sometimes meek,
And sometimes I remember days of old
When fellowship seemed not so far to seek
And all the world and I seemed much less cold,
And at the rainbow's foot lay surely gold,
And hope felt strong and life itself not weak.

10

II

Thus am I mine own prison. Everything
Around me free and sunny and at ease:
Or if in shadow, in a shade of trees
Which the sun kisses, where the gay birds sing
And where all winds make various murmuring;
Where bees are found, with honey for the bees;
Where sounds are music, and where silences
Are music of an unlike fashioning.
Then gaze I at the merrymaking crew,
And smile a moment and a moment sigh
Thinking: Why can I not rejoice with you?
But soon I put the foolish fancy by:
I am not what I have nor what I do;
But what I was I am, I am even I.

10

III

Therefore myself is that one only thing
I hold to use or waste, to keep or give;
My sole possession every day I live,
And still mine own despite Time's winnowing.
Ever mine own, while moons and seasons bring
From crudeness ripeness mellow and sanitive;
Ever mine own, till Death shall ply his sieve;
And still mine own, when saints break grave and sing.
And this myself as king unto my King
I give, to Him Who gave Himself for me;
Who gives Himself to me, and bids me sing

10

A sweet new song of His redeemed set free;
He bids me sing: O death, where is thy sting?
And sing: O grave, where is thy victory?

Before 1882

Chapter 6

Three Stages

1. – A Pause of Thought

I looked for that which is not, nor can be,
And hope deferred made my heart sick in truth:
But years must pass before a hope of youth
Is resigned utterly.

I watched and waited with a steadfast will:
And though the object seemed to flee away
That I so longed for, ever day by day
I watched and waited still.

Sometimes I said: This thing shall be no more;
My expectation wearies and shall cease;
I will resign it now and be at peace:
Yet never gave it o'er.

10

Sometimes I said: It is an empty name
I long for; to a name why should I give
The peace of all the days I have to live?—
Yet gave it all the same.

Alas, thou foolish one! alike unfit
For healthy joy and salutary pain:
Thou knowest the chase useless, and again
Turnest to follow it.

20

14 February 1848

(part two not included in the analysis)

3.

I thought to deal the death-stroke at a blow,
To give all, once for all, but nevermore; --
Then sit to hear the low waves fret the shore,
Or watch the silent snow.

"Oh rest," I thought, "in silence and the dark;
Oh rest, if nothing else, from head to feet:
Though I may see no more poppied wheat,

Or sunny soaring lark.

"These chimes are slow, but surely strike at last;
This sand is slow, but surely droppeth thro';
And much there is to suffer, much to do,
Before the time be past.

10

"So I will labour, but will not rejoice:
Will do and bear, but will not hope again;
Gone dead alike to pulses of quick pain,
And pleasure's counterpoise:"

I said so in my heart, and so I thought
My life would lapse; a tedious monotone:
I thought to shut myself, and dwell alone
Unseeking and unsought.

20

But first I tried, and then my care grew slack;
Till my heart slumbered, may-be wandered too: --
I felt the sunshine glow again, and knew
The swallow on its track;

All birds awoke to building in the leaves,
All buds awoke to fullness and sweet scent,
Ah, too, my heart woke unawares, intent
On fruitful harvest sheaves.

Full pulse of life, that I had deemed was dead,
Full throb of youth, that I had deemed at rest, --
Alas, I cannot build myself a nest,
I cannot crown my head.

30

With royal purple blossoms for the feast,
Nor flush with laughter, nor exult in song; --
These joys may drift, as time now drifts along;
And cease, as once they ceased.

I may pursue, and yet may not attain,
Athirst and panting all the days I live:
Or seem to hold, yet nerve myself to give
What once I gave, again.

40

25 July 1854

Memory

I.

I nursed it in my bosom while it lived,
I hid it in my heart when it was dead;
In joy I sat alone, even so I grieved
Alone and nothing said.

I shut the door to face the naked truth,
I stood alone,--I faced the truth alone,
Stripped bare of self-regard or forms or ruth
Till first and last were shown.

I took the perfect balances and weighed;
No shaking of my hand disturbed the poise; 10
Weighed, found it wanting: not a word I said,
But silent made my choice.

None know the choice I made; I make it still.
None know the choice I made and broke my heart,
Breaking mine idol: I have braced my will
Once, chosen for once my part.

I broke it at a blow, I laid it cold,
Crushed in my deep heart where it used to live.
My heart dies inch by inch; the time grows old,
Grows old in which I grieve. 20

8 November 1857

II.

I have a room whereinto no one enters
Save I myself alone:
There sits a blessed memory on a throne,
There my life centres.

While winter comes and goes--O tedious comer!--
And while its nip-wind blows;
While bloom the bloodless lily and warm rose
Of lavish summer.

If any should force entrance he might see there
One buried yet not dead, 10
Before whose face I no more bow my head
Or bend my knee there;

But often in my worn life's autumn weather
I watch there with clear eyes,
And think how it will be in Paradise
When we're together.

17 February 1865

A Bouts-Rimés Sonnet

So I grew half delirious and quite sick,
And thro' the darkness saw strange faces grin

Of Monsters at me. One put forth a fin,
And touched me clammily: I could not pick
A quarrel with it: it began to lick
My hand, making meanwhile a piteous din
And shedding human tears: it would begin
To near me, then retreat. I heard the quick
Pulsation of my heart, I marked the fight
Of life and death within me; then sleep threw
Her veil around me; but this thing is true:
When I awoke the sun was at his height,
And I wept sadly, knowing that one new
Creature had love for me, and others spite.

10

24 September 1849

Who Shall Deliver Me?

God strengthen me to bear myself;
That heaviest weight of all to bear,
Inalienable weight of care.

All others are outside myself;
I lock my door and bar them out
The turmoil, tedium, gad-about.

I lock my door upon myself,
And bar them out; but who shall wall
Self from myself, most loathed of all?

If I could once lay down myself,
And start self-purged upon the race
That all must run ! Death runs apace.

10

If I could set aside myself,
And start with lightened heart upon
The road by all men overgone!

God harden me against myself,
This coward with pathetic voice
Who craves for ease and rest and joys

Myself, arch-traitor to myself ;
My hollowest friend, my deadliest foe,
My clog whatever road I go.

20

Yet One there is can curb myself,
Can roll the strangling load from me
Break off the yoke and set me free

1 March 1864

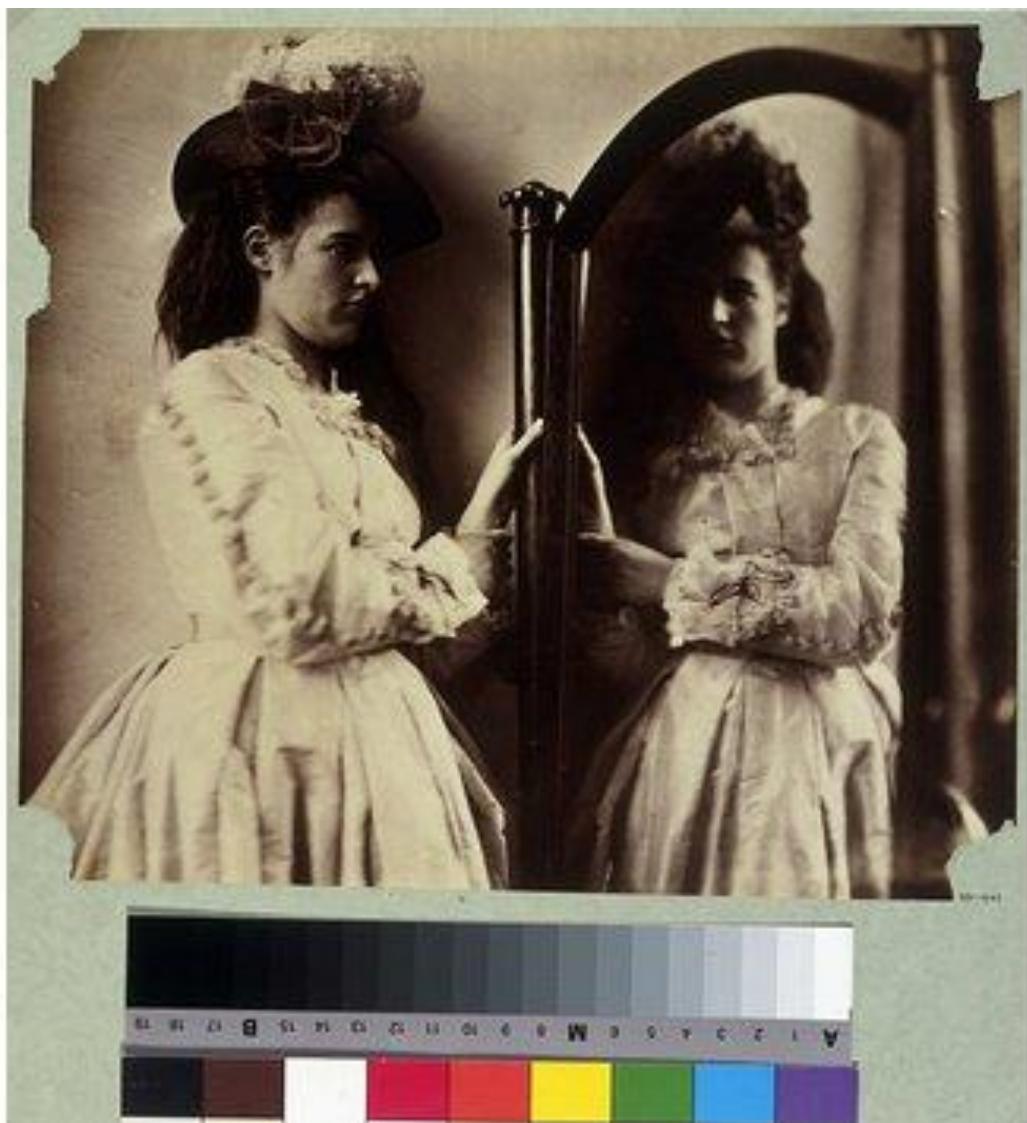
Appendix 2

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Clementina Maude, photography by Lady Clementina Hawarden, about 1862-3. Museum no. PH.457:230-1968,



Clementina Maude, 5 Princes Gardens; Photographic study, ca. 1863-1864; PH.291-1947.



Photographic Study (Clementina Maude, 5 Princes Gardens) ca. 1861-1862; PH.457:177-1968



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