

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S FRACTURED GOTHIC

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Abstract

This thesis approaches the poetry and devotional prose of Christina Rossetti from a new angle, examining the possibility that her work may demonstrate the influence of Gothic literature, which Rossetti read during childhood and in her early career as a poet. Though both during her lifetime and in more recent critical studies, her work has been considered mostly with regard to her Tractarian faith and her gender, this thesis will argue that Rossetti's work is preoccupied with Gothic, often in unexpected ways. This examination of Rossetti's work in the light of Gothic both complements and augments, rather than superseding, criticism which examines her work from theological or feminist viewpoints.

This study approaches Gothic as a fractured genre, which manifests an assortment of tropes, motifs and styles which have come to be identified by the general term of Gothic. To read Rossetti's work as fractured Gothic opens up a new perspective, one which situates her work in a different milieu, and which is significant for the study of Rossetti's work, but which also provides a different way of reading Gothic. This thesis engages with recent criticism of Rossetti as well as with work on Gothic, examining aspects of Rossetti's work which were previously neglected, particularly in a sustained consideration of poetry as a vehicle for Gothic. To read Rossetti's poetry as Gothic raises and examines issues that have been overlooked, as well as opening up works by Rossetti that remain largely neglected. The work of Christina Rossetti raises important questions about the relationship between Gothic and Christianity which this thesis will explore.

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Introduction

This thesis explores the possibility that the poetry and prose of Christina Rossetti manifest attributes of Gothic, developed through her adolescent exposure to Gothic fiction, and entwined with her Tractarian beliefs. It is well-known that Christina Rossetti was, at various stages of her life, an avid reader of Gothic fiction, particularly that of Charles Maturin, Ann Radcliffe, Walter Scott and Edgar Allan Poe. Though both during her lifetime and in subsequent scholarly work on her poetry, she has been read primarily as a writer of religious poetry, this thesis will argue that Rossetti's work is preoccupied with the Gothic genre, which appears in her poetry in forms that may be barely recognisable as Gothic in some cases, but which represent its complex influence within her work. A reading of Rossetti's work in the light of Gothic both complements and augments, rather than superseding, readings of the religious aspects of her work. The question of the complex intertwining of Gothic and Christianity is raised by Rossetti's work, and I suggest that nineteenth-century Christianity is expressed in Gothic in ways which are easily overlooked. In the case of Rossetti's work, her label as a religious poet may cause aspects of her poetry which belong to a different tradition to be ignored.

Gothic, I argue, cannot be seen as a single coherent entity, but is used as a collective term for an assortment of tropes and styles. What is termed Gothic thus constitutes a genre which has been fractured since its inception, and these fractures have continued and deepened as the form developed, with further rupturing caused by its absorption into more mainstream Victorian literature. Such fracturing is akin to the 'disjunction' in Gothic defined by Elizabeth Napier, in which the genre owes a great deal to other structures and forms, such as the romance novel, causing its ruptures from its origins.¹ To read Rossetti's work as fractured

¹ Elizabeth R. Napier, *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-Century Literary Form* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

Gothic permits a new reading of Rossetti, one which situates her in a different milieu, and which is significant for the study of Rossetti's work, but which also provides a different way of reading Gothic. This exploration of Rossetti's work as fractured Gothic, inherited from her early reading and reshaped by her cultural and religious position, engages with recent criticism of Rossetti as well as with the considerable body of scholarship devoted to Gothic. This thesis will examine aspects of Rossetti's work which have been neglected, particularly in a sustained consideration of poetry as a vehicle for Gothic. This introduction therefore aims to establish three essential issues: the critical context in which I am writing; the problematic nature of Gothic and its potential relation to Rossetti's work; and the important issue of Rossetti's Tractarian faith.

Rossetti's work, like that of her near-contemporaries, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Brontë, is frequently discussed in terms of gender, sexuality, the poetess tradition, or more specific issues such as anorexia, lesbianism or marriage.² These readings have provided the critical impetus for new work on Rossetti, and many are indispensable, but to read Rossetti's poetry as Gothic raises and examines issues that have been overlooked, as well as opening up works by Rossetti that remain largely neglected. The issue of gender, for example, is frequently pertinent to a study of nineteenth-century poetry, but to situate Rossetti's poems in the context of Victorian Gothic changes the emphasis. Her heroines do not always conform to Gothic stereotypes; she rewrites Maturin's heroines, for example, in a way which strengthens their characters and emphasizes religious faith. Moreover, to look at the poems as fractured manifestations of already-fractured Gothic is to remove the tendency

² For example, see D. A. Thompson, 'Anorexia as a Lived Trope: Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Mosaic* 24.3-4 (1991), 89-106; Frederick S. Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), and Ronald D. Morrison, "'One Droned in Sweetness Like a Fattened Bee': Christina Rossetti's View of Marriage in her Early Poetry', *Kentucky Philological Review* 5 (1990), 19-26.

to read Rossetti's poems as largely biographical,³ a trend begun by her brother William Michael Rossetti in his 'Memoir' of his sister and perpetuated by many critics since then.⁴ Though it would not be impossible to read Gothic novels as biographical, this would be unusual and difficult, with their exotic settings and melodramatic plots; instead, they tend to be read as providing access to the sub-conscious. In my consideration of Gothic, I read it as an open text which moves away from the fallacies of authorial intention towards a reader-generated meaning. This notion is further complicated, however, by Rossetti's avowed intention of writing to influence others for good, and the potential effects that this can create in the reader. Throughout these discussions it is evident that the Tractarian emphasis on reader-response is in tension with the similarly Tractarian concept of the exertion of positive influence through literature.

The Critical Context

Little work has been done on Rossettian Gothic, though many critics refer to 'Goblin Market' as Gothic.⁵ Though there are aspects of Gothic in this poem, such as the grotesque

³ Rossetti herself eschewed biography and any personal details: as Valerie Sanders suggests in *The Private Lives of Victorian Women* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), '[m]ost Victorian women saw autobiography as a forbidden area, and deliberately situated themselves outside its formal parameters' (p. 5), noting that Rossetti 'concealed her more personal thoughts among the leaves of an Anglican reading diary [*Time Flies*]', p. 1.

⁴ William Michael Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti, with Memoir and Notes* (London: Macmillan, 1904). Future references to this will be noted as *WMR* in the text. Other biographical readings include Lona Mosk Packer, *Christina Rossetti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), which reads many of Rossetti's poems in the light of a hypothetical affair with the painter William Bell Scott, a theory which is now usually discredited.

⁵ 'Goblin Market' seems to owe its 'Gothic' label to Ellen Moers, who discussed it as an example of the 'Female Gothic' in *Literary Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1976; repr. 1978). Subsequently the descriptor is

goblins who provide a genuine threat to the girls' domestic safety, this poem is in many ways less Gothic than some of her other, less famous, works. 'Goblin Market' has been discussed extensively by many critics who provide a range of interpretations, and consequently is not a focus of this thesis, though it is examined where it is pertinent to do so.⁶ Indeed, it has been noted that the range of interpretations of 'Goblin Market' is already 'disconcerting'.⁷ There is a Christina Rossetti page on the Literary Gothic website, though again there is no qualifying consideration of why her work might be included.⁸ In addition to her childhood reading of Gothic literature, there are compelling arguments for examining Rossetti's Gothic throughout her work.⁹ However, it is not enough to suggest that Rossetti's work bears the imprint of her

frequently used of the poem with little or no qualifying commentary, while web searches imply that the poem is an accepted part of the genre, which is fallacious. However, it could be argued that in its construction of a female domestic centre which is threatened by mythic monsters, it reflects early Gothic literature, particularly that of Ann Radcliffe.

⁶ Significant interpretations of 'Goblin Market' in this context include M. W. Carpenter, "'Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me': The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Poetry*, 29.4 (1991), 415-34; Diane D'Amico, *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender and Time* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), pp. 68-83; Constance W. Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), pp. 15-63; and Moers, pp. 100-7.

⁷ Rod Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 170. Edmond also lists some significant interpretations of the poem.

⁸ Jack G. Voller, 'Christina Rossetti', in *The Literary Gothic* (2008) <<http://www.litgothic.com/Authors/crossetti.html>> [accessed 7 April 2010].

⁹ Rossetti's childhood reading is discussed in some detail by Jan Marsh in *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), and further information on books owned by the Rossettis can be found in William Fredeman, *Books from the Libraries of Christina, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael Rossetti* (London: Bertram Rota, 1973). Two articles also discuss the potential influence on 'Goblin Market' of *The Vampyre* (1819), by John Polidori, Rossetti's maternal uncle: Ronald D. Morrison, "'Their Fruit like Honey in the Throat/But Poison in the Blood': Christina Rossetti and 'The Vampyre'", *Weber Studies: Voices and*

early Gothic reading; it is necessary also to determine exactly what is meant by the difficult and capacious term 'Gothic', which this introduction will endeavour to do. The Rossettian Gothic also owes a debt to Christianity and to biblical texts, on which Rossetti draws heavily throughout her oeuvre. Her Gothic imagination transforms familiar scriptures into alien and unsettling phrases, remaking them for her poetic purposes. For example, her poem 'Despised and Rejected', based on a text from Isaiah, is preoccupied with images of the blood of Christ, closing with the lines: 'I saw upon the grass | Each footprint marked in blood, and on my door | The mark of blood forever more' (ll. 56-8). Rossetti takes the dramatic and macabre images provided by the Bible and links them closely to the familiar world, and it is in this biblical usage, transformative rather than reproductive, that her Gothic roots lie.

It is not my intention to argue that the poetry of Rossetti is itself Gothic, or that it constitutes an addition to an already-defined body of Gothic literature, but that it reflects the wider cultural influence of Gothic and mirrors, echoes and transforms its identifiable modes and tropes.¹⁰ Consequently, this is not a study of influence, but rather an exposition of how a genre can be re-shaped and re-formed to suit specific ends. In particular, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that it is possible to read specifically Christian meanings into Rossetti's re-worked Gothic. It seems more pertinent, therefore, to consider not what Gothic *is*, since there have been many helpful discussions of this, but rather to examine what it *does*;

Viewpoints of the Contemporary West 14.2 (1997), 89-96; and David F. Morrill, "'Twilight is not Good for Maidens': Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in 'Goblin Market'", *Victorian Poetry* 28.1 (1990), 1-16.

¹⁰ A similar argument has been put forward by John V. Murphy in *The Dark Angel: Gothic Elements in the Work of Shelley* (London: Associated University Presses, 1975), in which he suggests that certain 'characteristics provide a means of demonstrating that Shelley takes from the Gothic tradition devices, moods, and ideas that permeate his total work. Although much of the obvious Gothic trapping is lost, it becomes apparent that the major poetry uses Gothic traits for very serious ends' (p. 9).

to what ends it is deployed, what effects are created, and how it shapes the text. This thesis demonstrates that the Rossettian Gothic is closely linked to religious belief, and that many preoccupations of Gothic, such as thresholds, the sublime, the spectral and the grotesque, follow a distinct trajectory which moves the reader (and indeed the poet) towards heaven, this progress culminating in Rossetti's devotional prose.

A considerable proportion of the body of work on Rossetti is biographical, much of it drawing on William Michael Rossetti's somewhat patronizing notes on his sister's life and work in her posthumously-published collected poems. The most significant biography is by Jan Marsh, which is detailed in its research and provides new material not available in previous works. Though Marsh draws some speculative conclusions (such as that Rossetti was abused by her father during his long illness), she seeks to contextualize Rossetti's poetry and to provide a biographical way into her work. This biographical approach is one which this thesis will avoid, but Marsh's discussions are frequently illuminating, and this, along with editions of Rossetti's letters, remains the standard work for information on her life.¹¹

After a period of neglect in the early twentieth century, Rossetti's work has been the focus of a considerable amount of recent criticism. A rediscovery of her work was initiated by feminist readings in the 1970s and 80s, some of which relied on biographical information to 'reclaim' Rossetti as a feminist, for example, and in particular to recover a repressed sexuality for her.¹² This particular aspect of feminist readings led to the prevalence of 'Goblin

¹¹ Antony H. Harrison, ed., *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, 2 vols (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997 and 1999).

¹² For example, Dolores Rosenblum, in *Christina Rossetti: The Poetry of Endurance* (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1986), examines what feminist criticism can do for a subject, most particularly the then popular theme of 're-voicing' women poets silenced by their gender, and is based on a textual analysis of Rossetti's poems. Other examples include Andrea Abbott and Sharon Leder, *The Language of Exclusion: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987); Germaine Greer,

Market' in criticism of her poems, since it lends itself to such interpretations, unlike the more mature work which is focused on the relationship between humanity and God. The work of feminist critics has often ignored the significance of religion, and there is little work which takes account of both Rossetti's self-conscious awareness of herself as a woman in a masculine literary world and as a human being in abject relation to God. Sharon Smulders, however, is concerned with the contrast between poet and saint that Rossetti embodies, and how these elements fit in with her views on women's place in society. Crucially, Smulders suggests that 'William felt her claim to poethood injured by her claim to sainthood'.¹³ Like other critics, Smulders seeks to reconcile apparently differing aspects of Rossetti's character, but in doing so suggests that Rossetti's Christian beliefs negated her womanhood, on the premise that all are equal in Christ.

More recently, there has been a revival of interest in her work as a religious poet, including criticism which considers the necessity of recovering her theological context in order to understand her work fully, especially her later poems, which still remain less generally known than her earlier work, while her devotional prose has received little attention. Jerome McGann, one of the earliest critics to consider seriously her status as a religious poet, argues that Rossetti's work was for a while seen as lacking serious intellectual qualities, due to a 'lapse of historical awareness'.¹⁴ Instead, he suggests that belief, or

Slipshod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet (London: Viking, 1992); K. J. Mayberry, *Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Discovery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Kathy A. Psomiades, 'Whose Body? Christina Rossetti and Aestheticist Femininity', in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. by Kathy A. Psomiades and Talia Schaffer (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), pp. 101-18; and Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth*.

¹³ Sharon Smulders, 'Woman's Enfranchisement in Christina Rossetti's Poetry', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 34.4 (1992), 568-88 (p. 569).

¹⁴ Jerome McGann, 'The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti', *Critical Enquiry* 10 (1983), 127-44 (p. 131).

disbelief, should be suspended, and her work should instead be read in the light of contemporary theological debates, which will demonstrate her profound intellectual interaction with her religion.

Subsequent critical work has therefore engaged more fully with the religious dimension of Rossetti's poetry. Diane D'Amico considers the 'problem' of religion in Rossetti's poetry by persuasively arguing that in an attempt to reclaim her as a feminist icon, critics have not sufficiently addressed her genuine faith.¹⁵ This is an aspect that has been considered by a number of other critics recently, including Constance Hassett, Dinah Roe and Antony H. Harrison.¹⁶ Hassett examines the restraints and silences of Rossetti's poems which themselves speak volumes, and which form an integral part of the poetry. Patience is therefore also required of the reader of Rossetti's work, in order to hear the silences and attempt to uncover the reserve. Rossetti's aesthetics are examined minutely, with faith that they reward the reader's patience. Hassett endeavours to detach the poetry from accusations of dogmatism and excessive religious fervour, though it is perhaps surprising that the notion of reserve is not discussed within its Tractarian context. Roe, however, places Rossetti's work specifically in its Christian context, providing close readings of Rossetti's poems which contextualize them, emphasizing Rossetti's faith and demonstrating how Rossetti both draws

¹⁵ D'Amico, *Faith, Gender and Time*, pp. 7-9.

¹⁶ Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (Brighton: Harvester, 1988); Hassett, *Christina Rossetti: The Patience of Style*; Dinah Roe, *Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Other notable works which engage with Rossetti's faith include Joel Westerholm, 'In Defense of Verses: The Aesthetic and Reputation of Christina Rossetti's Late Poetry', *Renascence* 51.3 (1999), pp. 191-203; Mary Arseneau, *Recovering Christina Rossetti: Female Community and Incarnational Poetics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) and *Symbol and Sacrament: The Incarnational Aesthetic of Christina Rossetti* (London, Ont.: University of Western Ontario Press, 1991); Kathleen J. Burlinson, *Speaking Silence: Indeterminate Identities in the Writings of Christina Rossetti* (London: University of London, 1994).

upon and imaginatively reworks scripture. Roe's argument is that Rossetti's understanding of prosody and the nature of poetry demonstrates that her faith did not adversely affect her judgment. Moreover, Roe refers to Rossetti's 'gothic imagination', and relates her work to her reading of the Romantic poets (p. 69). In contrast, Lynda Palazzo specifically sets out to reconsider Rossetti's theology as feminist, rejecting the notion of the renunciatory women in Rossetti's writing and instead figuring them as both feminist (in a broader cultural sense rather than in the framework of modern liberal feminism) and as theologically coherent with Rossetti's faith.¹⁷ Moreover, she suggests that Rossetti used her imagination to liberate scripture from historical 'patriarchal oppression' (p. xi), though Palazzo's description of Rossetti's theology as increasingly 'radically feminist' seems at odds with what one can observe in Rossetti's work (p. 54).

Such works attempt to reconcile her gender with her religion, and begin to suggest that, far from suppressing her poetic talent, her beliefs gave her the opportunity both to express her views and to establish herself as a poet. Moreover, given Rossetti's absorption in her faith, an understanding of this context is vital to truly comprehend her poetics. Such contextualization can be productive to readers of Rossetti's poetry. Harrison, in particular, offers an interesting commentary on reading Rossetti in a range of contexts:

We can properly understand Christina Rossetti's artistic values and procedures only when they are placed within the relevant contexts of their development and implementation. Such contextualization also enables enhanced perceptions of the 'meaning' relative canonical value, and reception history of her work. Reconstructing the aesthetic, social, and religious ideologies of Rossetti's immediate environment, out of which her poetics emerged, clarifies the interaction in her poetry among Pre-

¹⁷ Lynda Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti's Feminist Theology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

Raphaelite, Ruskinian, and aestheticist impulses. These impulses uniquely accommodated the High Anglican values with which she grew up and which increased in importance to her as she aged.¹⁸

This suggests the peculiar yet fitting blend of aesthetic values which her ideologies combined to create. Harrison's point that to reconstruct these is the only way to understand her work is, however, both a truism and almost impossible in any real sense. Harrison examines how it is possible for these ideologies to correlate, considering how her contemporaries perceived her as a Pre-Raphaelite poet despite her religious beliefs. With the important exception of devout religiosity, Harrison argues, these characteristics of Rossetti's poetry are still considered major components of Pre-Raphaelitism.

Alison Chapman's work on Rossetti, however, emphasizes the dangers of reconstruction whilst simultaneously seeing its potential value.¹⁹ Chapman considers the critical recovery of Rossetti's work, and discusses the problematic nature of this recovery, and its tendency to produce a ventriloquized character rather than conjuring the original poet. Chapman's argument is mainly against New Historicist tendencies towards an 'unproblematic uncovering' in relating poetry to its context and biography. This argument is in part based on the notorious absence of Rossetti from the text, which has led critics to attempt to trace her life through abstruse clues.²⁰ She analogizes this uncertainty of 'haunted texts' with Jennifer Green-Lewis's discussion of recent interest in Victorian photography:

¹⁸ Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, p. 23.

¹⁹ Alison Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti* (New York: Macmillan, 2000).

²⁰ Though Chapman and other writers have commented on Rossetti's absence from the text, this idea is more pertinent to her earlier works than to her later, devotional poems, which frequently demonstrate a surprisingly open and confessional tone.

Since the goal of much materialist criticism and new historicism seems to be conversation with the dead, it is hardly surprising that Victorian photography has lately assumed a new authority as medium. The results are more or less successful depending on one's degree of skepticism.²¹

New Historicist approaches, Chapman argues, merely serve to disguise the absence of Rossetti from her work, since they are predicated on the illusion of an authentic subject. Chapman goes on to doubt the validity of a feminist methodology which 'voices the silent', implying that ventriloquism, not interaction, is the result. However, she also comments that this recovered voice can rescue some poets from 'presumptive biography', citing Elizabeth Siddal as an example of this.²² In its discussion of the haunted text and spectral writer, Chapman's work informs my chapter on spectrality in Rossetti.

Though there is little work on Rossetti which has proved directly relevant for this study, studies of Gothic literature have offered a range of possible connections. The notion of Rossetti's work as pertaining to, and influenced by, Gothic, however, is one that is mostly unexplored, with a few notable exceptions. These exceptions include an essay by Diane D'Amico, which considers seriously the impact of Rossetti's early readings of Maturin.²³ D'Amico examines particular concerns in the work of Rossetti which can be traced back through her work to the early Maturin poems, and argues that these issues have an impact on Rossetti's mature work. D'Amico's work is discussed in more detail within this thesis, particularly the chapter on Maturin's poems, for which D'Amico's essay is crucial.

²¹ Jennifer Green-Lewis, 'Landscape, Loss and Sexuality: Three Recent Books on Victorian Photography', *Victorian Studies*, 39.3 (1996), 391-404.

²² 'Speaking with the Dead: Recovering Lost Voices', in Chapman, *The Afterlife of Christina Rossetti*, pp. 28-45.

²³ Diane D'Amico, 'Christina Rossetti: The Maturin Poems', *Victorian Poetry* 19 (1981), 117-37.

An essay by Jan Marsh uses as a starting-point Rossetti's 'self-haunted spider' which appears in *Time Flies*.²⁴ Marsh explores a possible synergy between the work of Rossetti and the emerging discourses of aestheticism and decadence, particularly in terms of her 'morbidity' and her interest in the supernatural which is manifested in many of her poems (p. 24). Marsh's article was in part the instigator of this thesis, since it hints at Gothic possibilities in the work of Rossetti without fully exploring the potential of such a direction. Moreover, Marsh links Rossetti's poetry to perceived personality, which seems to foreclose any exploration of Rossetti's work and Gothic:

[T]his dark side is Christina Rossetti, both in literary terms and in devotional terms: her final book was of course a long meditation on the Apocalypse, that most Gothic of biblical texts. As well as being the most powerful element in her work, it is the mainspring, the fountain, the innermost self of her creative imagination, the source of her art. [...] She is truly a poet of horror and despair, death and putrefaction. (p. 29)

Though Marsh's article suggests some important avenues for Rossetti studies, such as Rossetti's depiction of evil, the Rossettian Gothic is complex, and is worked and re-worked to provide a moral Gothic which is closer to the moral aesthetics of Ruskin than the death and decay of the early Gothic novelists.

This 'dark side' of Rossetti's work is also examined by Brad Sullivan, who views Rossetti's secular and devotional poetry from an angle which is sympathetic to a reading of a female Gothic. Critics have failed Rossetti, he suggests, by concentrating on her as a religious

²⁴ Jan Marsh, 'The Spider's Shadow: Christina Rossetti and the Dark Double Within', in *Beauty and the Beast: Christina Rossetti, Walter Pater, R. L. Stevenson and their Contemporaries*, ed. by Peter Liebrechts and Wim Tigges (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 21-30.

poet and thus simplifying her poetry and the concepts behind it.²⁵ Instead, he suggests, the poetry subtly represents the secret potential of women, locked away and creating a tension that can only be resolved by death. Nature represents this potential, with threatening images such as birds and the sea engendering a sense of lurking danger, which suggests her 'profound uneasiness' with the 'natural order of things' (p. 234). Sullivan posits that this uneasiness is at odds with the Tractarian principle of God's ordered universe; however, I shall argue that it is in reflecting this post-lapsarian world that Rossettian Gothic is at its most coherent, since the universe is ordered to God's plan rather than to mankind's, and was not intended to be fully intelligible to fallen humanity.

The use of 'Gothic' as a descriptor for Rossetti's poems appears frequently in a recent book, which discusses the 'clash between religion and romanticism' which features in Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti's expressions of desire.²⁶ Taking a psychoanalytic approach, Suzanne Waldman devotes a chapter to 'The Superegoic Demon in Christina Rossetti's Gothic and Fantasy Writings', though she does not explicitly examine why Rossetti's work might be considered Gothic. The implication is that many of Rossetti's poems are Gothic in narrative content: 'Rossetti composed many explicitly gothic poems in which women are lured to isolated locales where all prospects of human delight are absent' (p. 39). Waldman's primary concern, however, is with the projection of the ego and its manifestations of desire and denial; Gothic provides the setting for this struggle, but no more than that. Gothic is described as a subgenre of Rossetti's work, which 'draws on gothic conventions that she likely came across in the Rossetti library' (p. 15). Waldman's close readings of Rossetti's

²⁵ Brad Sullivan, "'Grown Sick with Hope Deferred": Christina Rossetti's Darker Musings', *Papers on Language and Literature* 32.3 (1996), 227-43.

²⁶ Suzanne M. Waldman, *The Demon and the Damsel: Dynamics of Desire in the Works of Christina Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 5.

poetry, whilst not explaining the label of Gothic used, nonetheless provide a valuable context in which to read Rossetti's work as Gothic.

Finally, an essay by Anna Jamison considers the poems in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* as transgressive, suggesting that their shock value is comparable to that of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* (first published 1857).²⁷ Concentrating on poems in which the speaker is dead, and female, Jamison places Rossetti's poems in the context of Victorian poetry to argue that Rossetti uses a poetics of stealth to provide a subtle break with the aestheticized dead woman of nineteenth-century poetry. Contrary to the expressive poetics with which the female poet was traditionally linked, Rossetti's poems are restrained and interior, in contrast to the objective and exterior corpses of women frequently appearing in men's poetry. While Rossetti ostensibly conforms to the Pre-Raphaelite exploitation of the female corpse, she reconstructs 'death as textual strategy' by providing a voice to the inviolate, emotionally detached woman (p. 271). The unsettling tone of Rossetti's poems is frequently overlooked even in modern criticism, and Jamison's essay helps to redress the balance.

The Problem of Gothic

The first novel which describes itself as Gothic, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), provides the original for many of the conventions now considered to be hallmarks of the genre, such as the castle, family, ghosts, a hero or heroine in a difficult situation, a preoccupation with history, and hidden identities. Significantly, it also features the unexpected appearance of parts of a giant knight, whose 'fatal helmet' crushes the son of the house on his wedding day.²⁸ The helmet appears periodically throughout the novel and

²⁷ Anna Jamison, 'Passing Strange: Christina Rossetti's Unusual Dead', *Textual Practice*, 20.2 (2006), 257-80.

²⁸ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, ed. by W. S. Lewis and Joseph W. Reed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982; repr. 1990), p. 23.

serves as a reminder of its owner. Next, a colossal foot is seen by servants, who suspect the creature is lying down but is too large to be seen in its entirety; an enormous sword is delivered to the castle; and later a hand is seen. The reader, like the inhabitants of the castle, only glimpses Alonso throughout most of the novel; the closest one gets to seeing him completely is in the marble statue of him in the church, and his portrait in the gallery of the castle. The giant is not seen in his entirety until the final denouement, but, instead, as apparently disembodied parts, engendering all the more fear for their grotesque dismemberment. This 'knight of the gigantic sabre' (p. 57), it transpires, represents the first great owner of the Castle, Alonso the Good, whose lineage has been usurped by its current occupier, Manfred. It is significant that where Alonso can be seen most fully, prior to his appearance at the climax of the plot, is rooted in religious history (the church) or in family history (as a portrait in the ancestral home). Moreover, the novel is scattered with broken images and things half-seen or heard, such as voices which speak in the dark, and dreams and revelations from saints, permitting the reader only glimpses of the narrative. Alonso's fragmented body has been read as a portent of the fracturing of the house of Otranto, and a semi-biographical representation of paternalistic relationships.²⁹ In such readings, it is possible to trace how this seminal novel encapsulates so many tropes and conventions, both physical and abstract, of what was to become Gothic tradition. In its representation of the giant knight, who threatens the established traditions of the castle, a partially obscured representation of Gothic itself can be traced. Critical readings of Gothic, themselves giant, sprawling and apparently dismembered, make it clear that it is not now, and perhaps never was, possible to view the form as a coherent and cohesive whole. Instead, aspects appear

²⁹ For pertinent examples of critical responses to *The Castle of Otranto*, see Valdine Clemens, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Otranto to Alien* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 29-40, and E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 71-9.

where least expected throughout the literature of subsequent periods, and these traces appear to be connected to the larger form of Gothic. Consequently, there is little critical agreement on what constitutes Gothic, other than the deployment of certain physical motifs and aspects of psychology. As a result, studies of the genre tend to give broad overviews – an obscured glimpse of the giant – or else detailed studies of motifs or themes, such as castles and the ancestral house, the supernatural, or the novels' heroines, providing a sight of a single aspect of Gothic.

There have been many critical attempts to define Gothic, many of which take into account its wide variety of forms and motifs. As critics have suggested, it is 'a form that escapes anything but the loosest definition'.³⁰ Early studies of the genre tended to focus upon the physical features of Gothic, with some even providing a list of such items.³¹ Such satirical discussions of the aesthetic tropes highlight the significant issue that in many ways the identifying features are often considered to be purely aesthetic, with plot, tone and literary merit being of less significance.³² If, for example, as *The Age; A Poem* ironically suggests, a romance can be turned into a Gothic novel by the substitution of certain objects, and such

³⁰ Alexandra Warwick, 'Victorian Gothic', in *The Routledge Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by Emma McEvoy and Catherine Spooner (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 29-37 (p. 29).

³¹ For example, *The Age; A Poem: Moral, Political, and Metaphysical. With Illustrative Annotations. In Ten Books* (London, 1810), pp. 209-10, cited in Napier, p. 28.

³² Napier suggests that the aesthetics serve a distinct purpose, which point the reader to the true 'meaning' of Gothic, if such a thing can be found: 'An attempt to isolate the distinctive qualities of Gothic narrative brings the reader repeatedly back to this characteristic: Gothic is finally much less about evil, "the fascination of the abomination", than it is a standardized, absolutely formulaic system of creating a certain kind of atmosphere in which a reader's sensibility towards fear and horror is exercised in predictable ways' (p. 29, citing Robert D. Hume, 'Gothic versus Romantic: A Rejoinder', *PMLA* 86 (1971), 282-90 (266-7). Rossetti's work is less formulaic in its problematizing of Gothic tropes, but retains the 'atmosphere' which is frequently dependent on aesthetics.

substitutions were considered to be successful, then both genres are exposed as purely decorative, relying only on the external for their imaginative power over readers. Since, as historians of the reading public have argued, the majority of their readers were likely to have been women, this also has unpleasant connotations for the appetites and intellects of women readers, such as those satirized by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey* (1818).³³ However, the considerable critical interest in Gothic, particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century, suggests that it is both possible and worthwhile to read more closely into the texts that are considered to adhere to Gothic conventions, however these might be defined. Perhaps the most helpful definition of Gothic is John Ruskin's definition of Gothic architecture, which has parallels with Gothic in literary form. Though one might argue that it is more straightforward to define the outward forms of Gothic principles in architecture than in literature, Ruskin's comments make it clear that the outward signs point to the inward, and are shaped by them, and that it is a combination of elements which make up the form:

Now observe: the chemist defines his mineral by two separate kinds of character; one external, its crystalline form, hardness, lustre, etc.; the other internal, the proportions, and nature of its constituent atoms. Exactly in the same manner, we shall find that Gothic architecture has external forms and internal elements. Its elements are certain mental tendencies of the builders, legibly expressed in it; as fancifulness, love of variety, love of richness, and such others. Its external forms are pointed arches,

³³ William St Clair, in *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 280-4, discusses attempts to control women's reading, in particular novels and romances, which itself indicates the likelihood of women's propensity to read novels 'which raise expectations of extraordinary adventures and cause readers to admire extravagant passions, and lead to unacceptable conduct' (p. 280). This idea of the potentially damaging effects of women's reading is demonstrated in Charlotte Lennox's novel *The Female Quixote* (1752).

vaulted roofs, etc. And unless both the elements and the forms are there, we have no right to call the style Gothic. It is not enough that it have the Form, if it have not also the power and life. It is not enough that it has the Power, if it have not the form.³⁴

Ruskin's abstruse argument is clearly applicable to literary Gothic, linking inner and outer forms. While modern literary criticism is less likely to take the writer's 'mental tendencies' into account, it is nonetheless possible to see the manifestations of the inward workings of Gothic in the aesthetics.³⁵ It is, as Ruskin says, the combination of the two which permits a work the title of 'Gothic'.

A sense of the difficulty encountered in attempting to define Gothic can be grasped from the excellent introduction to *The Gothic Revival*.³⁶ Michael Charlesworth, in introducing an interdisciplinary 'cultural history of the Gothic revival' (p. 5), considers the concept of 'living the Gothic' as a point where the architectural and the literary intersect. The desire to 'live' the Gothic was both inspired by literature, and inspired the writing of further Gothic literature; he considers the cases of Byron and Beckford, among others, but explains the difficulties and possibilities of living this fantasy:

³⁴ John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in *The Stones of Venice*, X, *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, 39 vols, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903-12), and on CD-ROM (Cambridge University Press for The Ruskin Foundation, 1996), pp. 180-269 (p. 183). Subsequent references to the works of Ruskin will refer to this edition, and subsequent references to 'The Nature of Gothic' will be noted as NG in the text.

³⁵ As Murphy rightly points out, the aesthetics or 'outward manifestations of Gothic' are 'critical because they draw our attention to the mood and situation that often determine the Gothic pattern we seek' (p. 17).

³⁶ Michael Charlesworth, ed., *The Gothic Revival 1720-1870*, 3 vols (Mountfield, Sussex: Helm Information, 2002).

Once the Gothic [building] had been located, however, a multiplicity of events could devolve from it, depending in large part on the preconceptions, specific interests, and purposes in view, of the subject involved. To put it another way, the experience of living the Gothic depended on all sorts of factors, not least the way in which the Gothic had been discursively constituted and ideologically framed in the life of the subject. (pp. 28-9)

It is perhaps unsurprising that the subjects of whom Charlesworth writes are male; the female Gothic 'subject' has historically been more of an object, less likely to choose to 'live the Gothic'.³⁷ Yet Charlesworth's point is significant: how one chooses to live out a fantasy is dependent on the subject's circumstance, be they fictional or otherwise. To read Gothic is to interpret it, as with any other text, but the monolith of Gothic turns out to be fractured and inchoate.

In 'The Nature of Gothic', Ruskin outlines the main tenets of Gothic architecture as he saw them, which he describes as 'characteristics or moral elements of Gothic' (*NG*, p. 184). These attributes are Savageness, Changefulness, Naturalism, Grotesqueness, Rigidity and Redundance. Significantly, he points out that 'every building of the Gothic period differs in some important respect from every other; and many include features which, if they

³⁷ A notable literary example of a female character who chose to live the Gothic is of course Catherine Morland of *Northanger Abbey*, whose desire to enact the melodrama of her favourite novels is a source of comedy. However, in contrast to this, it has been pointed out by Fiona Price in her book *Revolutions in Taste: Women's Writing and the Aesthetics of Romanticism 1773-1818* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) that women writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Joanna Baillie offer a pragmatic response to contemporary aesthetics, providing 'healthy lessons of association' which 'suggest[] a relationship between matter and mind, between the empirical observation of the environment and the moral and intellectual environment of the individual', a concept which returns the woman from object to subject (p. 111).

occurred in other buildings, would not be considered Gothic at all' (NG, p. 181). The grotesque is one such characteristic: frequently but not always present in Gothic, whether considering literature, architecture or art. Ruskin's considerations of the morality of Gothic can be applied to literature as well as to other forms. It becomes clear that Ruskin viewed Gothic as splintered, just as he saw Venice itself, consisting of the various 'verities of Venice'. Ruskin recorded his views of Venice in a fragmented manner, noting down measurements, architectural details, and personal impressions in order to piece them together in *The Stones of Venice*. This ruptured approach to Gothic is helpful in considering a mode of female Gothic, which necessarily regards the genre as a mode of fragments rather than a coherent whole corresponding to a monolithic patriarchal order.

Readings of 'female Gothic', particularly after Ellen Moers's use of the term in *Literary Women*, have mined the conventions and aesthetics of Gothic, but it has proved difficult to produce a sustained and convincing association between the surfaces and depths of the genre. Many studies of Gothic, therefore, tend to provide motif-related studies, examining, for example, the use of the castle in the novels, relating them to the psyche and the boundaries of the self. For Rossetti, physical motifs such as these are used sparingly; her poetry tends to concentrate on the psychological rather than the physical. This is not to suggest that Rossetti is not concerned with surface appearance; rather, she either contrasts the surface appearance with the depths, of the hidden elements, or suggests a sympathy between appearance and character. To take the castle as an example, critics such as Anne Williams have argued that the building serves as a physical representation of the ancestral 'house' and pervading notions of patriarchy which are associated with this, combined with the concept that the castle also represents the body of the heroine, both in its limits and the limitations it thus places upon her; and in its depths to be explored, both psychological and physical. It has become a truism about Gothic for the domestic home to become a place of terrors and threats, where safety is no longer assured:

[A] castle is a man-made thing, a cultural artifact linked with the name of a particular family. This structure has a private and a public aspect; its walls, towers, ramparts suggest external identity, the 'corridors of power', consciousness; whereas its dungeons, attics, secret rooms, and dark hidden passages connote the culturally female, the sexual, the maternal, the unconscious. It is a public identity enfolding (and organizing) the private, the law enclosing, controlling, dark 'female' otherness.³⁸

Though the notion of enclosure, whether within a building or by psychological barriers, features in many if not most of Rossetti's works, it is precisely this 'enfolding' which Rossetti's poems avoid. Rossetti's female protagonists, of whom there are many, from Laura and Lizzie of 'Goblin Market' to 'Cousin Kate', 'Sister Maude' and the speaker of 'The Convent Threshold', are rarely cloistered, at least at the moment of speaking. For example, the speaker of 'The Convent Threshold' may be hesitating on the brink of a cloistered life, but the true barrier is to her love, since she says, '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' (ll. 1-3). This 'blood' itself points to Gothic, both in the impression of physical excess of gore, but also in its sense of the barrier of patriarchy and family. Yet these heroines' freedom to speak enacts their freedom to move away from the physical boundaries of the castle or domestic space, and instead demonstrates a concern with social structures and the boundaries of the self, particularly in the 'fallen women' poems. The traditional villain, meanwhile, is virtually absent in any coherent form. While David Punter suggests that 'The villain was always the most complex and interesting character in Gothic fiction', Rossetti's villains, if they can be termed such, are mostly characters whose villainy lies in weakness of character and moral

³⁸ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 44.

turpitude rather than the pursuit of evil, such as the Prince in 'The Prince's Progress'.³⁹

Rossetti's focus is on heroines, or gender-less narrators; even those men who have rejected her ballad-heroines are weak-willed rather than wicked. Men, it seems, are not a threat *per se*, but a diversion from the path of righteousness.

Such readings of the physical/psychological aspects of the castle and other motifs have now become commonplace in criticism of Gothic, and as such are open to a variety of interpretations. Norman Holland and Leona Sherman have argued that it is wise to treat all interpretations of physical motifs with caution; they argue that what Gothic offers depends on the mental and emotional state of the reader, among other things.⁴⁰ How the reader 'matches' the inner and outer worlds of the Gothic novel varies widely, opening up a space of subjectivity which is by no means fixed.⁴¹ While the castle provides a liminal space in which to project not the heroine's but the reader's fears and fantasies, the 'receptive function of the habitation' does not limit the reader (p. 282). This suggestion opens up the possibilities of the Gothic novel, to the point where reader-interpretation becomes its strongest characteristic:

[P]sychoanalytic criticism would have assumed a one-to-one equation: the castle symbolizes the body [...] Rather, each of us resymbolizes reality in our own terms. A gothic novel combines the heroine's fantasies about the castle with her fears that her

³⁹ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: Volume 1: The Gothic Tradition* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 9.

⁴⁰ Norman N. Holland and Leona F. Sherman, 'Gothic Possibilities', *New Literary History* 8 (1977), 279-94.

⁴¹ To read in terms of inner and outer worlds is particularly appropriate for Rossetti's work, since a dual reading such as this pertains to typology, which, as Landow explains, is a significant presence in nineteenth-century literature, and was particularly espoused by the Tractarians, who believed that 'the physical world bears a divine impress which the sensitive eye can read in terms of type and symbol'. George Landow, *Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows: Biblical Typology in Victorian Literature, Art and Thought* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 112.

body will be violated. The novel thus makes it possible for the literents to interpret body by means of castle and castle by means of body, but it does not force us to do so.⁴²

The notion of an enclosed or enclosing space, which may appear physically threatening, is significant in Rossetti's work in that it offers the heroine-reader the potential to escape and to cross boundaries or thresholds. In Rossetti's poems, however, these thresholds are more often metaphorical and interior than physical and exterior; Rossetti deploys the Gothic motif of the threshold without always requiring a physical barrier.

The castle, and indeed the Gothic text, thus forms a 'potential space', in which 'the individual experiences creative living', producing meaning through the act of creative reading.⁴³ Though the text, in tone as much as in content, may be suggestive to the reader, it does not proscribe or coerce the reader's interpretations. This notion has particularly pertinent implications for Rossetti's work. Into this space, Rossetti wrote her poems, growing out of her own interpretations of a psychological and, most significantly, theological Gothic. If this reader is also a writer, as in the case of Rossetti, a doubled reading of Gothic is thus possible. Barthes states:

Thus is revealed the total existence of writing: a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all

⁴² Holland and Sherman, pp. 281-2.

⁴³ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge 1971), p. 103, cited in Holland and Sherman.

the quotations which make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.⁴⁴

This concept of writing as a fractured form which finds meaning in the reader is particularly applicable to Gothic, itself a collection of ambiguous tropes of varied derivation, and appearing in forms which the reader must piece together. Thus '[t]he "text" itself embodies no more than the possibility of a certain kind of relationship between its words and its literents'.⁴⁵ Napier goes so far as to suggest that Gothic is 'disruptive and subversive to read', being fractured to breaking-point into manuscripts which break off, or which cannot be read, letters and overheard words (p. 44). This, she suggests, causes the reader 'displeasure' which is an intrinsic part of the experience of reading Gothic:

Part of the distinctive appearance of the Gothic may actually derive from the reader's unconscious displeasure [...] with its characteristic pattern of alternating static moral passages with scenes of often hectic action, it seems to demand an activity of consolidating on the part of its readership that its own design subverts. The result is a form that is fundamentally unstable, both in theory and in practice. (p. 44)

Critics tend to concentrate on the pleasure produced by Gothic literature, particularly in the way in which it permits subconscious fantasies to come into play, and in its 'escapist' reputation. Napier is suggesting the reverse; that, far from being a form in which the reader loses herself, and moreover a form which does not demand anything of the reader, it is in fact a genre which requires action on the part of the reader in order to make sense of the clues in

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. and ed. by Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1977), pp. 142-48 (p. 148).

⁴⁵ Holland and Sherman, p. 188.

the text, a theory which is clearly applicable to Rossetti's work. Similarly, other critics have suggested that since Gothic concentrates on the external, it leaves the reader to deduce the psychological aspects of the work.

Coral Ann Howells, for example, who concentrates on 'feeling' – 'the whole non-rational side of experience – emotional, imaginative and sensational' which Gothic manifests distinctively – describes Gothic as a representation of 'the darker side of awareness'.⁴⁶ Howells emphasizes the 'sense of imprisonment' which creates the interiority of the Gothic novel, concerned as it is with boundaries and the self as well as literal prison walls (p. 6). The Gothic heroine 'is the prime example of this febrile temperament', irrational, over-sensitive, intuitive and often sickly (p. 9). Rossetti's heroines, by this definition, are not Gothic at all; they may find themselves in circumstances appropriate to Gothic, such as trapped or abandoned by a lover, mourning a loved one or awaiting a ghastly fate, but they do so with stoicism, patience and Christian forbearance. While Howells links the heroine's 'persecution mania' to a 'dread of sex' (p. 13),⁴⁷ Rossetti's heroines include Maude Clare and Jessie Cameron, among others, who have borne an illegitimate child, been abandoned, and continued with their lives, shamed but strong. The moral consequences are clear in Rossetti's work, not shrouded in mystery and fear as Howells suggests; perhaps it is in the depiction of her heroines that Rossetti's pragmatic Victorianism is most apparent. Unlike Radcliffe, for

⁴⁶ Coral Ann Howells, *Love, Mystery and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), pp. 1, 5. It seems likely that this notion is gendered, being tailored to the female characters in the Gothic novel, since such excessive and draining emotion is more channelled and focused in the Romantic poets, for example; Derek Colville writes in *Victorian Poetry and the Romantic Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1970) that for Romantic writers, 'the imagination is raised from a receptive state of "mind-wandering" to one of intense concentration from which the normally sensed world fades' (p. 59). This clarity of focused emotion is much more apposite for the Gothic represented in poetry.

⁴⁷ This is discussed by a number of other critics, including Rictor Norton in *Gothic Readings: The First Wave, 1764-1840* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000), pp. ix-x.

example, who ‘exploits almost continuously a double point of view: her heroine’s and her own, that of participant and of the objective observer, or that of the feelings and that of the rational judgement’, Rossetti does not appear to impose her own point of view upon a narrative, and eschews Radcliffean ambiguity for more forthright narrative.⁴⁸ Yet this is only completely true for Rossetti’s ballads; in her more abstract poems, a careful reading is necessary, to extract a Christian message, and to reflect and to unpick the strands of Gothic contained within.

This close reading is appropriate for Rossetti’s milieu in light of her beliefs, since she draws upon the Tractarian notion of reserve in both the content and aesthetics of her work. G. B. Tennyson, in his book *Victorian Devotional Poetry*, one of very few to consider Tractarian poetics, describes reserve as ‘a sense of dignity and limit to expression in order that it not become mere effusion’.⁴⁹ Rossetti’s poems can be read repeatedly, opened up and unfolded in order to develop the spiritual mind of the reader. A significant aspect of Tractarian poetics is its highly developed theory of reader-response. Keble summarizes this, suggesting: ‘It is to the awakening of some moral or religious feeling, not by direct instruction (that is the office of morality or theology) but by way of association, that we would refer all poetic pleasure’.⁵⁰ He goes on to suggest that authorial intention is irrelevant, since what signifies is the uplifting moral value which the reader may gain from the work. The use of reserve and typology required the reader to have a certain amount of prior knowledge in order to read poetry as an active participant rather than a passive observer. Simply to read was not enough; the reader would be expected to interpret and reflect. This is particularly true of devotional poetry, such

⁴⁸ Howells, p. 59.

⁴⁹ G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 143.

⁵⁰ John Keble, *Occasional Papers and Reviews* (London: James Parker, 1877), p. 152, cited in G. B. Tennyson, p. 25.

as Keble's *The Christian Year*, used by many Victorian readers, including Rossetti herself, as a meditative aid to devotions. A conscious ambiguity appears in many of her poems, placing the responsibility of interpretation onto the reader by leaving the message of the poem open.

This ambiguity is further complicated by Rossetti's mode of Gothic, in which she uses the aesthetics of the form sparingly whilst concentrating on the abstract to which the motifs are usually seen to point. For example, it is, of course, not possible to divorce the atmospheric settings and objects of Gothic from its potential meaning, but it has been established by a number of recent critics that the aesthetics of the genre may vary widely, according to their historical period and the oeuvre of the writer. Napier, for instance, argues that Gothic is itself so unstable a form that it cannot be defined in final terms, since, she implies, the conventions of Gothic are largely aesthetic and do not run deeper than the surface of a text. Significantly, Napier suggests that the abstract notions of psychology which are now critically associated with Gothic owe more to readings of these conventions than to the novels themselves, though it is clear that even criticism of the genre is now splintered or ambiguous.

The aesthetic tropes of Gothic, although they do in some instances occur in Rossetti's work, are of less significance.⁵¹ Her poems operate in a more complex way, in which the aesthetics can be associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and her Tractarian faith as well as Gothic. Yet if one assumes that Gothic exteriors point to Gothic interiors, and that one signifies the other in a 'langue' of Gothic which is specific to its own needs, it should be possible to trace in the interiority of Rossetti's poetics some of the concerns of Gothic. Concepts such as fear and evil, which recur in the situations of Gothic heroines, can be related to Rossetti's devotional poetics in a Christian context. Although, in much of her work, fear is related to the fear of God, there is also a considerable exercise of fear within the world,

⁵¹ For example, the list from 'The Age', cited in Napier, p. 28, offers 'A castle', 'A giant', 'A blood-stained dagger', 'A knight', 'A monk', 'A lamp', 'Skeletons' and 'A ghost'.

of its seductiveness to the Christian focused on Heaven, and of the evil which exists, particularly within the society in which she was situated. Consequently, she writes of social ills such as the fallen woman and the double standard towards sexually incontinent men, and, particularly in her later devotional poems, examines herself inwardly for sin.

This self-examination which divides the internal from the external is a concern which Rossetti makes explicit in several of her poems, where the striking contrast between the inner and outer being is emphasized. Unlike the conventional Gothic tropes of heroines who are blameless and villains who are evil, however, Rossetti's poems demonstrate a complex understanding of the world more akin to Maturin than to Ann Radcliffe. It seems likely that this tendency to self-scrutiny derives at least in part from Tractarianism, with its emphasis on personal purity, frequent devotions and, in some instances, use of the confessional. There has been increasing recent critical interest in Rossetti's faith as a contextual tool for reading her poetry, although the recovery of Rossetti's status as a poet was initiated by feminist criticism.⁵² This has also led to increased reading of her mature works, which are more devotional than many earlier poems, though her volumes of devotion and exegesis remain rarely discussed.

Tractarianism and the Gothic

Tractarianism, the High Church movement which grew from *Tracts for the Times*, was undoubtedly the greatest single influence on Rossetti's work. Some of its followers later converted to Catholicism, but the majority maintained a High Church Anglicanism which concentrated on personal holiness, social responsibility and the aesthetics of worship, among

⁵² G. B. Tennyson writes that 'one could illustrate almost every Tractarian topic and interest [...] with poems from the pen of Christina Rossetti' (p. 201). Subsequently, books such as D'Amico, *Faith, Gender and Time*, Roe and Hassett have demonstrated the truth of Tennyson's statement.

other things. However, '[g]rasping Tractarian beliefs can be a slippery task due to internal disagreements regarding key doctrines like reserve, the Eucharist, confession, the Incarnation and analogy. The *Tracts for the Times*, however [...] grant us some idea of their collective philosophy'.⁵³ The Oxford Movement had a complex relationship with Catholicism, particularly in its later developments into Ritualism. The aesthetic of the movement, with ornate churches, candles and incense, confessionals and sisterhoods, seemed suspiciously Roman Catholic to many.⁵⁴

It was a remarkably literary movement, and its adherents, including Newman, Keble, Pusey and Isaac Williams produced a great deal of poetry and prose which Rossetti read enthusiastically.⁵⁵ Moreover, in some ways the Oxford Movement provided a point of cultural intersection for the literature and architecture of the Gothic revival. The architectural significance of the Gothic revival also cannot be overestimated for its interest in the medieval, particularly in ecclesiology; for example, Isaac Williams's lengthy poem *The Cathedral: Or The Catholic And Apostolic Church In England* (1843) 'makes unmistakably clear the connection between a Gothic church and devotional feeling. While *The Baptistry* and *The Altar* are less intimately tied to Gothic, they too reinforce the growing Gothic inclinations of serious-minded churchmen'.⁵⁶ With its emphasis on sacraments and the ability of beauty to uplift the soul, the Tractarian church became increasingly Gothic in its aesthetics

⁵³ Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 87.

⁵⁴ An excellent and comprehensive introduction to Tractarianism and Ritualism is provided by John Shelton Reed in *Glorious Battle: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Anglo-Catholicism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996).

⁵⁵ For further discussion of the Tractarians and their influence on and engagement with literature of the period, see Knight and Mason, 'The Oxford Movement: Wordsworth to Hopkins', in *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*, pp. 87-119.

⁵⁶ G. B. Tennyson, p. 170.

as well as its literature.⁵⁷ Alongside this poetry, the *Tracts for the Times* were published between 1833 and 1841, setting out the often controversial beliefs of the movement's principal adherents.

Keble's *Lectures on Poetry* provide invaluable insight into the literary aspects of the Oxford Movement, suggesting, for example:

Let us test whether a writer overshoots the mark, whether his imagination runs riot without any reserve, whether he unworthily intermingles sacred with secular themes....He cannot bring himself to confess all to all men, but like a harp lightly touched, he needs but very few notes to convey his real meaning to sympathetic hearts.⁵⁸

In Tract 80, 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge', Isaac Williams writes of the Old Testament: 'We may notice the silence observed, respecting a future and eternal life in the books of Moses, as one of 'the secret things which belonged unto God'. Further on, Williams discusses the use of 'figurative expressions', suggesting:

[W]e cannot but apply the remark of Bishop Butler, where he observes the vast difference between Holy Scripture, and any human composition in this respect, that in the latter our object is by words to convey most fitly our meaning to others; we cannot

⁵⁷ A precursor to this architectural poetry would be George Herbert's *The Temple* (1633).

⁵⁸ John Keble, *Lectures on Poetry 1832–1841*, 2 vols, ed. by Gavin Budge and trans. by E. Francis (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003), I, p.73.

say this of God's written word. It may have objects quite of another kind, which its very obscurity serves, better than its distinct meaning would do.⁵⁹

Rossetti's writing tends to follow the biblical model, by use of veiled allusions, and especially typology. This latter was particularly significant in her work, since throughout her poetry the natural world, for example, serves as a metaphor for the workings of God, to which our eyes must be opened before we can understand. Furthermore, when the writer is 'unburdening himself' in poetry, 'Such exercise must always be done with the utmost circumspection and reserve, most often achieved through an indirect expression that includes allegory and other veiled modes of utterance'.⁶⁰ This note of Tractarian reserve is one in which Rossetti excelled, and, as Charlotte Yonge proposed in her book *Womankind*, she was 'writing as a Christian, with the glory of God in view'.⁶¹ Roe suggests that in her essay 'Dante, An English Classic' (1867), 'Rossetti connects the Tractarian doctrine of reserve and analogy to literary production. Just as the world is only a shadow of heaven, so a translation is a shadow of its original' (p. 66). The fallen world is thus the natural home of Gothic, but in Rossetti's case this is a moral Gothic, which accepts fear, terror, and the supernatural, as a part of the everyday life of a Christian.

The Christian faith, particularly Catholicism, and Gothic have a troubled and complex relationship;⁶² Tractarianism more so due to its perceived theological and sacramental

⁵⁹ Isaac Williams, 'Tract 80: On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge', *Tracts for the Times* <<http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts/tract80.html>> [accessed 6 April 2010].

⁶⁰ G. B. Tennyson, p. 34.

⁶¹ Charlotte M. Yonge, *Womankind* (London: Richard Clay, 1876; repr. 1889), p. 228.

⁶² This is discussed in detail in a number of books, including Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), which contains a chapter devoted to the Oxford Movement, particularly relating to the novels of Anthony Trollope. Denis G. Paz, in *Popular Anti-*

affinities with Catholicism. Closer investigation, however, suggests the theory that Gothic is essentially a Christian-based mode of literature, which this thesis will support. Montague Summers (himself an Anglo-Catholic) writes that the main characteristics of Gothic are 'aspiration, yearning, desire, mystery, wonder'.⁶³ These traits are, of course, supplemented by other aesthetic and abstract characteristics to form a mode of Gothic, as this thesis will discuss, but these are notable qualities for their shared language of faith. These terms could certainly be used to describe most, if not all, of Rossetti's poetry, though this observation alone is not sufficient to prove the Gothic affinities of her work, but they provide a useful signpost to the direction which my hypothesis will take. Murphy, similarly, cites Eleanor Sickels's work on melancholy in poetry in his work on Shelleyan Gothic, to illustrate the relationship between faith and Gothic:

[T]he elements which terror-romanticism took from the medieval revival were the very elements which it had in common with black religious melancholy. It took the backgrounds of dim cathedrals, midnight churchyards, ghastly charnel houses, and gloomy monastic ruins. It took the death theme, and embroidered it with all the terrors of physical corruption and spectral visitation. It took the theme of sin, and added

Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), which includes a chapter on 'The Tractarian Factor', points out that 'Anglo-Catholicism's ceremonial and theological implications got mixed up in the debate over the Gothic Revival. For some conservative Evangelicals, the Gothic style was "Popery done in stone"' (p. 133). Alison Shell, in *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination 1558-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), discusses the history of Catholicism and English literature, and suggests that, long before the Gothic revival in England, the 'Italian city-state' was used as a site for 'horrors' (p. 54), and that the anti-Catholic trend of Gothic has its roots in a much earlier unease with Catholicism.

⁶³ Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: The Fortune Press, 1968), p.

domestic and exotic demonology, age-old tales of contracts with Satan, and the expiatory sufferings of the Wandering Jew. And out of the theme of sin, which is never far from the theme of death, it built its arch-types – the criminal monk, the tyrant, the strong dark hero inwardly consumed by remorse.⁶⁴

Though Sickels's account is a simplified version of the history of Gothic from the medieval to its revival, it serves to emphasize the essentially religious nature of Gothic, its preoccupation with the complex themes of good and evil, heaven and earth, life and death, dramatized to provide both moral teaching and a discursive framework. Sickels links the graveyard poets directly to earlier religious culture and continues their tropes into the Romantic poets and Gothic.⁶⁵

This slippery term, Gothic, is rarely applied to poetry, and when it is, the claim is frequently unsustainable, or at least unexplained. Certainly there is virtually no critical material which considers the nature of poetry and Gothic.⁶⁶ It is interesting that such significant manifestations of Gothic have received little critical attention, since certain formal aspects of poetry might make it particularly fruitful for Gothic. This thesis explores the possibility that poetry is a form positioned to manifest elements of Gothic, since it is by

⁶⁴ Murphy, p. 19, citing Eleanor Sickels, *The Gloomy Egoist* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1932), pp. 159-60.

⁶⁵ This is also discussed by Eino Railo, in *The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism* (London: Routledge, 1927). Railo considers a direct line of influence from Shakespeare, taking in Milton and Spenser, Radcliffe and the Gothic, and the Romantic poets.

⁶⁶ Rictor Norton's anthology of early Gothic literature includes a section on poetry, much of which is by Radcliffe, and also includes Charlotte Smith, Coleridge, Nathan Drake, Hannah Cowley and Matthew Lewis. Norton discusses the influence of Gothic novelists on the Romantic poets, citing Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' and Byron's 'Manfred' as examples; yet there is no consideration of the Gothic nature of the poetry, merely a cursory note on the poets' interest in (and disdain for) novelists such as Radcliffe and Lewis.

nature fractured. In its subjective presentation of a wide range of subjects divorced from their surroundings, and in its ability to fragment further its content in stanzaic form and even fractured syntax, it bears a structural relation to Gothic. Moreover, in its reflective and psychologically complex subject matter, it frequently provides rich material for Gothic, and indeed it has been suggested that the genre itself draws much upon the work of the graveyard poets, such as Gray, Young, Blair and Parnell.⁶⁷ While these poets' work may have been an inspiration for Gothic largely in their grisly subject matter, the poems themselves bear further investigation as early examples of Gothic. Certainly poems such as Thomas Parnell's 'A Night-Piece on Death', reflecting on mortality by the light of a 'blue taper' (l. 1), and featuring revenants, corpses and graveyards, moving rapidly from melancholy to the sublime and back again, fit well into the genre of Gothic. Moreover, in its fragmentary effect of closed couplets, mixing interjections and vivid visual description, it gives an impression of trying to make sense of the world by focusing on the after-life.⁶⁸ It is possible to trace a developmental arc from the work of the graveyard poets to Rossetti's, and indeed further, in

⁶⁷ This idea is entertained briefly by David Punter and Glennis Byron in *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004):

'[I]t is also important to notice that as early as the 1740s we can trace the development of a form of poetry which was radically different from anything Pope advocated, and which came to be called "graveyard poetry". Graveyard poetry is significant here because it prefigures the Gothic novel in several ways and its emergence was sudden and dramatic' (p. 10). Similarly, Andrew Smith mentions this concept in *Gothic Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), suggesting that the graveyard poets 'made a significant contribution to developing a Gothic ambience (by dwelling on feelings of loss), and provided an investigation into life and death that constituted peculiarly Gothic metaphysic' (p. 52).

⁶⁸ Napier suggests that Wordsworth and Coleridge offer 'sublime moments of discontinuity' (p. 6), which the Gothic rarely achieves, despite its apparent predisposition towards fragmentation and the sublime; rather, poetry as a mode of Gothic is more receptive to such moments which provide uplift in the midst of the most reflective and melancholy moments. Radcliffe, however, tends to switch register, using motifs of gulfs, graveyards, mountains and brinks to demonstrate a momentous moral, for example.

the work of poets such as Sylvia Plath. It would be convenient to label Rossetti a late 'graveyard poet', but this classification is too neat and takes no account of the developments overlaid on the genre by the Gothic novel. Furthermore, for Rossetti it is not death itself, or the contemplation of it, which is her focus; it is death as a barrier to be crossed, a transitional stage to enable the Christian to pass into heaven.

Yet there are clear parallels between Rossetti's poems and those of the graveyard poets. Though Gray's poetics in 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' are very different from those usually employed by Rossetti, the defining premise of the poem, of the futility of human life and the inevitability of death which also characterizes 'On a Distant Prospect of Eton College', is reminiscent of the resignation and reflection of many of Rossetti's poems.⁶⁹ The graveyard poets, including Gray, Thomas Warton, Robert Blair and Edward Young, offer reflection on time, death and human life as a kind of *memento mori*, set in an appropriately melancholy setting, if not always a graveyard. These defining features of the genre are shared by much of Rossetti's poetry, though Rossetti sometimes permits her dead to speak; in 'From House to Home', for example, a ghost returns to its family to find it has been forgotten.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Peter M. Sacks, 'Gray's Elegy', in *Poets of Sensibility and the Sublime*, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 119-23, queries whether this is truly an elegy since it seems to be mourning humanity rather than a specific person (if one disregards Gray's recent loss of his friend Richard West), but concludes that '[t]his individual death, albeit imaginary, is that of the poet himself', who provides 'a definition of the terms by which he should be mourned' (p. 119). Such a preoccupation with the death of 'the poet' is a common feature of graveyard poetry, and also of many of Rossetti's poems.

⁷⁰ As Harrison has suggested, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poems and paintings tend to fetishize the beautiful, dead woman, constructing her as a passive object of love, untouchable in death. Rossetti also utilizes the image of the dead woman, notably in poems such as 'After Death' and 'At Home', but for her, the dead woman speaks; she is rarely passive and almost never silent. Jamison argues that Rossetti uses a poetics of stealth to provide a subtle break with the aestheticized dead woman of nineteenth-century poetry. Contrary to the expressive poetics with which the female poet was traditionally linked, Rossetti's poems are restrained and interior, providing a contrast

Moreover, Rossetti's dead, whether speaking or silenced, come out of the graveyard and into the home; for her, such reflection is not confined to the appropriate place, where the dead are buried, but instead can walk in the world as a constant reminder of imminent and inevitable death. Rossetti avoids the grisly and the decaying, but the ideas which characterize such poems are present. Poems such as 'Song (When I am dead my dearest)' feature a potential, future graveyard in which the corpse 'may remember' or 'may forget' (ll. 15-6), for example, shifting the emphasis from the living to the already-dead, which has the dual effect of both reminding the living that their life is finite, and simultaneously providing hope that after death an earthly consciousness might remain.

Other poems which have been described as Gothic include those written by Gothic novelists, notably Matthew Lewis and Ann Radcliffe. Rossetti is likely to have read Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* (1801), which includes poems written or translated by him as well as some 'collected'. The first poem in the book, 'Bothwell's Bonny Jane', provides an interesting study; the poem is a traditional ballad in its form, with a narrative which conforms to motifs of Gothic.⁷¹ It tells the story of Jane, who wishes to marry a 'village clown' rather than the rich man her father has chosen; the abbot offers to help her escape by boat, but is treacherous and seizes her for himself. In the ensuing struggle, he falls overboard, and the boatman turns out to be a fiend, with 'blood-shot eyeballs' and 'iron fangs', who takes them to the bottom of the ocean. The poem is reminiscent of Scott's 'The Daemon Lover', in which a woman is spirited away by a ghost, and of Bürger's 'Lenore', both of which are acknowledged sources for Rossetti's 'The Hour and the Ghost'. Such a poem as 'Bothwell's Bonny Jane' conforms

to the objective and exterior corpses of women frequently appearing in her brother's and other nineteenth-century poems. Furthermore, Jamison argues that for Rossetti as for Plath and Sexton, death is an act of self-creation which increases women's autonomy within the liminal space of the poem. The female form is released from its material body, and, like poetry itself, provides an 'alternative materiality' (p. 275).

⁷¹ Matthew Lewis, *Tales of Wonder* (London: Bulmer, 1801), pp. 1-10.

to traditional concepts of Gothic in both its plot and its aesthetics; it is closer to the Gothic novel than to graveyard poetry in content. Yet it is a precedent, and moves the ballad form closer to Gothic; Rossetti's ballads seem to have developed by way of Lewis's and Scott's.

Such plot-driven poems owe their Gothic nature mostly to the content of their narrative form, while the poems of Ann Radcliffe (usually as a voice for the emotions of a heroine), utilize a quite different tone.⁷² This sonnet, placed in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* at a point where Emily is remembering her recently-deceased father, works as an artefact of Gothic even when taken out of context:

Now the bat circles on the breeze of eve,
That creeps, in shudd'ring sits, along the wave,
And trembles 'mid the woods, and through the cave
Whose lonely sighs the wanderer deceive;
For oft, when melancholy charms his mind,
He thinks the Spirit of the rock he hears,
Nor listens, but with sweetly-thrilling fears,
To the low, mystic murmurs of the wind!
Now the bat circles, and the twilight dew
Falls silent round, and, o'er the mountain-cliff,
The gleaming wave and far-discover'd skiff,
Spreads the grey veil of soft, harmonious hue.
So falls o'er Grief the dew of pity's tear

⁷² The contrast between these two poems is quite clearly that of 'terror Gothic' (usually associated with Radcliffe) and 'horror Gothic' (usually associated with Lewis), a fracture in Gothic created by Radcliffe herself in her 1826 essay 'The Supernatural in Poetry'.

Dimming her lonely visions of despair.⁷³

The twilight and the imposing scenery combine here with the melancholy mind to provide a pensive tone. The aesthetics – the bat and the breeze, the woods, the cave, lonely sighs, the mountain-cliff, and the tear, when juxtaposed with the emotional – the melancholy, sweetly-thrilling fears, the ‘grey veil of soft, harmonious hue’ and the ‘lonely visions of despair’, form a slow-moving and languorous sonnet which is appropriate to the reflective mood of the Gothic heroine. It offers none of the drama and grisly horror of the Lewis ballad, and in its use of natural imagery to evoke emotions, it recalls Rossetti’s introspective poems, such as ‘An October Garden’ and ‘On the Wing’. Radcliffe’s poems tend, in fact, to operate in a similar manner to graveyard poems, recalling what is past and remembering the dead whilst using towering scenery to provide a reminder of the comparative frailty of humankind.

Since poetry is often without a plot, it becomes increasingly crucial to distinguish between Gothic that is a function of the plot, and Gothic which is inherent in the subject matter. Though it is not possible to separate trope from abstract in such a way, it becomes necessary to rely on the significance of ‘tone’, which is one way of identifying Gothic in literature. In poetry, then, it is possible for Gothic to emerge through a combination of factors, and is rarely reliant on plot. The more obvious aesthetics of Gothic appear in the poetry of Tennyson in the nineteenth century, for example, in his ‘moated grange’ and medieval preoccupations, but it is possible to trace elements of Gothic in a much wider range of works, such as the poetry of Thomas Hood. Earlier poetry, written in or before the heyday of the Gothic novel, appears, like the novels themselves, to maintain more consistently the connection between the aesthetics (or ‘recipes’) of Gothic and its deeper preoccupations. For

⁷³ Ann Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. by Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974; repr. 1980), p. 96.

example, Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', preoccupied with the transitoriness of life and reflections of death, and linked not only to Gothic but also to an earlier tradition in the *memento mori* vein, also contains 'moping owls', a picturesque churchyard, gravestones and enough moonlight to see by; it would make a perfect setting for Buffy the Vampire Slayer as well as for Ann Radcliffe's heroines. Yet no tryst takes place here. Gray appears to have perfected the inner psychological intensity of Gothic, in which inward reflection is manifested by the surroundings in which it takes place, a pathetic fallacy which is reflected in Gothic novels. Rossetti's poems frequently demonstrate this, particularly in poems such as 'Birchington Churchyard', written to commemorate her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who was buried there. The inexorable movement of time is set against the unchanging landscape, and the grief is carefully restrained.⁷⁴ Rossetti's poetry manifests certain aspects of Gothic, appearing in her poetry throughout her life, and which is fractured, sometimes incoherent and contradictory, from her earliest poems to her mature prose works. Each of the chapters below examines a specific aspect of this fractured Gothic, exploring and testing potential Gothic tropes in Rossetti's poetry and prose and working cumulatively, with each chapter building on the last.

Chapter One discusses Rossetti's work in the context of spectrality, an influential recent critical discourse in the field of Victorian studies, considering what this approach might offer for a study of Rossetti's work.⁷⁵ Though writing itself is spectral, as this chapter discusses, for Rossetti this is particularly pertinent. A consideration of the spectral also

⁷⁴ Hassett discusses 'Birchington Churchyard' and suggests that the elegy is 'poignantly lovely and austere, uncomfirmed. This churchyard poem intimates the consolation that is wanted but which [...] she is far too honest to profess' (p. 201). Hassett also suggests that this churchyard reflection demonstrates a more mature and less idealized depiction than her earlier poems such as 'Remember me when I am gone away'.

⁷⁵ This is particularly supported by recent studies including Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, The Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), and Chapman.

permits a consideration of the ways in which Rossetti's work is itself haunted by earlier writers, including Gothic novelists, other poets and, particularly, Dante. Most significant here, however, are Rossetti's revenants, characters in her poems who come back from the dead, or who are haunted by dead lovers. The concept of crossing the barrier between life and death recurs in her work, and begins to dissolve this barrier, as ghosts return and the dead speak. This chapter raises a number of issues to which this thesis will itself return, raising and endeavouring to answer questions of the thresholds of earth and heaven in Rossetti's work which recur throughout. In investigating the role of the spectral in the Rossettian oeuvre, this chapter opens up Rossetti's work to the possibilities of Gothic.

Chapter Two provides a specific case-study of the influence of a traditional, though not conventional, Gothic novelist on the work of Rossetti. Though Rossetti read widely in the genre, it was only the novels of Maturin which prompted her to write dramatic monologues such as the early poems discussed here. It is interesting to note that the novels of Radcliffe, for example, framed in terms of the heroines' consciousness, are much more closed to interpretative readings than Maturin's novels. Little critical attention has been paid to the Maturin poems, in part because they are often classed as juvenilia, but in their voicing of Gothic heroines and some emerging themes, such as love, loss, and the threshold between heaven and earth, they are significant for her later work. In particular, Rossetti's poetic responses to Maturin provide an illustration of the theological significance of Gothic in her work, an exploration of which culminates in Chapter Five. The starting-point for this chapter is an essay which considers the Maturin poems, one of very few works to take them seriously; it has limitations which have helped to shape my argument.⁷⁶ Particularly as an early example of Rossetti's engagement with heroines, something which is most often

⁷⁶ D'Amico, 'Maturin Poems'.

associated with the poetess tradition, these poems provide a useful barometer by which to gauge the extent of her poetic involvement with Gothic texts.

Chapter Three sets a discussion of Rossetti's grotesques in the context of Ruskin's exposition of the grotesque as a fragment of Gothic in 'Grotesque Renaissance' and 'The Nature of Gothic'. The grotesque is an important and under-examined aspect of Gothic, yet Ruskin is unequivocal in his inclusion of it in 'The Nature of Gothic', and, in its reliance on disproportioned or misshapen elements, it is present in Gothic in various forms from Walpole onwards. While it is not at the centre of modern critical studies of Gothic, it provides an apposite approach to many of Rossetti's poems. This chapter provides a discussion of the grotesque and its potential effects and purposes, and relates them to Rossetti's poetry in order to construct an argument for a moral grotesque which corresponds to the sublime as well as the fearful, and relates to her understanding of the earthly and the sublime. This is also an area where a Gothic aesthetic is at work, filling the poems with grotesques which can also attempt to teach a moral and gesture towards heaven despite their physical unattractiveness. Close readings of Rossetti's poems which incorporate the grotesque, including 'Goblin Market', lead to the conclusion that the grotesque is an intrinsic aspect of the fallen world, human-focused and fallible.

The subject of Chapter Four, Rossetti's book of poems for children, *Sing-Song*, is perhaps the least Gothic work in tone and content considered here, yet there are some surprising connections to be made. Gothic is not seen now as an appropriate mode of writing for children's literature, but this chapter suggests that this has not always been the case. Too frequently *Sing-Song* has been considered as a manifestation of Rossetti's longing for motherhood, or as an outlet for frustrated desires.⁷⁷ Such speculation is unprofitable, and does

⁷⁷ This idea is discussed by Julia Touché in 'The Longing for Motherhood and the Concept of Infertility in the poetry of Christina Rossetti', in *Contemporary Problems in Christina Rossetti's Sing-Song* (2007)

not do credit to the appeal of these poems, or the freedoms they attempt to offer to the child-reader. Rossetti's poems in *Sing-Song*, this chapter argues, are in many ways the antithesis of Gothic, in which the child, like its mother, is often figured as trapped inside a domestic space, controlled by patriarchal tradition. Rossetti, however, metaphorically opens the nursery doors and offers a freedom to the child, allying it with the natural world, like the Wordsworthian child, though less idealized. The Gothic is discernible on the periphery of the text of *Sing-Song*, haunting the margins in the death of the child or mother, both of which scenarios are enacted repeatedly in the text. Yet in the construction of the poems, death is figured as a threshold to be crossed, not unlike the nursery threshold, which is not permanent and not even a threat despite its accompanying sadness. Like her use of the grotesque, Rossetti uses these poems for children to emphasize a Christian morality which is entangled and possibly inseparable from the roots of Gothic in her work, which becomes clearer in a study of her devotional prose.

The final chapter examines the devotional and exegetical works which Rossetti wrote towards the end of her life, building upon the findings of the previous chapters and extending into new areas of Rossetti's work, which exposes both the presence and the complications of Gothic in her work. These lengthy texts remain a little-read part of Rossetti's work, but provide conclusions to some of the issues raised throughout her life, from the earliest Maturin poems onwards. *Letter and Spirit* and *The Face of the Deep* in particular offer some resolutions for Rossetti's fractured Gothic, especially the latter. An exegetical work on the book of Revelation, *The Face of the Deep* contrasts a beautiful and idealized heaven with a fallen and increasingly grotesque world, and this complex binary offers clarity to a Rossettian Gothic. Since the Fall, the world can only be figured as Gothic, filled with evil, decay, horror

<<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/crosetti/touche3.5.html>> [accessed 30 March 2009], for example, relating the poems to her own childhood and her disappointment at her childlessness.

and fear; heaven seems all the more perfect by contrast, while humanity can cross between the two, through the grace of God. *The Face of the Deep* is concerned with the crossing of thresholds between heaven and earth, the dissolving of boundaries with which Gothic is concerned, and with resolving the division between humans and God.

Rossettian Gothic is concerned with the passing of time and with the contrast and barriers between man and God, earth and heaven, good and evil. The besetting fears of this world are the result of the Fall, and Rossetti's poetry suggests a constant striving to reach beyond the bounds of this world to the next, leaving Gothic behind. Even when she depicts the beauties of this world, as in the poem 'De Profundis', the urge to leave behind the fallen world is strong:

Oh why is heaven built so far,
 Oh why is earth set so remote?
 I cannot reach the nearest star
 That hangs afloat.

I would not care to reach the moon,
 One round monotonous of change;
 Yet even she repeats her tune
 Beyond my range.

I never watch the scatter'd fire
 Of stars, or sun's far-trailing train,
 But all my heart is one desire,
 And all in vain:

For I am bound with fleshly bands,
 Joy, beauty, lie beyond my scope;
 I strain my heart, I stretch my hands,
 And catch at hope. (ll. 1-16)

Rossetti's speaker is not bound in the grave, or even reflecting in a graveyard, but she has bypassed the melancholy aspects of death and wishes to exceed only her 'fleshly bands' and reach up to heaven.

The many references to biblical sources throughout my thesis are taken from the Authorized Version of the Bible, and are noted by chapter and verse rather than by page. The references to Rossetti's poems are similarly noted by line number rather than by page, since there are several editions of Rossetti's poems currently in print. The edition cited in this thesis is *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, edited by Rebecca W. Crump.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Rebecca W. Crump (London: Penguin, 2005).

Chapter One: The Spectrality of Rossettian Gothic

The preoccupations of a Rossettian mode of Gothic – from the larger Christian issues of life, death and eternal life, to the graveyard aesthetics of Gothic, including spectres, corpses and revenants – point to the spectral as a productive starting-point for a consideration of her Gothic. Because of Rossetti's interest in the unknowable and supernatural, her poems frequently suggest a spectrality which has been little considered in criticism of her work. These concepts of the spectral in writers and their work have been examined by critics such as Julian Wolfreys and Chapman. Wolfreys sets out to examine the concept of haunting and spectrality in nineteenth-century literature.¹ In examining how texts are haunted, he refers to Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, considering the cultural haunting which permeates the work of nineteenth-century writers. Chapman, however, examines the work of Rossetti in particular, reviewing the difficulties and possibilities of critical work on a dead poet and the dangers of ventriloquism that this presents.

Both Wolfreys and Chapman suggest that the idea of spectrality is apposite to the study of nineteenth-century writers.² Aspects of Victorian texts, notably the forms of uncertainty which appear both manifestly and covertly, point critics towards the spectral, and allow a response to the self-expressed uncertainties of poets. For example, in 'Dover Beach' Arnold formulates and displays many of the anxieties of the age, describing the period as 'a darkling plain | Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, | Where ignorant armies

¹ Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, especially the introduction, pp. 1-24.

² This idea is considered in a different light by W. David Shaw in his book *Origins of the Monologue: The Hidden God* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), which examines the intentional ventriloquizing of the spectral poet speaking through the mouth of a fictional speaker in a poetic monologue. The poets he considers in detail are Browning, Tennyson, Arnold, Coleridge, Morris and Keats, though Rossetti's later monologic poems are mentioned briefly. This ventriloquism has a ghostly effect of raising the dead in many instances. (pp. 9-11)

clash by night' (ll. 35-7). In this dark and fallen world, the spectres that haunt it are many, and the poetry of the period frequently seems to be seeking to represent them.³

The nature of Victorian poetry lends itself to considerations of the spectral, owing in part to the uncertainties of the historical period, in which many writers express a sense of being trapped between the world they knew and a modern world of which they know nothing. In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold suggests how the world might best avoid anarchy:

But for us,— who believe in right reason, in the duty and possibility of extricating and elevating our best self, in the progress of humanity towards perfection, — for us the framework of society, that theatre on which this august drama has to unroll itself, is sacred; and whoever administers it, and however we may seek to remove them from their tenure of administration, yet, while they administer, we steadily and with undivided heart support them in repressing anarchy and disorder; because without order there can be no society, and without society there can be no human perfection.⁴

Arnold's concern for what he saw as the potential cultural disintegration of Britain is reflected in his exhortations to resist this disintegration and rely upon man's better nature. Culture in all its forms represented for Arnold the means to perfection in humanity. It is clear that he saw, and feared, a kind of twilight world opening up before him, in which the restricted cultural climate clouded the prospects of humanity forever, as though he saw in the

³ Furthermore, Tim Armstrong, in *Haunted Hardy: Poetry, History, Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), outlines the relationship between writing and death, linked by memory, and goes so far as to suggest that '[t]he career of the writer is founded on death' (p. 16), and that, therefore, a haunting attributed to an object or a place in fact occurs in the eye of the poet (p. 30) (for example, in Hardy's poem 'Old Furniture').

⁴ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932; repr. 1971), p. 202.

nineteenth century a kind of second 'fall' of mankind. The realm of spectres is a convenient analogy for the darkness and disorder of which Arnold speaks, since it is both out of our control and also beyond our comprehension.

The essence of the peculiarly nineteenth-century spectre, at least in literary terms, is an aspect of poetics which Bloom examines in *The Anxiety of Influence*. How poets influence, are influenced, and perhaps most significantly fear influence, provides a web of spectral relationships between living and dead poets. In his introduction, Bloom suggests:

For every poet begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death's necessity than all other men and women do [...] from his start as a poet he quests for an impossible object, as his precursor quested before him.⁵

It seems, to the poet, Bloom implies, that poetic precursors have overcome death, by leaving their poetry, and thus traces of themselves within it, to haunt later generations. The poet, or at least the strong poet, is destined to struggle with the ghosts of the past, only to become a ghost herself in time.⁶

Bloom goes on to discuss the anxiety of 'latecomers', and the fear of haunting that accompanies the nineteenth-century poet. His suggestion is that post-Keats, Wordsworth et al, the fear of becoming a 'copy' rather than an original increased, causing a distinctive belatedness in the Victorian poet which makes a haunting by predecessors inevitable. In fact, Bloom's discussion of influence relies heavily upon notions of haunting and other Gothic images; he describes the poet's development as both fear of unification with the 'other', that

⁵ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 10.

⁶ For Bloom, however, the 'strong poets' are invariably male.

is, the precursor, and fear of separation from it. The ‘family romance’ of poetic influence culminates in a Gothic scene:

The strong poet peers in the mirror of his fallen precursor and beholds neither the precursor nor himself but a Gnostic double, the dark otherness or antithesis that both he and the precursor longed to be, yet feared to become. (p. 147)

The ‘mirror’ of poetry provides a space in which neither the reader nor the writer is quite herself, but instead is something in between, something not necessarily pleasant or welcome. Between reading and writing lies the ghost, Bloom implies, and it is both to be feared and welcomed.

The construct of spectrality as it is discussed in criticism today springs largely from the work of Derrida, notably *Specters of Marx*. Derrida’s interest in Marx lies primarily in Marx’s own ‘spectropoetics’ and how Marx’s legacy is interpreted and misinterpreted in contemporary society. Just as Marx said in 1848 that ‘[a] spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism’, so the spectre of Derrida haunts modern literary criticism.⁷ The multiple ghosts of Marx, which will not die despite the attempts of his detractors, return because they must, Derrida states, and because they have a mission to accomplish in society, in common with popular conceptions of ghostly visitants.⁸ The binaries Derrida presents – being/not being, living/dead, open up a space in between, which is either filled by a spectre, or is an empty space which we fill with a constructed ghost of our own making. He suggests

⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: Cosimo, 2009; repr. from 1848 edition), p. 38.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf and ed. by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1994).

that we can only live between the two binaries, implying that life is dependent on death for its meaning, and that therefore death and its subsequent spectres are an intrinsic part of human life. The binaries thus become less clearly defined than we might expect. Derrida argues that this space and its spectres are quite unavoidable, and that where such a space occurs, a ghost will rise up to fill it. This space in which a ghost appears is defined by Wolfreys, applying Derrida's ideas to textual matters:

The identification of spectrality appears in a gap between the limits of two ontological categories. The definition escapes any positivist or constructivist logic by emerging between, and yet not part of, two negations: neither, nor. A third term, the spectral, speaks of the limits of determination, while arriving beyond the terminal both in and of identification in either case (alive/dead) and not as an oppositional or dialectical term itself defined as part of some logical economy.⁹

This is, in terms of categorization, a simpler definition than that of Derrida, since it reduces the nature of the spectral to a 'third term', similar to adding 'maybe' to the binaries of 'yes' and 'no'. As Derrida suggests, and as this chapter will argue, the spectral is more than a third option; it is inextricably linked to the living, and yet it is necessary for it to be dead.

The Spectral and the Psychological

Schopenhauer suggests that 'we have a capacity for intuitively representing objects that fill space', confirming the idea that the psyche creates its own ghosts for specific reasons, often

⁹ Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, p. x.

unknown to the ghost-seer.¹⁰ This gap which we fill is, in Freudian terms, the space of repression. Schopenhauer goes on to suggest that ghosts come from the intellect, not the senses, since our perceptions of the world external to ourselves exist primarily cerebrally rather than physically: 'The notion of a spirit or spectre really consists in its presence becoming known to us in a way quite different from that in which we know the presence of a body' (p. 227). The implication is that we do not need the physical senses to see or understand the presence and potential message of the spectre. Since it is derived from the intellect, this is how we understand it; and it is no less real for that. Humans are programmed to believe in ghosts, he says, pointing out the affiliation between dreams and ghost-seeing. Questions of this kind, relating to the imagination and its spectres, have a long history. Defoe, for example, suggests that:

[W]e form as many Apparitions in our Fancies, as we see really with our Eyes, and a great many more; nay, our Imaginations sometimes are very diligent to embark the Eyes (and the Ears too) in the Delusion, and persuade us to believe we see Spectres and Appearances, and hear Noises and Voices, when indeed, neither the *Devil* or any other Spirit, good or bad, has troubled themselves about us.¹¹

Defoe does not suggest that apparitions and spirits (which he clearly differentiates) do not exist, but is inclined to be sceptical about the proliferation of tales of them. In fact he is clear that he is not suggesting that 'there is no Intercourse or Communication between the World

¹⁰ A. Schopenhauer, 'Essay on Spirit Seeing and Everything Connected Therewith' in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, ed. by E. F. J. Payne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 225-309 (p. 238).

¹¹ Daniel Defoe, *An Essay on the History and Reality of Apparitions (1727)*, ed. by G. A. Starr (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2005), p. 43.

of Spirits, and the World we live in' (p. 44). As the editor of this volume, G. A. Starr, makes plain, Defoe's intention is to demonstrate how 'the "natural" and the "supernatural", the "visible world" and the "invisible world", are not separate and opposed but connected and permeable' (p. 1). Not unlike Rossetti, Defoe sees an understanding of the interlinked spiritual and physical worlds as an integral part of Christian belief.

Castle has argued that, post-Enlightenment, spectres were increasingly likely to be understood as a product of the mind rather than as separate entities.¹² Certainly Schopenhauer provides a list of nine reasons for seeing ghosts, ranging from madness and fever to guilt and a premonition of coming death. Castle proposes that '[i]n the very act of denying the spirit world of our ancestors, we have been forced to relocate it in our theory of the imagination' (p. 143). This gives rise to a theory of haunted consciousness, and has provided rich material for psychoanalysis. However, if ghosts are a product of the troubled mind, then a spectral visitation becomes something not just to be avoided but to be cured. Castle takes this further, suggesting that if ghosts are in the mind, then thought itself may become spectral, bordering on the irrational.

In the psychological terms in which we understand Gothic today, the work of Freud has become indispensable. In his *Outline of Psychoanalysis* (1940), Freud examines the ghosts which haunt the mind, and throughout his work prescribes what we understand as a kind of exorcism. The parallels here are distinct: a ghost is confronted, and a resolution proposed in order for it to cease its haunting. For ghosts in the mind, the confrontation and resolution take the form of psychoanalysis and therapy. His famous essay on 'The Uncanny' has provided an analysis applicable to literature as well as to psychoanalysis which is

¹² Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 161.

frequently referred to in studies of Gothic literature. The uncanny in literature and life, Freud explains, is the effect of a disruption of the familiar, which acts upon the mind:

The German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of '*heimlich*' [homely], *heimisch* [native] the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar. Naturally not everything that is new and unfamiliar is frightening, however; the relation is not capable of inversion.¹³

The return of the familiar, in the form of the ghost of a figure once known, provides an appropriate example of the familiar/unfamiliar, often appearing within a homely scene where a threat is least expected. The transformation, when least expected, is sufficient to fill the viewer with horror. As Derrida suggests, however, the return of a spectre is always both a first time and a last time, a doubling and a separation. Since each instance of an event is unique, and since the ghost is recently dead and transformed into a spectre, it is a first time. Yet it is returning; therefore it is a recurrence, even despite death. This is explained in *Specters of Marx* as:

Repetition *and* first time, but also repetition *and* last time, since the singularity of any *first time* makes of it also a *last time*. Each time it is the event itself, a first time is a last time. (p. 10)

¹³ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, XVII (London: Hogarth, 1953), 219-52 (p. 239).

‘Repetition *and* first time’ is one of the many paradoxes of the spectre, doubling its nature and arguably its impact by being the ‘double’, and yet different from the living person it represents. Both the transformation of the ghost (from corpse to spectre) and the viewer (from passive character into spectator) disrupts identity. The dead are changed substantially from their state when living, yet remain entirely recognisable to the living. It is this disruption of identity which is a significant aspect of Rossetti’s spectres. For example, the respectable young wife in ‘The Hour and the Ghost’ is proved by the appearance of the spectre of her dead lover to be ‘fair and false’, with a guilty aspect to her personality previously unsuspected by her husband. The appearance of a ghost does not only demonstrate the disruption of the ghost’s identity, but can, most importantly, significantly disrupt and alter the world into which it enters.

The most significant aspect of Freud’s analysis, however, is that ‘the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimlich*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it’. Like Defoe’s argument that the ghost is a product of the conscience, Freud’s argument suggests that guilt, fear or anger, for example, when repressed, can be transformed. These emotions eventually emerge as ghosts of the mind. The form they take varies, but the process remains the same. Indeed, as Freud points out, many of the issues of the spectral and uncanny in literature are motifs which are common in fairy tales, and which are therefore both familiar, and assumed to contain ‘meaning’.¹⁴ Freud’s reading of ‘The Sandman’ from Hoffmann’s *Tales* illustrates this, and there are many other examples throughout the tales of the Brothers Grimm which Freud does not explore. It is an idea still popular in current pop-psychology that fairytales provide an early training for adulthood, but of course this training includes warnings. Similarly, Schiller states that

¹⁴ This is further discussed in Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairytales* (London: Penguin, 1991).

‘Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life’.¹⁵ So, Bettelheim, writing in the mode of Freud, suggests that the ‘monsters’ in fairytales are important to children and adults because they represent the unconscious, the other of which the child is afraid without recognizing that it is an intrinsic part of human consciousness. Fairytales, he argues, permit children to learn to identify and exorcize the repression which has caused these monsters. These fairytale themes – of ghosts and monsters, rejected lovers, questing hero/ines and so on – Rossetti explores in her poetry, often in the medium of the ballad form.

The Spectral and the Double

Critics have long noted the frequency of the trope of doubling in Gothic literature. In many Gothic novels, characters often appear doubled, reflecting two facets – usually good and evil – of one character. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, for example, Valancourt and Montoni, hero and villain, frequently manifest similar characteristics or appearances despite their oppositional natures. It has been argued that in the Gothic novel ‘[i]ndividuals were divided products of both reason and desire, subjects of obsession, narcissism and self-gratification as much as reasonable, responsible codes of behaviour’.¹⁶ The duality or fragmentation of human nature is seen as a Gothic subject here, in which the instability of the psyche is manifested as split entirely. One character which may be both good and evil is separated into two, a hero and a villain, emphasizing the contrast between the two and enacting the struggle that ensues.¹⁷

¹⁵ J. C. F. von Schiller, *The Piccolomini*, III, p. 4, quoted in Bettelheim, p. 5.

¹⁶ Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.12.

¹⁷ Of course, later in the century Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* would incorporate these two characters into one figure.

The ghost is an example of a projection of the unconscious, in the form of a doppelgänger, appearing in an apparently material form, thus haunting the mind of the ghost-seer yet seeming to occupy a physical space.¹⁸ Further, in 'The Uncanny', Freud sees the double as a portent of evil:

From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death [...] When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted — a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect.

The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons. (p. 242)

If the double refers to the childhood of an individual or character, this returns again to the childhood stories which impact on writers' and readers' understanding of Gothic as containing familiar yet uncanny elements of fairytale. In her book of poetry for children, *Sing-Song*, Rossetti draws on the apparent simplicity of childhood to create a dual atmosphere of realism and fairytale. For example: 'A pin has a head, but has no hair; | A clock has a face, but no mouth there;' (ll. 1-2). The effect of poems such as this is often to superimpose strange or comic images onto the everyday object.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes of the figures in dreams being 'lay figures', who merely exist to represent the self at one step removed.¹⁹ This transference can

¹⁸ The double is a Pre-Raphaelite preoccupation, appearing in numerous Pre-Raphaelite poems and paintings, often using reflections and shadows as well as doppelgängers, such as *How They Met Themselves* (1861), by Dante Gabriel Rossetti; *The Awakening Conscience* (1853) and *The Shadow of Death* (1869-73), by William Holman Hunt; and *The Baleful Head* by Edward Burne-Jones (1886-7).

¹⁹ M. J. Adler, ed., *The Major Works of Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: William Benton, 1952), p. 249.

be equally true of a spectre. In Freud's consideration, anxieties or fears, for example, are projected onto another figure, or a double, as an attempt to protect the self from what one fears. When a speaker describes an occurrence or event involving another character, therefore, it is possible to read the poem as transferring the anxieties of the narrator onto a 'lay figure', who manifests the speaker's – or indeed the poet's – own fears. This is especially pertinent to poems such as 'Goblin Market', in which Rossetti explores doubles in a variety of ways, such as doubling the 'fallen' woman with her 'unfallen' counterpart. Here, Laura and Lizzie are similar in every respect, sleeping 'golden head by golden head' (l. 184), yet one succumbs to the charms of the goblin fruit, and must be rescued by her more virtuous sister. That the two girls are representation of two sides of one character is a possible interpretation in a psychological reading of the poem which credits the same, dual character with both fall and redemption.²⁰ Doubling is a form of fragmentation of the self, if one assumes that the unconscious mind is doubled with the conscious. Where Laura and Lizzie are doubled, two characters with a single destiny, they remain indistinct in appearance according to Rossetti's poem. The self has its good and evil aspects, which Gothic novels represent frequently, and this is explored here as a struggle between the two sides of one nature. When Laura accepts the goblin fruit, her fate seems sealed, like Jeanie 'Who for joys brides hope to have | Fell sick and died' (ll. 314-5). If one assumes that Lizzie is not merely a good sister but an aspect of Laura, then the redemption of Laura owes more to transference or self-interest than to sisterhood. The possibility of saving oneself therefore appears paramount in 'Goblin Market', but must be facilitated. By confronting the goblins with a manifestation

²⁰ It is possible that Rossetti's Gothic reading inspired her dual characters, and may be the reason why Rosemary Jackson, in her book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1981), suggests that 'Goblin Market' is written in a Gothic tradition, though she offers no explanation of this. (p. 103)

of her better nature, Laura can save herself. The struggle between good and evil is here suggestively personified as two characters rather than one.

‘A Peal of Bells’, by contrast, uses a doubled perspective to indicate approaching death. The first stanza is filled with sights, sounds and smells to block the senses and emphasize the vitality of the speaker, while the second stanza doubles death with life:

My friend is passing to his bed,
 Fast asleep;
 There's plaited linen round his head,
 While foremost go his feet—
 His feet that cannot carry him.
 My feast's a show, my lights are dim;
 Be still, your music is not sweet,—
 There is no music more for him: (ll. 18-25)

Though this stanza speaks of a ‘friend’, the narrator is clearly sensing the approach of her own death. The closing lines of the poem, however, not only contrast life with death, but demonstrate the narrator’s awareness of her mortality, with the death of her friend representing her own: ‘My blood is chill, his blood is cold; | His death is full, and mine begun’ (ll. 29-30). The implication of these lines is that death is beginning as soon as life starts, but moreover, that the frenetic life represented in the first stanza has faded, and the

narrator, somewhere between death and life, is becoming a ghost in her lifetime, filling the neither/nor space suggested by Derrida.²¹

Rossetti wrote several poems in which the speaker is a ghost, as though imagining reactions to her own death. The surprisingly self-sacrificing notion expressed in the last few lines seems to imply a woman who has died of a broken heart:

He did not love me living; but once dead

He pitied me; and very sweet it is

To know he is still warm tho' I am cold. (ll. 12-4)

Landow argues that Rossetti's poems such as this one offer a rare example of an aestheticized dead woman as an object of beauty and pathos who has a voice.²² Like Poe, who suggested that the death of a beautiful young woman was a sublime subject for poetry, Rossetti appears to aestheticize the dead in her monologues from beyond the grave, as Landow discusses. However, in voicing the woman, she subverts tradition by permitting her a voice at all, albeit one which sounds somewhat subservient, taking on the sexual implications left unspoken by Poe.

Landow satirizes 'After Death' as seeming 'to embody the standard self-pitying adolescent fantasy expressed in the words, "they'll miss me when I'm gone (sob)". More complicated, however, is Rossetti's puppeteering of the ghost, for, to assume that the dead

²¹ Emma Parker proposes that Rossetti's poems of death can be explained by her 'wish that her work be remembered' as well as her own belief in life after death, in 'A Career of One's Own: Christina Rossetti, Literary Success and Love', *Women's Writing* 5.3 (1998), 305-28 (p. 322).

²² George Landow, 'The Dead Woman Talks Back: Christina Rossetti's Ironic Intonation of the Dead Fair Maiden' (2002), *The Victorian Web* <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/crossetti/gpl1.html>> [accessed 12 July 2007].

girl still has thoughts and feelings is to deny what we understand of death — and, incidentally, to contradict the closing lines of ‘Song (When I am dead)’:

And dreaming through the twilight
 That doth not rise nor set,
 Haply I may remember,
 And haply may forget. (ll. 13-6)

The uncanny effect created by the introduction of a talkative corpse in a death-bed scene is not necessarily the element of surprise (since where could it be more obvious for a spectre to be?) but the construction of the poem which permits the dead narrator to communicate to us, the reader, whilst allowing her mourner no sign of her feelings. The lover is unaware that a second transformation has occurred – first from living to dead, and then from dead to spectral.

An uncanny disruption occurs in ‘At Home’, where a ghost returns to familiar surroundings. These poems of spectral narrative, in which the words are spoken by the ghost, provide a more complex relationship between reader and ghost, since here the phantom cannot be explained as a product of the ghost-seer’s mind (particularly since in ‘At Home’ the living do not see the ghost, essentially placing the reader in the position of the ghost-seer). Instead, Rossetti has created this ghost to haunt her reader. The scene is both familiar and generic, of friends eating and drinking and talking of the future, in contrast with the dead who have no tomorrow. By making the scene both universal and specific, readers identify not with the speaker, who is dead, but the oblivious living, unaware of the ghosts among them. The final verse, in which the spectre refrains from allowing her erstwhile friends to feel her presence, can only make the reader wonder what ghosts might revisit them:

I passed from the familiar room,
 I who from love had passed away,
 Like the remembrance of a guest
 That tarrieth but a day. (ll. 29-32)

As Rossetti makes clear in other poems, a guilty conscience about forgotten loved ones can itself conjure ghosts. Those who feel no guilt are merely silently observed by spectres. The discomfort that such poems can generate is itself a form of haunting.

Rossetti wrote several poems about nightmares in which the dreams of the narrator are haunted, which is apposite since this encapsulates the interior drama of haunting that Freud has elucidated and which appears in the novels of Radcliffe. Rossetti's unpublished poem 'A Coast-Nightmare', for example, describes a nightmare world of ghosts, where the narrator's lover resides, yet also haunts her: 'All night long I feel his presence hover | Thro' the darkness black as ink' (ll. 31-2). How the phantom inhabits the 'towers and towns from sea to sea' (l. 20) of 'ghostland' and yet also haunts his lover's nightmares can only be explained by his existence within her mind, detailed in this chilling poem of night terrors. Perhaps the silence the poem implies is one of its most frightening aspects, since this ghost neither speaks nor causes the narrator to speak. In this dream-sequence noted for its subtle eroticism, there is no interchange between the woman and the spectre. Nonetheless, he tells her secrets of death, indicative of Rossetti's preoccupation with secrets that cannot be told. The final stanza is most descriptive of this haunting:

Without a word he tells me
 The wordless secrets of death's deep:

If I sleep, he like a trump compels me
 To stalk forth in my sleep:
 If I wake, he rides me like a nightmare;
 I feel my hair stand up, my body creep:
 Without light I see a blasting sight there,
 See a secret I must keep. (ll. 33-40)

Since death is frequently referred to as sleep, this is the rhyme to be expected at the end of the second line; instead, Rossetti subverts our expectations and instead transforms sleep into something which involves no rest or numbing of senses. The physical effects of haunting upon the senses are detailed, yet there is no explanation for the haunting itself, except the cryptic first line, 'I have a love in ghostland'. The interiority of the ghost to the narrator is in no way acknowledged, making this poem, with its Gothic landscapes and 'indistinguished hazy ghosts' (l. 17) one of her most inexplicable and terrifying. It is possible, however, to read it with the idea that the narrator may be verging on insanity.

The polarities which exist in human consciousness, and their representation in fiction as a 'device for articulating the experience of self-division' are clearly expressed in the doubling which forms the structure of many of Rossetti's poems.²³ As I have argued, 'Goblin Market' provides one of the clearest examples of this, in which two characters work in unison to solve the 'problem' of fallenness. Similarly, Dante Gabriel Rossetti uses the trope of the double in 'Jenny', where the narrator musing over the archetypal fallen woman twins her in his mind with his cousin Nell, 'the girl I'm proudest of' (l. 191). This is a device Christina Rossetti uses in her poems which consider the state of fallen women, such as 'Maude Clare', where a respectable woman and a dishonoured one are compared, with the morality of the

²³ John Herdman, *The Double in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 1.

fallen woman bearing scrutiny better than might be expected. It might be argued that the fallen woman was herself a spectre in nineteenth-century society, being both a focus for moral outrage and also for attempts at reform.²⁴

Many biographers of Rossetti have concentrated on her ostensibly dual nature, in which her pre-adolescent temperament was lively and rebellious, but a nervous breakdown in her early teens led to a more subdued and religious character.²⁵ Rossetti's biographers frequently assume that illness and anxiety created a more reflective and deeply Christian young woman than the wayward child might otherwise have become. Whether this personality trait manifested itself in her writing is debatable, but there is no doubt that she appears aware of the potential dualities in human nature, writing contrasting or doubled characters in many poems. She expanded this idea in *Time Flies*, where she writes:

The gas was alight in my little room with its paperless bare walls. On that wall appeared a spider, himself dark and defined, his shadow no less dark and scarcely if at all less defined. They jerked, zigzagged, advanced, retreated, he and his shadow posturing in ungainly dissoluble harmony. He seemed exasperated, fascinated, desperately endeavouring and utterly helpless.

What could it all mean? One meaning and one only suggested itself. That spider saw without recognising his black double, and was mad to disengage himself from the horrible pursuing inalienable presence.

I stood watching him awhile. (Presumably when I turned off the gas he composed himself.)

²⁴ For more discussion of the position of the fallen woman, see Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

²⁵ For example, Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life* (London: Constable, 1980), makes much of this aspect of Rossetti's personality, as the title of the biography implies..

To me this self-haunted spider appears a figure of each obstinate impenitent sinner,
 who having outlived enjoyment remains isolated irretrievably with his own horrible
 loathsome self.

And if thus in time, how throughout eternity?²⁶

Like the Ancient Mariner and his dead albatross, to Rossetti the double can represent man's 'horrible loathsome self', as a harbinger of death, since sin brings death, and also as retribution for wrongs. In 'Goblin Market' it is made clear that Jeanie died for her sins, and Lizzie escapes that fate only due to the intervention of Laura. Like the spectre, the double is a creation of the mind which serves to emphasize what we already know, be it the coming of death or the guilt of sin.

Spectrality and Writing

In fact, the spectre is part of the poet, according to Bloom, inextricable, and existing both in and because of the poet. Since the word 'spectre' derives from the Latin *specare*, to look at or to view, it is on the gaze of the viewer that the emphasis lies – the essence of the spectre is derived from the spectator rather than the apparition.²⁷ This suggests that the poet or ghost-seer is entirely complicit in her own haunting. Derrida hints at this, but few critics have developed this crucial suggestion:

²⁶ Rossetti, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (London: SPCK, 1885), pp. 121-2. Subsequent references will be noted in the text as *TF*.

²⁷ Chapman suggests that for Rossetti, '[s]eeing what is not usually in focus is a theme to which Rossetti continually returns, as part of her Tractarian typological heritage; as she urges [...] in *Time Flies*, "less depends on the 'seeing' than on the seer" (p. 8).

What seems almost impossible is to speak always *of the specter*, to speak *to the specter*, to speak with it, therefore especially *to make or let a spirit speak* [...] Finally, the last one to whom a specter can appear, address itself, or pay attention is a spectator as such.²⁸

Derrida is here highlighting the supposed difficulty of interaction with the spectre, whilst making central the role of the spectator. To engage with the spectre causes the spectator to be no longer a viewer but a participant, which is why Bloom refers to critics as ‘necromancers’, attempting to bring the dead to life in their reading of texts.

Derrida asks questions about responsibility and justice to the dead in *Specters of Marx*. The acknowledgement of the ghostly presence/absence, or spectral space, needs to occur in order for ‘justice’ to be possible.²⁹ This raises interesting questions for literary criticism, since Derrida claims that justice relies upon ‘the principle of some responsibility beyond all living present’, a responsibility which is due by the living to the dead, though the examples he cites here are the wronged dead, victims of oppression or injustice (p. xix). This poses crucial problems: that of the responsibility of living critics to dead writers, and also, perhaps separately, to their works. What debt of responsibility do critics owe to now-spectral authors? This is particularly pertinent for feminist critics who may consider that they owe a

²⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 11.

²⁹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. xix. It is interesting to note that Tim Armstrong suggests that Hardy frequently ‘describes the dead as wronged, misrepresented or unreported by the texts of history’ (p. 90), though he concludes that: ‘What saves the dead from history, then, is carried within the phrase ‘mute thought’ and its cognates: in the recollection of ghosts; in the evocation of the muttering and vanishing of the souls of the slain; in close attention to the curious calls of the dead’ (p. 102).

debt to ‘oppressed’ or excluded women writers.³⁰ This sense of responsibility appears to manifest itself in the recent critical desire to reclaim and re-voice silenced poets such as Rossetti, problematic as this is, and to suggest the spectral nature of writers themselves.

One such argument has been proposed by Chapman, who has offered the most sustained discussion of the spectrality of Rossetti as a writer, whilst acknowledging the difficulties this presents:

What does it mean to recover Victorian women’s poetry? Is it really an unproblematic uncovering of lost, forgotten or silenced works, or is this somehow always a re-covering? How do we let the poetry speak once its imposed silence within the literary canon has been exposed? (p. 2)

To re-voice the silent, Chapman posits, is all too often to submit to the inherent difficulties of New Historicism – that is, to use the spectre as a puppet by inflecting the words of the poet with the cultural networks of the critic. Bloom similarly considers that past poets are revived through their poetic inheritors:

The mighty dead return, but they return in our colours, and speaking in our voices, at least in part, at least in moments, moments that testify to our persistence, and not to their own.³¹

³⁰ This is in itself a problematic concept, however. Talia Schaffer, in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), points out that ‘[t]he recovery of worthwhile female authors seemed more important than the question of their possible allegiance to a literary and cultural genre’ (p. 172), which is an issue more recent feminist criticism has been addressing.

³¹ Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 141.

This re-voicing is, for many 'mythologised' writers, a common position, and one of which critics are increasingly wary.³² However, recently there have been several examinations of the notion of spectrality in relation to various mythologized authors, including Shakespeare, Blake and Plath.³³ Garber, for example, describes the relationship between "'Shakespeare" and western culture' as analogous to 'the transference relationship Freud describes as existing between the analyst and the patient' (p. xiv). This relates to Bloom's argument about the patterns of influence traceable through generations of poets, where influence may occur, but must also be overcome in order for the poet to succeed in becoming a poet in her own right. While the process of reading is vital to the poet, it is also necessary then to exorcise the demons of previous poets in order to write oneself.

Not only writers, but writing itself, are spectral, according to Wolfreys, who discusses the 'virtual network of spectro-technical relations' (p. 1), and highlights Derrida's theory that ghosts are never something of the past but relate immediately to the double present in which they appear – the present of the character who sees them, and the present of the reader of the text.³⁴ Ghosts are commonly associated with history: either the past in a historical sense or part of an individual's past. That they might be entirely of the present is perhaps an uncommon idea, but one which is logical. When a ghost appears, it is the present for the character who sees it; it is also a present for the reader who reads of it. Equally, the ghost always has some bearing on the present and appears for a reason which can be explained by the present, such as wishing to take the spectator to the grave. This may be in retribution for

³² Chapman, p. 3.

³³ Marjorie B. Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (London: Methuen, 1987); Steven Vine, *Blake's Poetry: Spectral Visions* (Basingstoke: St Martin's, 1992); Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991).

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Ghost Dance: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', by Mark Lewis and Andrew Payne, in *Public 2: The Lunatic on One Idea* (1989), pp. 60-74.

past wrongs, but has nonetheless an immediacy to it. Further, all stories are ghost stories, and every narrative is haunted, since:

to tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns, although never as a presence or to the present. Ghosts return via narratives, and come back, again and again, across centuries, every time a tale is unfolded.³⁵

This idea also insists on the immediate nature of ghosts, in that they return and revisit every time a narrative is read or reread. The text itself is a liminal space in which the oppositional binaries we might take for granted (alive/dead) are blurred, and the text itself acts as a space in which the ghost can manifest itself.

The acts of writing and reading, Chapman suggests, are spectral acts which allow the living to connect with the dead. This concept is particularly appropriate for examining the work of Rossetti, for the connection between the living and the dead is something she explores in a variety of ways in her poems. Chapman goes on to consider Rossetti as absent from her own work, suggesting that as the critic becomes closer to her work, Rossetti herself seems to draw away, making any kind of historicist reconstruction of character and context increasingly difficult.

Certainly Rossetti plays with the notion of her own absence and presence in many of her poems, such as 'Winter: My Secret', where a secret, which may or may not exist, is constructed to appear to be the key to the writer's personality, as she deliberately masks

³⁵ Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*, p. 3.

herself from 'every one who taps' (l. 13).³⁶ The speaker uses the reader's curiosity, drawing out the suspense in a teasing manner, only to admit finally that there may be no secret at all. One might expect that the poem serves as a warning to critics attempting to personalize Rossetti's poetry, since one realizes in reading this poem that there is quite possibly nothing under the layers – the poet has absented herself deliberately, becoming an invisible ghost in her own poem. Of course, this playfulness is a manifestation of Rossetti's 'resistance to inscribing the personal', since for Rossetti it is the poem and not the person which must remain paramount.³⁷ Virginia Woolf hints at Rossetti's desire for her name and work, but not her person, to be known. In her essay 'I am Christina Rossetti', Woolf describes an event at a tea party:

[S]uddenly there uprose from a chair and paced forward into the centre of the room a little woman dressed in black, who announced solemnly, 'I am Christina Rossetti!' and having so said, returned to her chair.

With those words the glass is broken. Yes [she seems to say], I am a poet [...] Here you are rambling among unimportant trifles, rattling my writing-table drawers, making fun of the Mummies and Maria and my love affairs when all I care for you to know is here. Behold this green volume. It is a copy of my collected works. It costs four shillings and sixpence. Read that. And so she returns to her chair.³⁸

³⁶ Marsh discusses this poem in her biography of Rossetti, and suggests that it is indicative of a genuine secret, which may be that she was abused by her father, Gabriele Rossetti. However, others, such as Burlinson take issue with this suggestion, and argue that to probe the possible 'secret' is unproductive.

³⁷ Chapman, p. 15.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'I am Christina Rossetti', in *The Common Reader*, ed. by A. McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), II, 237-44 (p. 240).

Woolf uses contrasting past and present tenses here, in which Rossetti's actions are situated in the past (she 'uprose' and 'paced forward') and yet the effect of her words is very much of the present ('she seems to say', and then 'returns to her chair'). By the juxtaposing of past and present, opening up the neither/nor of spectrality, Woolf conjures Rossetti as a spectre herself, situated in a liminal space which leaves the reader with a feeling of uncertainty as to both the time and the purpose of Woolf's anecdote. In fact, this serves to emphasize the historical position of Rossetti herself, who was dead by the time this was written, and the living nature of her poetry, still accessible and available to readers.

Rossetti, like all writers, thus appears necessarily spectral: neither alive nor dead, neither completely absent nor actually present. In reading her work we revivify her person, yet acknowledge her historicity and thus her death. As Chapman submits, once an author has died, she is nothing more than a signature, though, according to Derrida's 'Signature Event Context', '[b]y definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer. But, it will be said, it also marks and retains his having-been present'.³⁹ The signature thus stands in for the existence of the poet who appended her name to her work whilst alive, as a kind of proof. However, it doubles as a monument of death or absence too, since it must serve in place of the poet herself. The signature or name itself therefore becomes spectral. Rossetti's manifest consciousness in her dealings with publishers, for example, of the use of her name suggests that she was aware of the indelibility of the signature of the author to mark both their authorial presence, and absence, and significance of it to her literary career.⁴⁰

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Signature Event Context', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 308-30 (p. 314).

⁴⁰ For further discussion of this, see Parker, pp. 317-8.

Tim Armstrong, writing about haunting in Hardy's work, points out that Hardy 'repeatedly describes the dead as wronged, misreported or unreported by the texts of history',⁴¹ and further concludes that:

What saves the dead from history, then, is carried within the phrase 'mute thought' and its cognates: in the recollection of ghosts; in the evocation of the muttering and vanishing of the souls of the slain; in close attention to the curious calls of the dead.⁴²

Many nineteenth-century writers did indeed pay 'close attention' to the spectres of the past in their poetry, and as a consequence the spectral figure appears repeatedly, manifesting itself for a purpose. Rossetti's interest is in the spectres of her characters' personal histories, and her phantoms are frequently manifestations of guilt. She develops this issue sometimes through reworked ballads, in which a spectre is demanding a form of justice and acknowledgement of responsibility from those who loved them in life yet have forgotten them in death.

To address the question of the critic's responsibility to an author's works, it might seem that to locate work culturally and historically within the poet's milieu allows an authentication of the work, but this is almost impossible, since, as Chapman points out, valid authentication can never take place because it is always too much coloured by the present to allow any genuine historical reconstruction of the text. Furthermore, it is the interaction of writer and reader which prevents the poet from remaining dead in the usual sense. To illustrate the unexpected communication between the binaries, Garber quotes Keats's 'This

⁴¹ Tim Armstrong, p. 90.

⁴² Tim Armstrong, p. 102.

Living Hand', 'with its *trompe-l'oeil* gesture across the boundaries of life and death, writing and reading'⁴³:

This living hand, now warm and capable
 Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
 And in the icy silence of the tomb,
 So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
 That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
 So in my veins red life might stream again,
 And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
 I hold it towards you. (ll. 1-8)

This quotation indicates the crossing of the boundary of life and death which can be traversed by the dead author as a text is read. Of course the reverse is also true, that as we read we may cross the threshold towards the tomb in interpreting the work of a poet. Where the critic's responsibility lies is difficult to define, and an answer to this question of critical responsibility is not easily provided, if it is possible to provide one at all. Certainly in the case of Rossetti there are particular problems with acknowledging a writer who deliberately absented herself from her work. Though many of Rossetti's poems are in the first person, one cannot assume she is speaking personally. Rossetti constructed her own absence to side-step the issue of her readers considering her own voice to be speaking through her poems. This allows her readers to develop their own spiritual selves, partly perhaps by placing themselves in the space of the speaker. Since many of her poems are devotional, speaking in personal

⁴³ Garber, p. xv.

tones of a need for salvation and a longing for God, the reader finds herself apparently speaking these words, not unlike prayers.

Rossetti thus forces her reader to align themselves unconsciously with the poem, rather than the poet, using her absence and ambiguity to require a personal response. For example, 'A Better Resurrection' is unspecific about the cause of grief, dealing instead with its effects and potential alleviation of suffering. The echoes of biblical phrases, which would have been familiar to her readers, give clues to the source of comfort even before the line 'O Jesus, quicken me' (l. 8). This use of familiar, biblical phraseology is indicative of the aesthetics of Tractarian poetics, and a form of justice towards Rossetti's work lies in the acknowledgement of her beliefs. For Rossetti, spectrality is further complicated by her religious views. Rossetti was herself 'haunted' by Tractarianism, by Gothic literature, by other women poets, and by her Italian heritage, to name but a few.⁴⁴ The haunting of Rossetti's texts by Dante provides a further spectral aspect to her work; the Bible and the works of Dante are crucial to understanding her poems fully. The significance of the many Dantean references is that they strengthen the argument for Gothic in much of her work. Alison Milbank attributes the Rossettis' interest in Gothic to their familiarity with the work of Dante, suggesting that they lived literally under a shadow of Dante through their father's obsession, and also speculates that their interest in 'tales of spectres and doppelgängers' was formed by their early association with the *Divine Comedy*.⁴⁵ These shadows still haunt her

⁴⁴ In *Christina Rossetti in Context*, Harrison points out the necessity of an attempt to reconstruct context for Rossetti's poetry, commenting: 'Moreover, as only the most recent commentators have begun to indicate, her aesthetic values often derive from extremely diverse and sometimes ostensibly incompatible literary sources' (p. 1). The book covers a wide range of contextual issues, including Tractarianism, Dante and Pre-Raphaelitism, but little about Gothic.

⁴⁵ Alison Milbank, *Dante and the Victorians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 124.

work when we read it today, but our readings are also haunted by our own cultural positions.⁴⁶

A significant aspect of Tractarian poetics is its highly-developed theory of reader-response, which Keble extrapolates in his *Lectures on Poetry* (1832-41). In his opening lectures, he discusses the importance of poetry's effect on its readers, uplifting them and appeasing their sorrows. Believing that everyone has an innate desire for poetry, Keble sees poetry as the ideal vehicle for influencing readers. Further, it is a divine gift, to both writer and reader, as an outlet for directed and controlled emotion, with its 'prime and peculiar function of healing and relief' (I, 66). In the response of the reader the poet's worth can be measured, he argues. For example, Shakespeare's work inspires 'nobility of mind' – 'not that nobility merely which by a certain attractive and enthusiastic quality excites youthful minds, but the more austere qualities of purity, integrity, strenuousness, goodness' (I, 70). Reserve, he suggests, is vital, so that the poet does not appear to be moralizing, but rather allows the reader to draw from the poem conclusions only hinted at:

Judicious writers [...] lightly touch the special points to be impressed on the reader; and an author, like a host, shows his ability most surely if his readers are dismissed with an appetite whetted but not satisfied. (I, 77)

Keble also suggests, however, that authorial intention is irrelevant, since it is the uplifting moral value which the reader may gain from the work which signifies.⁴⁷ The text, it seems,

⁴⁶ Bloom posits that poems are too often read from a cultural viewpoint that values social aspects over the aesthetic: 'This reduces the aesthetic to ideology, or at best to metaphysics. A poem cannot be read *as a poem*, because it is primarily a social document or, rarely yet possibly, an attempt to overcome a philosophy'. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 18.

must stand alone, in order to be treated fairly and to fulfil its purpose.⁴⁸ The haunted space between writer and reader, which is filled with spectres, is also where potential meaning is generated. Ricoeur suggests that 'the book divides the act of writing and the act of reading into two sides, between which there is no communication. The reader is absent from the act of writing; the writer is absent from the act of reading'.⁴⁹ What communication there is between the two is through the act of creation, with the reader becoming the producer of the text; it is the act of reading that constitutes a threshold, and a means to crossing this divide between reader and writer. The author may indeed be dead, but the text itself becomes her ghost, haunting the reader and interacting with the culture in which the text is read. This is an appealing theory in the light of the Tractarian desire for influence, allowing a spectral author to haunt a text as a reader interprets it, using signposts such as biblical references and typology.

⁴⁷ This 'disappearance' of an author from a text suggests a different aspect of spectrality; that of the 'death of the author'. Roland Barthes, in *Image, Music, Text*, proposes that the figure of the author is a construction of the reader (and a modern one at that) which is always fallacious, being based on individual interpretations of a text and frequently misleading biographical details, which can cause the reader to fail to interact with a text: 'To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing...once the Author is discovered, the text is "explained"' (p. 147). A spectre can never be explained, or explained away; if a 'final' meaning is assigned to a text, its spectres are dead though its author may have been revived.

⁴⁸ This argument also permits the reading of classical authors, for example, whose beliefs were pagan but could still provide some moral guidance.

⁴⁹ Paul Ricoeur, and M. J. Valdes, eds., *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), p. 45.

Rossetti's Spectres

In 'The Hour and the Ghost', an argument takes place between a bride, bridegroom, and the ghost of the bride's former lover, which plays on the notion suggested by DeLaMotte: 'Two fears dominate this Gothic world: the fear of terrible separateness, and the fear of unity with some terrible Other'.⁵⁰ As the ghost tries to take the bride away to 'our home' (l. 12), she clings to the bridegroom, who dismisses the ghost as 'dreams and terrors' (l. 49). In fact readers find themselves in a state of confused reality, as we can hear the ghost 'speak' in the poem, so we cannot doubt his existence, but the bridegroom clearly hears nothing. Rossetti only gives us the speaker's point of view, which the reader therefore must believe, whilst doubting its literal truth. The reason for the haunting becomes apparent as soon as the ghost speaks:

Come with me, fair and false,
To our home, come home.
It is my voice that calls:
Once thou wast not afraid (ll. 11-14)

This haunting, and her own eventual death, are the result of her betrayal of her former lover, and her punishment is to see her bridegroom betray her: 'To see one much more fair | Fill up the vacant chair' (ll. 57-8). Rossetti hints, however, that the conversation is in the mind of the bride, torn between guilt for her dead lover and love for the living. This suggestion is supported by Castle's proposition that literature on ghost-seeing began, in the early

⁵⁰ Eugenia C. DeLaMotte, *Perils of the Night: A Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 22.

eighteenth century, to concentrate on the ghost being in the mind rather than a physical reality, and thus 'thought itself was a spectral process' (p. 164). Castle's discussion suggests that whereas before the Enlightenment it was considered both possible and even likely to see an external manifestation of one who had died, a gradual transition began which forced the spectre into the realms of the mind, considering it a projection of the ghost-seer's unconscious rather than of the spirit world. The guilt of the bride in 'The Hour and the Ghost' is tantamount to an explanation that the ghost has been conjured by her conscience, as the final lines of the poem emphasize:

Forget not as I forgot:

But keep thy heart for me,

Keep thy faith true and bright; (ll. 43-5)

The ghost and bridegroom seem unaware of each other, and the bride's resolve to stay with the living fades as she says 'He draws me from thy heart, | And I cannot withhold' (ll. 22-3). She does not attempt to deny the ghost's claim on her, but admits her guilt. There is certainly more than a suggestion that the ghost is reasonable in exacting his punishment, and the bridegroom seems a sorry figure for his belief that he can protect her from a ghost which, as the reader may surmise, is internal to his bride. Crump states in her notes that Rossetti may have been influenced by the ballad 'The Daemon Lover', which tells a similar tale.⁵¹

Typically, Rossetti has chosen a moment in the poem – just before the bride is taken away, when her fate is clear – and dramatized it, with her own emphases. In Scott's version, the bride is married already, with 'two babes also', and, though she goes with the demon lover,

⁵¹ Crump cites Alfred Noyes, ed., *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border Collected by Sir Walter Scott* (Wakefield: EP Publishing, 1975).

she soon ‘espied his cloven foot’, and he takes her to ‘the mountain of hell’. Rossetti’s version, telling of the bride’s sadness to leave her husband, and her fear of the unknown, is more chilling in its depiction of emotion and fear, and yet one senses that the bride brought it upon herself.⁵²

Castle posits that, paradoxically, the act of seeing a ghost is an attempt to deny the possibility of death, since the ghost appears to have transcended death to return to the living. For a ghost to return, death cannot be final, and can seem to negate the possibility of one’s own death, and also indicate a possibility of the spectral return of loved ones. However, the ghost is often, as it is here, a portent of death, an indication of approaching death which can be misread as a sign of life. The ghost as a production of guilt serves as a warning: the writer, now spectral, similarly demands acknowledgement. An examination of Rossetti’s spectral poetics is supported by her faith, manifested in her poetry. She is interested in connections with the supernatural, in its broadest sense, and how it impacts on the lives of the living. In *The Face of the Deep* she states:

Eyes that have been supernaturalized recognize [...] how darkness reveals more
luminaries than does the day: to the eye pertains a single sun; to the night
innumerable, incalculable, by man’s perceptions inexhaustible stars.⁵³

⁵² This is not an unusual theme for a ballad; as Hugh Shields argues in ‘The Dead Lover’s Return in English Ballad Tradition’, *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung* 17 (1972), 98-114: ‘[w]riters in English attempted, as Bürger had done, to dress the traditional theme of the revenant lover in modern garb, using literary resources unknown to the old ballads’ (p. 98).

⁵³ Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 1892; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003), p. 116. Subsequent references will be noted as *FD* in the text.

The 'supernaturalization' of which she writes is that which comes through Christianity, which is inextricable from her use of language.⁵⁴ For Rossetti, there is a fine line between the aspects of the supernatural that are of God, and therefore acceptable, and those which relate to the occult and darker aspects which should not be meddled with.⁵⁵ As she wrote in *Time Flies*, it is only Christ 'Who seest the unseen' and 'Who knowest the unknown' (TF, p. 106). Moreover, as Schopenhauer points out, the Protestant church cannot admit the existence of ghosts external to the mind, since after death souls are believed to go straight to heaven or hell, and 'cannot come out to us from either' (p. 293).

Catholicism, on the other hand, with its belief in Purgatory, has fewer theological difficulties with belief in ghosts, but Rossetti, as a Tractarian whose mind was set firmly against conversion to Rome, is likely to have considered ghosts as a product of the mind rather than of the spirit realm. Catholicism sustains the belief not only that souls are held in Purgatory, but also that they can be affected by the living whilst there. In Tract 79, *On Purgatory*,⁵⁶ Newman cites the Creed of Pope Pius IV: 'Constanter teneo Purgatorium esse, animasque ibi detentas fidelium suffragiis juvari'.⁵⁷ Newman adds that proof of the existence

⁵⁴ The 'supernaturalization' of which she speaks is that of 2 Corinthians 4.18: 'While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.'

⁵⁵ Rossetti would have been familiar with the words of Deuteronomy 18. 10-12: ¹⁰ 'There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch. ¹¹ Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. ¹² For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee.'

⁵⁶ John Henry Newman, 'Tract 79: Against Romanism No. III: On Purgatory', *Tracts for the Times* <<http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts/tract79.html>> [accessed 16 March 2010].

⁵⁷ 'I hold without wavering that there is a Purgatory, and that souls there detained are aided by the suffrages of the faithful' ('Section 1: Statement of the Roman Doctrine Concerning Purgatory', para. 6).

of Purgatory 'would seem to lie in the popular stories of apparitions witnessing to it', and deconstructs it as a theological possibility. Rossetti's references to the supernatural align her more with Christian mysticism than with the supernatural dabblings of the period. In setting Gothic in the context of Romanticism, Montague Summers argues that the mysticism of the Romantic age impacted on the Gothic novel of that period, suggesting that: 'Romanticism is, in effect, a supernaturalism, and the highest form of Romanticism, in its purest and best endeavour, raised upwards to the sublime, is Mysticism' (p. 18). Rossetti's attitude toward the supernatural is perhaps best described by the closing lines of *The Gothic Quest*, in which Summers states that 'everything in the last analysis depends upon the supernatural, since as S. Augustine tells us, God is the only Reality' (p. 412). Summers himself, as a high Anglican, perhaps demonstrates the cultural position of Rossetti with regard to Gothic.

Occult aspects of the supernatural were fashionable with many of her contemporaries, however, who maintained an interest in spiritualism, mediumship and mesmerism. Her brother, D. G. Rossetti, held seances after the premature death of his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, and, suffering from guilt for his neglect of her during her life, endeavoured on many occasions to contact her after her death. Their brother W. M. Rossetti took to attending professional seances, but Christina Rossetti declined to be involved on these occasions, remaining hostile to spiritualism in general. As Marsh suggests: 'With her poetic liking for voices beyond the grave, Christina might also have been intrigued by spiritualism's claims. Instead, she remained staunchly distrustful'.⁵⁸ The rise of spiritualism in the nineteenth century was rapid, and many public figures attended seances in an attempt to communicate with the dead, which Rossetti must have been aware of through her acquaintances. She is explicit about her own feelings on this, however:

⁵⁸ Marsh, *Biography*, p. 342.

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 wilful self-surrender become my road to evil choice, imagination, conduct, voluntary or involuntary. Neither will I subscribe to any theory which would pursue knowledge by cruel or foul methods; or do evil that good may come. Neither will I either in jest or in earnest tamper with fortune-telling or any other fashion of prying into the future.
(FD, p. 271)

To search for the supernatural, the other, she states emphatically, is wrong, though it is eyes attuned to the 'supernaturalized' which also help one to see the work of God. Indeed what is notable about the supernatural in her poems is that it is always the dead reaching out for the living, the other reaching towards the self rather than the other way around.

As an enthusiastic and informed reader of the Gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, Rossetti was likely to have been aware of Radcliffe's essay, *On the Supernatural in Poetry*, since it was published as a preface to Radcliffe's only novel to include a genuine ghost, *Gaston de Blondville*, published posthumously in 1826. In her essay Radcliffe emphasizes that the truly supernatural character is that of the writer, rather than the text: 'I am speaking of the only real witch – the witch of the poet; and all our notions and feelings connected with terror accord with his'.⁵⁹ Radcliffe goes on to suggest that an explanation of the spectral is beyond human comprehension, saying 'If I cannot explain this, take it as a mystery of the human mind' (p. 152). This accords with Freud's notion that it is the repressed which resurfaces as something uncanny.

⁵⁹ Ann Radcliffe, 'The Supernatural in Poetry', *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, 16.1 (1826), 145-52 (p. 149).

Though the spectres in her novels tend to have rational explanations, the mystery which surrounds them remains, and in her essay she makes clear that not only is the supernatural a mystery, and should be accepted as such, but it is a mystery which relates to the human mind; that is, it is the projections of the minds of readers that are significant, rather than the potential workings of the spectral world itself. The existence of spirits in this world and the next is irrelevant here; Radcliffe's essay hints at the ideas outlined by Defoe, that the spirit world is within the mind of the spirit-seer, and reflects their psychology.

This is the approach taken by Rossetti, where the focus of a poem is not on the ghost itself, but on the interrelation between the dead and the living, which sheds light on the mind of the living character, turning her ghost poems into a drama of emotional or interior life. As DeLaMotte explains in her discussion of Radcliffe's novels:

Radcliffe comes close to presenting the idea, if not stating it directly, that the imagination, though it cannot create real things, can provide valid insights through the delusions it produces [...] In Radcliffe, the aura of mystery lingers long after the mystery itself is finally explained. (pp. 46-7)

The mystery, therefore, is not that of the supernatural, but that of the mind, and this interiorization of plot and narrative is indicative of the literary mode of Gothic. Despite this, Radcliffe goes on to discuss the conceivability of taking ghosts such as Banquo and Hamlet's father as literal truths:

'You would believe the immortality of the soul,' said W—, with solemnity, 'even without the aid of revelation; yet our confined faculties cannot comprehend how the soul may exist after separation from the body. I do not absolutely know that spirits are

permitted to become visible to us on earth; yet that they may be permitted to appear for very rare and important purposes, such as could scarcely have been accomplished without an equal suspension, or a momentary change, of the laws prescribed to what we call *Nature*—that is, without one more exercise of the same Creative Power of which we must acknowledge so many millions of existing instances, and by which alone we ourselves at this moment breathe, think, or disquise at all, cannot be impossible, and, I think, is probable. (p. 152)

The implication, with which Rossetti's poems suggest she would agree, is that the possibility of haunting must remain, due in part to faith in the immortality of the soul which readers would be expected to already maintain; and yet that is what they remain – possibilities, not to be fulfilled except by the witch-poet.

Castle, in refuting the claims of previous critics that Radcliffe's work is not Gothic enough because her ghosts are explained away, discusses the space created by critics looking at Gothic literature, particularly Radcliffe's *The Castle of Udolpho*. She argues that critics separate the 'Gothic core' of the novel from the domestic, familiar scenes which take up a considerable amount of the book (p. 121). The division of the world into homely and uncanny (in itself a troublesome proposition), and the division of the book into Gothic and domestic, is common in criticism of Gothic, and echoes the too-comfortable binaries of living and dead: 'Seldom at issue in any of these accounts, however, is the two-world distinction itself (with its normal/abnormal, rational/irrational, ordinary/extraordinary oppositions)' (p. 122). Rossetti, however, draws on domestic vignettes interrupted by ghosts. Her poem 'After Death' exemplifies this with its familiar (to contemporary readers) scene of a body laid out, with 'rushes, rosemary and may' (l. 2), the first two bearing the meaning of docility and remembrance. While this scene would have been recognisable, it rapidly becomes apparent

that the speaker is the body on the bed, speaking from beyond the grave to an unspecified audience. The unsettling aspect of this is all the more effective for taking place in an apparently familiar setting.

Castle posits that this distinction is not present in Radcliffe's work due to her unifying use of spectral language, and that it is therefore in the domestic scenes where memories of the dead take over Radcliffe's characters. The result of this is that 'the supernatural is not so much explained [...] as it is displaced' into the 'everyday'.⁶⁰ That there is something neither living nor dead, not one thing or the other, is intrinsically difficult to verbalize, requiring resistance to commonly used critical terms such as 'vital', 'incorporate' or 'embodiment'. As Wolfreys points out, however, the spectral is about the 'limits', testing the boundaries, and yet while it is neither living nor dead, it is not not living, and not not dead – since a ghost is something that was once alive, and was also once dead. It defies a clear understanding, in terms of what it is and of its purpose, and by evading definition and appearing in a space apparently constructed for it, the spectre can serve a purpose which, while mysterious, could not be fulfilled by anything more concrete or deterministic. To enter this spectral space, a threshold must be crossed: from life to death, since the space exists between these binaries. DeLaMotte discusses the use of these thresholds in Radcliffe's work, considering the moment when a heroine enters a castle, for example, or a forbidden room, to be the moment when the domestic, 'real' world is left behind and a Gothic world inhabited by death and fear is entered. The threshold is also associated with knowledge, however, since death and knowledge are closely linked in theology.⁶¹ As Rossetti herself says in *Time Flies*, 'The hardest step is at the threshold' (*TF*, p. 4). This concept of a threshold, the crossing of which

⁶⁰ Castle, p. 124.

⁶¹ Genesis 2:17: 'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.'

alters a situation completely and irrevocably, provides a helpful focus for a Rossettian Gothic.

In 'The Daemon Lover' and 'The Hour and the Ghost', the sea appears as a threshold which the bride has been condemned to cross, while in the *Inferno* the air becomes the sea, the purgatorial representation for souls who, literally, cannot rest.⁶² While in some instances crossing a threshold can be seen as transgression, where the supernatural is concerned it is death that is the threshold – literally, in the case of 'From House to Home', for example, or metaphorically, with the sea as a threshold in 'The Hour and the Ghost' and 'A Ballad of Boding'. The threshold of the house in 'The Ghost's Petition' serves as a metaphorical threshold between this world and the next. In 'The Hour and the Ghost', it is interesting to note that in several cases the words spoken by the Bride run over more than one line:

He bids my spirit depart

With him into the cold:—

[...]

Thro' the lone cold winter night

Perhaps I may come to thee. (ll. 24-5, 46-7)

Enjambments are used sparingly by Rossetti throughout her poetry, with most lines of her verse complete in themselves. The effect here is of a threshold being crossed by the reluctant Bride as her ghostly lover tears her away from her husband.

⁶² John Woolford notes that 'the sea is an ambiguous image in Rossetti's work. As a representative of life, it is turbulent and destructive, and she positions herself far from it, yet with a sense of it as the goal to which streams, and herself imaged as a stream, inevitably run. As that, it can stand for death.' 'Robert Browning, Christina Rossetti and the Wordsworthian Scene of Writing', *Wordsworth Circle*, 34.1 (2003), 30-5 (p. 33).

The repeated trope of the enclosed space in Gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe's, where castles, convents and caves provide barriers to the heroine's ambitions, is that the heroine is trapped inside waiting to be freed. Rossetti frequently reverses this, instead allowing her heroine the freedom of the world, and the lover who comes to take them away from it presents a threat rather than a release. The threat is the threat of loss of freedom, in which the (male) lover comes to take his bride to the afterlife, implying a kind of imprisonment in the spirit world. Yet the poem suggests a terrifying space, with the sea and mountains appearing as a Gothic landscape. Far from the 'blissful renewal of domestic life' which many expected of heaven, fear of the other supersedes fear of death itself in this poem.⁶³ For all the morbidity of some of Rossetti's poems, a fear of death is rarely present, and as her work matures, it becomes apparent, particularly in her prose works, that to cross the threshold between life and death is to find true freedom. While for some heroines crossing the threshold may lead to freedom, for Rossetti's it often leads to knowledge, and not, perhaps, always the knowledge they desire, which is particularly pertinent in the case of 'Shut Out', which represents Eve's expulsion from Eden. DeLaMotte says: 'Much of the complexity of knowledge as a Gothic theme derives from the fact that the word *knowledge* itself has meaning in two contexts' – factual knowledge and sexual knowledge, and while the first may be positive, the second, in many of Rossetti's poems where the haunting is by a lover, becomes a source of terror.⁶⁴

In 'The Poor Ghost', one of the protagonists is a spectre who, having crossed the threshold to death very recently, has returned due to the grief of her lover. Surprisingly, the ghost-seer shows little astonishment at her appearance, despite her 'face as white as

⁶³ Castle, p. 131.

⁶⁴ DeLaMotte, p. 49.

snowdrops' (l. 3) and 'voice as hollow as the hollow sea' (l. 4), but instead asks the reason for her return. The spectre offers him knowledge of death and what comes after: 'You know the old, whilst I know the new: | But tomorrow you shall know this too' (ll. 7-8). However, his fear is of leaving the familiar: despite his grief, he is clearly more at home in the world than the 'poor ghost' had realized. She therefore asks the question Rossetti's spectres often ask: 'Am I so changed in a day and a night | That mine own only love shrinks from me with fright...?' (ll. 13-4) Her lover admits his love was more finite than either had anticipated – 'I loved you for life, but life has an end' (l. 18). The change wrought by death is a change which cannot survive love, he suggests. He loves her still, perhaps, provided she remains dead as expected. This unromantic response is met with sarcasm: 'Life is gone, the love too is gone, | It was a reed I leant upon' (ll. 25-6). It is only in the closing lines that the woeful spectre indicates that she returned because of his grief, which woke her from her supposedly eternal slumbers. In the context of rigid and extravagant nineteenth-century mourning rituals, this is an idea which might have either frightened or appealed to Rossetti's readers, particularly given the rapidly developing interest in spiritualism. Alex Owen claims that spiritualism was based on the dominant theory of woman's 'sphere', being the domestic and the spiritual, confined largely to the private world of the home, as opposed to the masculine sphere of the public and intellectual life. Owen describes one female medium, who had suffered illness in childhood, as therefore 'forced to turn in upon herself and to dwell upon the themes of Christian resignation and suffering', and that she was comforted by considering 'life and its sorrows as a necessary preparation for the future world'.⁶⁵ Yet this narrative of revenance comes with a warning attached, that the dead might wish to take the living away with them.

⁶⁵ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990; repr. 2004), p. 78.

The spectre of love which exceeds death appears frequently in Rossetti's narrative poems, often with a veiled threat or intention of vengeance.

A slightly different approach can be found in 'The Ghost's Petition', where a woman waits for her husband, whose uncanny arrival is signalled by the blue flame burning in the fire. This spectre comes to gently chide his wife for her sadness, since 'there's no sleeping while you sit weeping'. The wife replies:

Oh but Robin, I'm fain to come,
 If your present days are so pleasant;
 For my days are so wearisome. (ll. 70-2)

This is perhaps indicative of the poor social standing of widows as much as her grief. In this instance, the living wish to accompany the dead to the grave, which may be lip-service, given the slightly shrewish note in the last lines, suggesting she sees herself as much as an abandoned wife as a widow:

Yet I'll dry my tears for your sake:
 Why should I tease you, who cannot please you
 Any more with the pains I take? (ll. 73-5)

Once again, the grieving living find closure in the reappearance of a ghostly beloved. By contrast, 'From House to Home' provides a very different consideration of the life that follows death. Here, there are no recriminations, simply a hard-won acceptance that life is a preparation for death. D'Amico points out that 'in reading Rossetti's poems that urge the reader to renounce the world or to beware the temptations of the world, one must keep in

mind her belief in a reward of individual immortality and spiritual joy'.⁶⁶ The narrator, separated from the man she loves, finds that the world is a pale reflection of heaven where he awaits her. The ghost here is not from the afterlife, but is the world itself, with its illusions and fleeting joys, leading the speaker to conclude:

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. (ll. 201-4)

The transitory nature of the joys of this world are reflected in many of her poems, such as 'Beauty is vain', which concludes with the moralizing note, 'Time will win the race he runs with her | And hide her away in a shroud' (ll. 15-6). More permanent are the joys of heaven, and increasingly as the poet matures she concentrates on this aspect of the supernatural world. Notably, 'The World', a sonnet not of love but of fear, describes the world as a *femme fatale*, who seduces only to destroy. The nightmarish quality of the reality that the speaker faces when, in the night, she realizes the truth, is remarkable for its qualities of reasoned argument in the face of terror:

But thro' the night, a beast she grins at me,
 A very monster void of love and prayer.
 By day she stands a lie: by night she stands
 In all the naked horror of the truth
 With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands. (ll. 7-11)

⁶⁶ D'Amico, *Faith, Gender and Time*, p. 64.

Like 'A Coast-Nightmare', the visual imagery here is reminiscent of Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1781), with which Rossetti may have been familiar through her brother's interest in his work. Comparable to the goblins in 'Goblin Market', 'The World' personified here is attempting an invasion of mind here figured as an invasion of the body. By recreating the supernatural in physical, human terms, Rossetti produces a warning for her readers, using a Gothic motif of fear of monsters in the dark to instruct and influence. The deceiving and destructive supernatural control of the world itself contrasts starkly in her work with the release of the soul to heaven after death, where reality is subject to God, and therefore more permanent. This is exemplified in 'A Portrait', where the reader is permitted a glimpse of the thoughts of a corpse surrounded by mourners, this time a devout and pious woman: 'Heaven opens; I leave these and go away; | The Bridegroom calls, — shall the Bride seek to stay?' (ll. 20-1) The boundaries of this world melt away, exposing its temporality, and indicating the deeper and permanent joys of heaven.

Wolfreys suggests that Gothic expanded beyond its boundaries in the nineteenth century, haunting texts and reforming itself: 'The gothic became other than itself, the meaning of the term changing, metamorphosing beyond narrow definition, promising the destabilization of whatever it came to haunt'.⁶⁷ The implication that Gothic 'spread far and wide' fits the concept that all texts are haunted, and that society is haunted: Gothic has become more than an eighteenth-century literary mode, but instead a pervading cultural atmosphere. It was no longer confined to the novel; though it had always exceeded its boundaries in some respects, including as it did excerpts of letters, poems, quotations and other fragments. In the light of this, Rossetti's poems provide a useful example of Gothic

⁶⁷ Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys, eds., *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), p. xiv.

haunting. They are in themselves haunted by the unfulfilled promise of Gothic, never reaching fruition in the Gothic genre, but instead providing the reader with tantalizing Gothic fragments. Just as DeLaMotte and Wolfreys have argued that the nature of Gothic itself has always been fractured, relying on a splintered narrative often divided up with poems, letters, quotations and multiple narration, so Rossetti's poems present quasi-vignettes of Gothic, with poems which indicate a much larger narrative than they are able to explain. Poems frequently figure as fragments in Gothic novels, notably those of Ann Radcliffe, where they are used as a quotation to direct the reader at the beginning of a chapter, or to provide an outlet for the voice of a character. It is in this last that Rossetti's poems display the traces of Gothic, since she picks a moment in the imagined lives of her characters to dramatize, be it through her version of ballads, which comprise her 'ghost poems', or through the dramatic monologues she wrote for Maturin's heroines.

The majority of Rossetti's poems which include ghosts are fragments of narrative – the thoughts of the speaker, or a ballad with a story only hinted at. The poems themselves present only a fraction of a tale: the reader is left to guess at the rest of the story, the context and preceding events. These aspects of larger imaginary tales work well perhaps because they often seem familiar, with Rossetti drawing on sources including ballads, novels, the Bible and the work of Dante. Most striking, however, are the poems which draw on the works of Maturin, which provide an especially intense and direct Gothic intertextuality.

Chapter Two: Early Influences: Rossetti and the Gothic of Maturin

Some of Rossetti's early monologic poems demonstrate a direct response to her reading of Gothic novels, particularly eight poems based on the novels of Charles Robert Maturin: 'Eva' (1847), 'Immalee' (1847), 'Isidora' (1847), 'Zara (Now the pain beginneth)' (1847), 'Lady Montrevor' (1848), 'Zara (The pale sad face of her I wronged)' (1848), 'Zara (I dreamed that loving me)' (1855) and 'Look on this Picture and on this' (1856). Although Rossetti's reading of Gothic included a range of authors, she appears to have been most engaged by the novels of Maturin. These poems portray Maturin's Gothic heroines at a moment of crisis, both in the novel and in their lives, giving them a voice at a crucial moment. Divorced from their context, the poems can prove difficult to appreciate, but studied alongside Maturin's novels they provide a case-study of Rossetti's interaction with a particular Gothic author. These poems have been overlooked, possibly on the grounds that they were written in youth and do not easily fit in with the rest of her oeuvre. Marsh, for example, comments that 'Such works clearly supplied a need', but does not consider them any further.¹ It is undeniable that the structure and language, as well as emotional content, of the first six Maturin poems are not as developed as her mature work. Moreover, in his edition of Rossetti's poems published in 1904, W. M. Rossetti designates these (and other) poems as juvenilia, and, as with so many of his decisions about his sister's poetry, the label has stuck. Juvenilia tends to present a critical problem, in that it is easy to trace simplified connections between early writings and to draw biographical as well as literary assumptions that can be facile. However, when Rossetti produced the first poem, 'Eva', in 1847, she was sixteen — considerably older than

¹ Marsh, *Biography*, p. 45.

the Brontës, for example, when their childhood writing began.² Critics consider the early writings of the Brontë siblings to be important not only in demonstrating and honing their developing literary talents but also in the complex plots of their later work. The Brontës' biographer, Juliet Barker, discusses Charlotte Brontë's early interest in the supernatural manifested in her Angrian writings,³ while other critics go further. Sally Shuttleworth, for example, takes the early work of Charlotte Brontë very seriously, considering its interrogation of gender boundaries in a political and social context, and pointing out the value of these works: 'We find here the same sense of embattled selfhood, shying away from interpretative penetration, the same concerns with the instabilities of psychological and gender identity, which fuel the later work'.⁴ For Brontë, her 'juvenilia', in terms of the saga of Angria, was produced well into her twenties, yet Rossetti was not much younger when she began writing poems influenced by Maturin. It has been overlooked that the last two Maturin poems ('Zara – I dreamed that loving me he would love on' and 'Look on This Picture and on This') were written in 1855 and 1856, just a year before the critically acclaimed 'A Better Resurrection' (1857), for example.

The Gothic novel, with its complex psychological heritage and subterranean explorations, may seem a surprising choice for a religious adolescent girl, but *Melmoth the Wanderer* became one of Rossetti's favourite novels from childhood onwards. Rossetti's early reading of Gothic novels is now common knowledge, yet her brother, W. M. Rossetti, reduced her choice of literature to a footnote in his 'Memoir', in her posthumous collected

² Growing critical attention has been focused on the juvenilia of Jane Austen, George Eliot, John Ruskin and others. For example, The Juvenilia Press was set up at the University of New South Wales for the purpose of bringing the juvenile works of such authors to a wider academic audience.

³ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Phoenix, 1995).

⁴ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 101.

poems.⁵ Here, in relation to the poem 'Lady Montrevor', which is based on Maturin's novel *The Wild Irish Boy*, W. M. Rossetti comments: 'Christina, as well as her brothers, was in early youth very fond of Maturin's novels, and more than one of her poems relate to these'.⁶ D'Amico, in her essay 'Christina Rossetti: The Maturin Poems', suggests that since biographical references to Rossetti's interest in Maturin are merely cursory, we might erroneously 'expect this connection to be a minor one, perhaps involving only Rossetti's youthful fancies' (p. 117). Though Rossetti read other authors such as Ann Radcliffe with similar avidity, only *Melmoth the Wanderer*, *The Wild Irish Boy* and *Women* inspired her to write poems based on their heroines.

D'Amico's essay stands almost alone in its central argument that Rossetti's interest in Maturin's novels was more than an adolescent phase.⁷ D'Amico argues that Rossetti's interest in his work forms three major strands, which are borne out in her later work. The first of these, she suggests, is 'a convent motif in which a woman is torn between her lover and her religious vows' (p. 118). This is an image which Maturin frequently employed, notably in *The Albigenses* (1824) and *Fatal Revenge* (1807) (neither of which inspired Rossetti to write, and there is no evidence that she read them, though it seems likely that she did). Rossetti wrote a number of poems which examined convent life, including 'The Convent

⁵ Other texts read, or at least owned, by Rossetti are indicated by Fredeman, who states that books owned by Christina Rossetti include John Gay's *Fables* (1727), Jeremy Taylor, *Holy Living and Dying* (1837), the anonymous *Tales of Terror* (1808), Maturin, *Women* (1818), Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766), Newman's *Dream of Gerontius* (1865), Charles Cayley's *The Psalms in Metre* (1860) and Swinburne's *A Century of Roundels* (1883).

⁶ *WMR*, p. 477.

⁷ Rossetti's Maturin poems are considered seriously by two notable critics, who explore a single aspect of their impact: Rosenblum considers aspects of rivalry which develop from the *Women* poems, and D'Amico, in *Faith, Gender and Time*, further considers the theology of these poems.

Threshold', one of her most famous poems. Here, the world of the convent is seen as harsh and wearisome, as the novice cries:

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? (ll. 57-60)

The world beyond the convent, despite its temptations, is illusion, however, and the novice pleads with her lover to repent so that she might see him again in heaven, with a longing reminiscent of the close of her poem based on Immalee. Similarly, 'An Immurata Sister', though speaking with hope of the life to come, is an essentially melancholy poem which despairs of 'yearning without gain'. The convent itself features little in Rossetti's so-called 'convent poems', certainly not in the gloomy and forbidding style of convents in Gothic literature, since Rossetti focuses on the monologue of the nuns themselves. Instead, it is the notion of enclosure, compulsory or otherwise, combined with a focus on God, which sets the tone of these poems.

In many of Rossetti's convent poems, however, the convent itself appears mainly as a device to provide a barrier between the repentant woman and her lover, a concept also present in Radcliffe's works which use the convent motif, such as *The Italian*, in which Ellena is cloistered in a convent by Schedoni. While D'Amico comments on the motif in Rossetti's poems, she does not explore it further. In fact, the convent, although it features in Maturin's fiction, is more easily traced to other concerns in Rossetti's life. The development of Anglican sisterhoods was supported by Reverend William Dodsworth of Christ Church, Albany Street, which Rossetti, with her mother and sister, attended. Dinah Mulock Craik also

wrote vociferously in support of them, as a useful vocation for the single woman, though she emphasized that ‘family life is the first and most blessed life’.⁸ Another Tractarian writer, J. M. Neale, produced a book of stories of virgin saints, which Rossetti may have read, since we know she read other books of saints. In his book, which, incidentally, uses distinctly Gothic language itself to describe the fallenness of human life, being written for those ‘hard beset with temptations of the Ghostly Enemy, and a body of death’, Neale discusses the highest vocation of women.⁹ This is couched in terms reminiscent of a cloistered life, though he does not use any terms which relate his words directly to the convent:

And more than this, those who were capable of being elected to so high an honour, as to be the Brides of Christ, henceforth ceased to be slaves of human passions. They acquired a dignity which they had not before possessed: a dignity of which chivalry and romance were the true and living expressions.¹⁰

Rossetti read widely in the literature of the Tractarians, and would have been aware of such teaching. Moreover, Neale and other Tractarian writers did not suggest this vocation of single womanhood could only be undertaken within a convent.

Newman and Pusey encouraged the development of Anglican sisterhoods, both in order that women might provide much-needed care within their communities, for example working with the sick and with ‘fallen women’, and in order to provide a devotional alternative to spinsterhood. The first Anglican sisterhood, the Park Village sisterhood, was

⁸ Dinah Mulock Craik and Christina Rossetti, *Maude; On Sisterhoods; A Woman's Thoughts about Women*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 54.

⁹ J. M. Neale, *Annals of Virgin Saints* (London: Rivington, 1846), p. xxi.

¹⁰ Neale, p. xxxiv.

therefore created in 1845, associated with Christ Church. Later, in 1859, Rossetti began volunteering at the St Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate, and eventually became an associate sister, while her elder sister Maria entered a sisterhood in 1873, sensing a vocation that Christina Rossetti considered herself to lack. It seems probable that despite her religious devotion, Rossetti's depictions of the convent life in her poetry stem from her own nature, which she believed could not thrive under such conditions.¹¹ Lynda Palazzo even suggests that sisterhoods exploited women, by rendering them barren on all levels (p. 6). In fact, Rossetti's poems frequently tend to concentrate on love both earthly and spiritual, with its tensions and synergies, rather than on the cloistered life. The convent represents barriers to fulfilment or happiness, both earthly and spiritual.

The second strand of Maturin's influence on Rossetti's work, D'Amico posits, is the novels' 'concern [...] not simply with the secular aspects of such a love dilemma but with the religious as well' (p. 118). This is certainly a major concern in Rossetti's poetry, which, despite her concern about her poems being read as 'love personals', early critics tended to see as biographical, relating to her two broken engagements.¹² There is no doubt that the conflict between earthly and spiritual love was an issue which appealed to Rossetti, and which she developed in her poems based on Maturin's novels, particularly 'Isidora' and those drawn from *Women*. She expanded upon this motif in later poems, such as the sonnet sequence 'Monna Innominata'. While D'Amico suggests this might appear unlikely, this chapter will

¹¹ Rossetti wrote in a letter to Caroline Gemmer: 'So you think I once trembled on the 'convent threshold' – Not seriously ever, tho' I went through a sort of romantic impression on the subject like many young people. No, I feel no drawing in that direction: really, of the two, I might perhaps have less unadaptedness in some ways to the hermit life' (dated 'June 27'), quoted in Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context*, p. 189.

¹² In a letter to W. M. Rossetti dated 28 April 1849, Rossetti wrote: 'I must beg that you will not fix upon any which the most imaginative person could construe into love personals.' Harrison, *Letters*, 1, 16.

argue that it was precisely the conflicted nature of these heroines and their circumstances which drew Rossetti to Maturin's work and inspired her poetic representations.¹³

The final strand D'Amico explores is 'the theme of the strong soul in conflict' (p. 120). It is indisputable that Rossetti was drawn to the depictions of the 'active, heroic woman' in Maturin's fiction. Indeed the heroines of her poems were strong-willed and passionate, such as Maude Clare and Maggie, and the narrative thread of these poems is predicated on this. However, it is the aspect of the struggles the heroine faces which seem to have particularly attracted Rossetti. It is difficult to conceive of Rossetti producing a poem based on Matilda in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), for example, since Matilda appears barely to struggle with her immorality, having little interiority in Lewis's narrative, and instead embraces her blasphemy. Rather, it is probable that the drama of the conflicts faced by Immalee/Isidora, Zaira, Eva and Lady Montrevor presented possibilities to Rossetti. These aspects continued to interest her for the rest of her writing life. To separate these three strands of Maturin's influence is difficult and perhaps unnecessary, since they point towards the one overriding concept: the tension between earthly and spiritual love is resolved only by the renunciation of the earthly.

Though D'Amico rightly suggests that the Maturin poems are deserving of further study, and that they provide an element of influence on her later work, there is little discussion of their significant impact upon her later poems. The assumption that there is an underlying division between the young and instinctive Rossetti and the reserved, mature poet is one that has driven much of the criticism of her work, yet the Maturin poems provide scope to revisit her earlier poems in the context of her more famous later work. The motifs and

¹³ D'Amico writes that '[i]f Rossetti had simply been looking for distressed females and unhappy love affairs of which to write, the works of Lewis, Radcliffe, Scott and, later, Dickens would have provided several' ('Maturin Poems', p. 120).

issues which she began with her earliest poems are in many cases maintained until her last. This chapter considers Rossetti's Maturin poems in the order of Maturin's novels, in order to provide a sense of continuity in both the novels and the poems. In fact this chronology also for the most part reflects the chronology of the poems, suggesting the development of Rossetti's work alongside her reading of Maturin's novels.

The Wild Irish Boy

Maturin's first major novel, *The Wild Irish Boy* (1808) was written following the success of *The Wild Irish Girl* (1806) by Sydney Owenson, later Lady Morgan. Since the later novel had little in common with its predecessor save the title, however, *The Wild Irish Boy* was not well received, though this may in part have been due to its complex and sometimes confusing structure. E. F. Bleiler, in his introduction to the 1977 reprint of the novel, suggests that it is:

best classified as a conglomerate novel [...] In this subform several genres could be combined to create a novel of potentially wide appeal. Gothic terror and exoticism, fairly realistic society material, intellectual speculation, satire and sentiment all might be worked into a single framework.¹⁴

The novel, which begins in an epistolary form and moves on to a somewhat disjointed narrative with multiple narrators, tells the story of a 'wild Irish boy', Ormsby Bethel, and his ill-fated love for the beautiful Lady Montrevor. With its action moving between high society in London and Dublin, the novel was censured for its low morals and sordidness, though it is clearer to the modern reader, with the benefit of hindsight, that Maturin's somewhat heavy-

¹⁴ Charles Robert Maturin, *The Wild Irish Boy*, ed. by E. F. Bleiler, 3 vols (New York: Arno Press, 1977), I, p. v.

Subsequent page references are to this edition.

handed portrayals of a corrupt society were intended as parody. The scene is set with the letters of Elmaide, a young girl who cherishes an unrequited love for Bethel. Expressing her misery in overblown, romantic terms, she tells her correspondent that she is 'obliged to listen to all that *can be said* with conviction and despair' (I, 20). In fact, throughout the novel it is what *cannot* be said which is paramount. Bleiler comments that 'The greatest strength of *The Wild Irish Boy*, as might have been expected, lies in its power of language, an area where Maturin excels' (I, ix). While Maturin's use of language is commendable, Bleiler comments only on the power of words. What Maturin exercises, and Rossetti's poetry consistently demonstrates, is an understanding of the power of what is beyond words.

In *The Wild Irish Boy*, it is initially intense emotion, or love, that is beyond words, though as the novel reaches its climax it seems to be truth itself that cannot be spoken; indeed Ormsby Bethel refers to the 'dark language' (III, 290) spoken in society, which aims to beguile and deceive. Maturin reinforces this on a number of occasions; for example:

'I know not how to speak at this moment; I wish I could borrow the common language of description, and tell as I would of any woman of fashion'. (I, 242-43)

'I can speak of her at no time, for every time I saw her she was different; it is difficult to speak of her mode of beauty, it is more difficult to speak of her age'. (I, 246)

Language becomes both a medium of communication and a barrier to it. Like Elmaide, Bethel finds that love leaves him speechless, and that language appears too base or corrupt an instrument with which to express his feelings. This is a common enough rhetorical device, to declare words to be insufficient yet to use many of them; in this novel the failure of words is

supplemented with those who have words for every occasion, such as Lady Montrevor, who, on being congratulated for her wit, replies:

‘Tinsel, mere tinsel,’ said she, almost with a sigh; ‘but it does as well for common use. The value of wit, as jewellers say of plates, depends more on the fashion than the weight; and this light currency saves credit, and gains time, two great points in preventing a bankruptcy of – conversation.’ (I, 258)

Her own consciousness of the levity with which words may be spoken and heard is to her credit, and attracts Bethel to her still further. With this speech she becomes a more than two-dimensional character, attractive to the reader as well, aware of her flaws despite her physical appeal.

It has been suggested that Maturin was influenced by Mme de Staël’s *Corinne* (1807) in the creation of his characters of Lady Montrevor, and also Zaira in *Women*. If, as Taylor Monroe posits, Maturin read *Corinne*, this seems a not implausible argument, as the characters do seem to have at least their fatal magnetism in common, but furthermore a tragic aspect unites them.¹⁵ One particular trait the three characters share is their ability to communicate, or ‘speak’, through a variety of media including their appearance and demeanour, dance, music, painting and poetry as well as spoken language. The result of these abilities is that, as Lord Nelvil states in *Corinne*, beside such women, other women appear to speak only in ‘insipid conventional phrases used to express neither their feelings nor their opinions truthfully’.¹⁶ The Gothic heroines which Rossetti depicts are aware of their ability to

¹⁵ J. Taylor Monroe, *Tragedy in the Novels of C. R. Maturin* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

¹⁶ Germaine de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy*, trans. and ed. by S. Raphael (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.

communicate, yet also conscious of the failures and problems of communication, and particularly language, which seems inadequate.

Corinne, Lady Montrevor and Zaira experience the failure of language under the pressure of intense emotion. Rossetti similarly emphasizes the value of silence in 'Monna Innominata', which gives a voice to the usually voiceless woman, she who loves passionately and cannot speak of it. The final sonnet of this series closes:

The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
The silence of a heart which sang its songs
While youth and beauty made a summer morn,
Silence of love that cannot sing again. (Sonnet 14 ll. 10-14)

In 'Monna Innominata' Rossetti makes the distinction between those who are silent through convention, as women who love should be, and those who are silent because silence is more telling than words.¹⁷ In this last sonnet, the latter is the case; the heart can no longer speak but the love remains. In another poem, 'Echo', she writes of the 'speaking silence of a dream' (l.

¹⁷ This idea was discussed in detail by Carlyle, who suggests: 'Was the tongue suspended there, that it might tell truly what we had seen, and make man the soul's brother of man; or only that it might utter vain sounds, jargon, soul-confusing, and so *divide* man, as by enchanted walls of Darkness, from union with man? Thou who wearest that cunning, Heaven-made organ, a Tongue, think well of this. Speak not, I passionately entreat thee, till thy thought have silently matured itself, till thou have other than mad and mad-making noises to emit: *hold thy tongue* (thou hast it a-holding) till *some* meaning lie behind to set it wagging. Consider the significance of SILENCE: it is boundless, never by meditating to be exhausted, unspeakably profitable to thee!' Thomas Carlyle, 'Boswell's Life of Johnson', [Fraser's Magazine, 1832], in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Boston: Phillips, Samson, 1858), 317-41 (p. 324).

2), and it is in the 'speaking silence' that she excels; what is not said is as important as what can be put into words, and frequently more so.

The use of spoken French (and also written French, in the form of some popular novels) appears in *The Wild Irish Boy* as a sign of deception and the untruthfulness of words spoken by those in society. This trope is reinforced throughout the novel, from Bethel's first introduction to society in Ireland to the corrupt world of London. The novel contains many French (and some Italian) phrases, most of which are inconsequential, and permit the reader to comprehend their meaning without much knowledge of the language and thus both enacting and demonstrating the desire of the character to display knowledge and sophistication where none may actually exist.

Mr Corbett, the preacher whom Bethel can barely hear when initially intrigued by Lady Montrevor, perhaps provides the most sincere example of how language may be used. He too is talking of love, but in his portrayal of divine love he appears gifted with an eloquence lacking from those who wish only to talk of earthly love:

Though his positions were strong and important, they were clothed in a language, whose peculiar and providential felicity is, that it is the universal language, the first language that religion talks to the ear of infancy, the language that genius reverences, and ignorance understands, the language of the poet and of the saint, the language of divinity and of the heart, the language of the Scriptures. (I, 209)

Mr Corbett's use of language is full of sincerity and spirituality, redolent of the poetic spiritual truths later voiced by the Tractarians. While it was accepted by the Tractarians that there was much that was divine that could not be either understood or expressed by human tongues, the eloquence afforded by the language of Scripture is a concept which clearly

chimed with Rossetti. Her interest in language, as a poet, is to be expected, but her discussions of language in her later work, particularly defending the role of Eve in the Fall, give an insight into how deeply she considered the matter, and to what uses debates around language might be put. It is likely that for Rossetti, as for T. S. Eliot:

Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.¹⁸

The instability of language is both refuted and reinforced in Rossetti's work: she demonstrates, particularly in her later work, that the Bible is not immune to the vagaries of interpretation, which can have considerable theological significances. Her poems have a tendency to utilize ambiguity, in the sense which Empson gives it: 'any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language'.¹⁹ Furthermore, Rossetti exploits such verbal ambiguities in her own interpretations of Scripture; for example, in *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (1883), Rossetti considers the Fall, and her conclusion suggests that language may be at the root of it.²⁰

Several of her poems maintain this engagement with the slipperiness of language. In 'The World', a poem which begins softly with emphasis on the sibilants, and the juxtaposed

¹⁸ 'Burnt Norton' v, ll. 13-7, *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber, 1936; repr. 1989), p. 194.

¹⁹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London: Penguin, 1930; repr. 1965), p. 1.

²⁰ Christina Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (London: SPCK, 1883; repr. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003), pp. 17-8. Subsequent references will be noted in the text as *LS*.

seductive and loathsome images, Rossetti presents the temptations of the world as a Gothic monster, not unlike the fiends both mental and physical that afflict the characters of *The Wild Irish Boy*. In 'The Three Enemies', however, the speaker conducts a conversation with those who would tempt humans from righteousness (the Flesh, the World and the Devil). Here, the tempters speak fondly – 'Sweet, thou art pale' (l. 1), 'Sweet, thou art young' (l. 17), and are firmly answered, 'More pale to see | Christ hung upon the cruel tree' (ll. 2-3) and 'So was He young | Who for my sake in silence hung' (ll. 18-9). The speaker uses language rich in biblical allusions, and with echoes of the catechism, drawing on reserves of language which appear convincing in the context of the poem because of their familiarity and association with scripture. The poem appears like a catechism, with answers readily forthcoming to each temptation, yet the use of catechismic language may cause the reader to wonder if the answers are more learned responses than considered beliefs. However, the answers in the last section of the poem suggest that 'Knowledge' (l. 41) is 'helpless dust' (l. 42), yet 'Thy Word' (l. 48) can conquer all; Rossetti prioritizes the language of the scriptures over everything else, even knowledge, and thus the use of this language can be seen as strengthening her argument. Rossetti is demonstrating here the use to which language may be put: to verbalize one's beliefs and to strengthen one's resolve, and, moreover, to pass this on to others. Language may be used for deception, but it can also be used to repel temptation.

In the penultimate line of her poem based on *The Wild Irish Boy*, 'Lady Montrevor' (1848), Rossetti picks up the thread of Maturin's preoccupation with the uses and misuses of language. Despite her fame as a wit, it is silence that Lady Montrevor wishes for, and her 'tongue shall not complain' (l. 13), as evidence of her stoicism and remorse for her misspent life. Though suffering, Lady Montrevor is not a character to be pitied, and her pride insists that she remain strong. In depicting her thus, Rossetti resists the broken-hearted woman as a figure of ignominy and replaces her with a stronger, more appealing character. She develops

this concept throughout her Maturin poems, as abandoned women speak out and demand to be heard. Here, Rossetti manipulates words and their power to create a monologue spoken by a beautiful and tragic heroine.²¹ The society belle, Lady Montrevor, is speaking here presumably towards the end of the novel, when the extent of her misery and duplicitous life has been revealed to the reader:

I do not look for love that is a dream:
 I only seek for courage to be still;
 To bear my grief with an unbending will,
 And when I am a-weary not to seem.
 Let the round world roll on; let the sun beam;
 Let the wind blow, and let the rivers fill
 The everlasting sea; and on the hill
 The palms almost touch heaven, as children deem.
 And though young Spring and Summer pass away,
 And Autumn and cold Winter come again;
 And though my soul, being tired of its pain,
 Pass from the ancient earth; and though my clay
 Return to dust; my tongue shall not complain:
 No man shall mock me after this my day. (ll. 1-14)

²¹ The monologic form is itself significant. Shaw argues that the monologue both addressed issues of divided selfhood and offered the poet the opportunity to become a 'hidden God' in ventriloquizing through their poems. The poem conforms to the traditional construction of the tragic soliloquy in many ways (see Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 42-7, for more detail on the tragic soliloquy).

The character's lexical range, emphasizing the natural world, may appear an odd choice for a society woman such as Lady Montrevor, yet at the moment of crisis when her accustomed world has failed her, it seems appropriate. The passing of time and beauty, echoed in the passing of the seasons, is a trope to which Rossetti returns, while the words of patience and stoic courage express sentiments which Rossetti's poems voice throughout her life, in poems such as 'A Better Resurrection', 'Where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt', and the sonnet sequence 'Later Life'. Rossetti's interest in the solemn endurance of Lady Montrevor is likely to have contributed to her interest in the book. More particularly, however, Rossetti's 1854 poem 'A Study. (A Soul.)', unpublished until Crump's edition of her work, describes a woman who stands 'Like Cleopatra when she turned at bay | And felt her strength above the Roman sway', and '...stands there patient, nerved with inner might' (ll. 2-3; 12). Though the woman described is unnamed, it is possible that she may have her origin in Lady Montrevor, who, when describing her fall from fortune, and her resolve to face it with resilience, states:

'We were fallen! fallen! fallen! Yet I was determined to fall like myself. I had been the Cleopatra of the revels for many loose and worthless years, I was now to be the Cleopatra whose departure was to throw dignity upon a clouded life.' (III, 78)

It is not merely the reference to Cleopatra that is striking, but the notion of a woman braced to face an unpleasant life, or indeed death, in the case of Cleopatra. The strength and resolution of a woman such as Lady Montrevor, intelligent and intrinsically noble despite her immoral behaviour, clearly attracted Rossetti's attention throughout her reading of Maturin's novels.

Lady Montrevor has no Christian comfort such as the speakers of poems such as 'Where neither rust nor moth doth corrupt', and I suggest that in fact the sonnet is written

within a framework of resignation, which no longer looks for comfort. Crump suggests that lines 6-7 refer to Ecclesiastes 1. 7: 'All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again'.²² Further, Crump refers the reader to 'A Testimony', which contains the lines, 'The rivers do not fill the sea, | But turn back to their secret source' (ll. 10-11). Here, the reference is quite unmistakable. 'A Testimony' is a poem which owes much to Ecclesiastes; it considers the passing of time and the frailty of worldly possessions, which are apposite symbols for the tale of the doomed Lady Montrevor.

However, another poem which also draws heavily on Ecclesiastes 1. 2-11 seems to provide a more useful context for 'Lady Montrevor'. 'One Certainty' opens with the words of Ecclesiastes 1. 2, 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity'. Vanity is at the centre of Lady Montrevor's corruption. In the first two volumes of the novel she is portrayed as a vain, heartless woman who survives on the excessive admiration of others; in the third volume, where she tells her own story, she admits that her need for admiration, and her own vanity, has been her undoing. The joylessness of 'Lady Montrevor' is reflected in the resignation of 'One Certainty':

So little joy hath he, so little cheer,
Till all things end in the long dust of death.
Tomorrow is the same as yesterday,
Tomorrow also even as one of them.
And there is nothing new under the sun:
Until the ancient race of time be run (ll. 7-12)

²² Crump, p. 1108.

Like 'Lady Montrevor', this poem also emphasizes the passing of time, the enemy of beauty, as Rossetti suggests in many of her poems, such as 'Beauty is Vain', which warns, 'Time will win the race he runs with her | And hide her away in a shroud'. 'One Certainty', though not suffering the same stigma of juvenilia as the Maturin poems, was written only a year later than 'Lady Montrevor', and follows the same Petrarchan sonnet form as the earlier poem. The similarities in tone and content are striking; it is only the narrator who changes.

Ecclesiastes inspired or is a point of reference in many of Rossetti's poems, though 'Lady Montrevor' appears to be the first. Over thirty poems include references to it, of which fourteen refer to 1. 2, and six refer to 1. 7.²³ Its resonance for Rossetti was evidently deep and personal, due perhaps to the philosophy of her stoical nature, but in the context of Lady Montrevor's character it is particularly appropriate. Even much later poems, such as 'A Vain Shadow', which appeared in *Verses* (1898), strike a similar note to Lady Montrevor's resigned renunciation of the world, commenting on the temporal and vain world and closing with reference to the fluctuations of the sea.

Women

This novel, published in 1818, inspired Rossetti to produce five poems, which I will examine in the order in which Rossetti wrote them. Once again these are monologues which reveal the inner turmoil of a character from the novels. By re-writing characters from novels, Rossetti is also creating her own space in the poetess tradition. D'Amico asserts that Rossetti is writing in the poetess tradition at this stage, particularly in drawing on already existing narratives of women's lives, as did others, including Augusta Webster, Felicia Hemans and L. E. L.,

²³ Nilda Jimenez, *The Bible and the Poetry of Christina Rossetti* (London: Greenwood Press, 1979).

particularly focusing on the lives of ill-fated women, though in the case of these poetesses, the characters were more frequently based on autobiography rather than fiction.²⁴

The novel tells the tragic story of Charles De Courcy, who falls in love with a young, extremely religious girl, Eva, who is portrayed as a victim of her family's zealous Evangelicalism. They eventually become engaged, despite her scruples about his lukewarm religious beliefs and her desire to focus solely on heaven. Whilst being smitten with her youth and purity, De Courcy is fatally attracted to a well-known singer and society beauty, Zaira (though Rossetti always spells it 'Zara').²⁵ After some agonising vacillations, De Courcy leaves Eva, and London, to travel abroad with the fascinating Zaira. However, his guilty thoughts are with Eva, and his fascination with Zaira wanes, until he returns to England, only to find Eva on her deathbed. After Eva's death, it transpires that Zaira was Eva's mother, who had been forced to give up her child in order to provide a better life for her. De Courcy also dies, hoping that Eva had forgiven him. Zaira must then live with her conscience, and it is this struggle that provides Rossetti with material for two of her 'Zara' poems.

Rossetti's poem 'Eva' (1847) appears to take place near the end of Eva's life, when, abandoned by Charles De Courcy, she falls ill and prepares for death, blaming herself for becoming too attached to him. Once again, earthly and spiritual love contend for primacy in this poem. There are no direct biblical allusions here, which is surprising given both Rossetti's and Eva's tendency towards this, though one line appears to derive from the *Book of Common Prayer*: 'It is good and meet and right'. Like so many of Rossetti's poems, and indeed much of Maturin's prose, the poem uses phraseology and syntax which sounds weighted with Scriptural authority; for example:

Lord, Thou knowest, I have said,

²⁴ D'Amico, *Faith, Gender and Time*, pp. 18-20.

²⁵ Except in direct quotation from Rossetti's poems, however, 'Zaira' will be used throughout.

All is good that comes from Thee;

Unto Thee I bow my head.

I have not repented me. (ll. 8-11)

The poem is strictly rhymed, representing not the overflowing of emotion from a dying woman that one might expect, but rather the tones of love and desire reined in by the scrupulous exercise of willpower and conscientious Christian belief typical of both Eva and Rossetti. The structure of the poem is particularly significant in its emphasis on certain aspects of Eva's concerns, concentrated in the mono-rhymed tercets which close each stanza, throwing the emphasis of each line onto the words in the middle; for example, the nouns 'sorrow', 'trial' and 'faith' in the first, and adjectives 'bitter', 'stubborn' and 'haughty' in the second:

That the sorrow shall not last,

And the trial shall be past,

And my faith shall anchor fast.

[...]

Still, oh! still 'tis bitter ill;

Still I have a stubborn will,

And my heart is haughty still (ll. 5-7; 12-4).

The catalectic trochaic metre provides a regularity of rhythm not typical of Rossetti's verse, though one trips slightly over the word 'Heaven' in the final two stanzas where it needs to be pronounced as one syllable, indicating a move towards death as heartbeat and strength fail. Eva speaks of her penitence, and her feeling that her punishment is deserved, since despite

her remorse she continues to love De Courcy. In addressing herself as she does, she appears to be admonishing an unseen listener (or indeed the reader), which contains echoes of her deathbed scene in the novel, in which she abjures the children of the family to ‘Love God, and him *only!*’ (III, 381) and asks them to learn from her plight.

Of course, the alternative to Eva’s fate of dying of an illness brought on by the desertion of Charles, might have been for her to have rejected him and continue to focus on God. Many of Rossetti’s poems reflect this alternative, and present it as no more appealing. ‘Memory’ tells of a choice made, though the choice is not specified:

None know the choice I made; I make it still.

None know the choice I made and broke my heart

[...]

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. (ll. 13-4; 17-20)

Eva, too, had a choice to make between earthly and spiritual love, and despite her innocence and initial reluctance, was persuaded by De Courcy to commit herself to him. The suffering and endurance of the speaker in ‘Memory’ seem barely preferable to Eva’s fate of an early grave, and certainly Rossetti’s poems contain many early deaths, some less lamented than others. However, Rossetti is preoccupied with the idea of lovers parting, to be reunited after death, particularly with the self-sacrifice and endurance that this entails. Eva prays for this reunion at the close of Rossetti’s poem; ‘Memory’ closes with conviction of reunification after death, and other poems such as ‘One Day’, ‘Twilight Night’ and ‘Isidora’ close on a

similar note, with several poems using the word 'Paradise' to emphasize the bliss of the lovers' reunion.²⁶ This is a trope which emerges earliest in her work through her Maturin poems, however, and is a feature of all the Maturin poems except 'Lady Montrevor', who wishes only for forgetfulness, and 'Zara (I dreamed that loving me)'.

This concept of reunification in heaven is a complex one theologically. In cultural terms, Victorian writers, especially novelists, feature 'death-bed scenes [...] of "going to join" parents, or brothers or sisters who have died early, [which] presupposes the continuity of distinctive individuality and personal relationships'.²⁷ This assumption is clearly also made by Rossetti, not only in her Maturin poems but also in many other works. In 'Saints and Angels', published in 1875, Rossetti presents a biblical description of Paradise in which 'The road to death is life, the gate of life is death' (l. 33). Like other poems including the later 'Zara' poems, death as the gateway to heaven is something to be relished rather than feared. This poem also offers hope for reunions in heaven: 'The loves that meet in Paradise shall cast out fear, | And Paradise hath room for you and me and all' (ll. 39-40). As D'Amico suggests, '[f]or all these women, heaven is much more Pre-Raphaelite than Christian', close in theology to D. G. Rossetti's 'Blessed Damozel'.²⁸ This is a poem in which the life to come is longed for not as a respite from daily toil or grief, though this is a common conceit in her

²⁶ Jerome McGann, in 'Religious Poetry', discusses Rossetti's theology in detail, suggesting that it should be taken seriously and considered in the light of contemporary theological debates. In particular, he comments on her use of the doctrine of 'soul sleep', adding that it provides 'the means for paradisaal images which answer to her emotional needs' (p. 139). While the relevance of Rossetti's emotional needs is debatable, her apparently fluctuating approach towards the nature of heaven suggests that it could be tailored to her literary requirements.

²⁷ John Hick, *Death and Eternal Life* (London: Collins, 1976), p. 204.

²⁸ D'Amico, *Faith, Gender and Time*, p. 127.

work, but for the sake of the state of bliss it offers. Like Emily Dickinson's poetry, Rossetti's poems see no fear in death, but rather a happiness not available on earth.

Her belief in the individuality of souls in heaven may come from her readings of Dante, especially the *Paradiso*. Not only does Rossetti's poetry reflect the concrete reality of Dante's heaven, which 'worked within current cosmology and astronomy in order not to contravene any cosmological truth set in his time', but Dante's assertion of being guided through the afterlife by Beatrice affords a similar hope for reunion to Rossetti's poetry.²⁹ Dante also sees and speaks with some of the apostles, whom he evidently recognizes, as well as many other figures whose tales he tells. It is interesting to note that, like Rossetti, Dante is also concerned with what cannot be expressed verbally, commenting that he 'saw things which to tell | Lack power and skill'.³⁰ The restraints of language which Rossetti learned early in her career as a poet may have stemmed from her absorption in the work of Dante as much as from her reading of Maturin.

Contrary to this belief are the words of Mark 12. 25, which state unequivocally: 'For when they shall rise from the dead, they neither marry, nor are given in marriage: but are as the angels which are in heaven'. This passage 'abrogates not only the essential human faculty of sexual love and relationship and the need for procreation but even the very survival of human ties'.³¹ Simon goes on to suggest that the wider family provided by the communion of saints in heaven is perhaps compensation for this. The implication is that there will be no recognition of individuality in heaven; rather, the earthly body will be discarded, which is also a concept which many of Rossetti's poems endorse, since she writes with a dualistic

²⁹ J. Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 166.

³⁰ Dante Alighieri, *The Commedia and Canzoniere of Dante Alighieri*, trans. and ed. by E. H. Plumptre, 2 vols (London: Isbister, 1887), 'Paradiso', ll. 4-5.

³¹ Ulrich Simon, *Heaven in the Christian Tradition* (London: Rockliff, 1958), p. 217.

theological approach in many instances, in which it is the soul which travels on while the frail body is discarded.

A particularly explicit example of Rossetti's dualism can be found in 'Two thoughts of Death', two sonnets which contrast the view that the body is dead with the continued life of the soul. The first sonnet opens, 'Her heart that loved me once is rottenness | Now and corruption; and her life is dead' (ll. 1-2). Rossetti's emphasis is on the 'life', or body, that is dead, in earthly terms. The second sonnet, however, considers the memory of the beloved, reflected in natural images which regenerate and live on. This sonnet concludes:

Then my heart answered me: Thou fool to say
That she is dead whose night is turned to day,
And whose day shall no more turn back to night. (ll. 12-4)

Just as Tractarian typology points all natural life on earth towards heaven, similarly nature is used here to remind the reader of eternal life, and provide hope for the bereaved – a concept, incidentally, not only promulgated by Tractarianism but also explained by Beatrice in lines 77-81 of Dante's *Paradiso*. Rossetti's poems, unsurprisingly, insist on the continuation of life after death; it is the exact nature of the continued life that is changeable.³²

Rossetti's approach to death is altered in some cases, which serves to indicate her inclination to use 'poetic licence' when it suited her, as well as a salutary warning that

³² Marsh, in 'The Spider's Shadow', uses this poem as an illustration of Rossetti's 'fascination with death' (p. 24), and, more specifically, with 'the sensation of oneself being dead and in the grave, buried, under the earth, but as if still sentient' (p. 25). Though Marsh's concern with the Rossettian aesthetics of Gothic succeeds in reclaiming her 'into the mainstream of Romantic writing, within a European tradition that places despair, spiritual anguish, alienation and self-disgust as central elements' this particular account of Rossetti's poetry fails to place Rossetti's faith in its necessary context (p. 30).

Rossetti's beliefs may not always be directly reflected in her poetry. For example in 'Amor Mundi', there is a reference to 'a thin dead body which waits the eternal term' (l. 16), which relates to the belief that the body and soul may be reunited only at the Last Judgment.

However, Rossetti's poems of heaven usually imply an immediate entrance to heaven as well as recognition of family and friends. Furthermore, her description of heaven in 'Paradise', for example, draws on Scripture to produce a sensory description of heaven that consistently relates to human understanding and senses. All the human faculties are overwhelmed with the beauty of heaven in this poem, and the implication is clear: that we are transformed yet retain human, or earthly, qualities of perception which seem to translate our understanding of individuality. Though Rossetti is not entirely consistent in her approach, and admits that after death one 'haply may remember, and haply may forget' ('Song (When I am dead)', l. 16), this may be because she is prepared to use a certain amount of poetic licence to dramatize situations. Death may be a longed-for release or a keenly anticipated prize, but it is present in many of her poems as a destination no less real than earth.

This desire for death as a release from the pain of life is a feature of the poem 'Zara (Now the pain beginneth)' (1847). Like 'Eva', it is written at a moment of crisis, with the first line indicating her awareness of the anguish that lies ahead of her. Despite this, the tone is restrained and rhythmic; the dignified heroine does not seem to stoop to untrammelled despair. 'The word' which is 'spoken' in line 1 is unspecified, but the effect is that the time for speaking is past, now replaced with the 'tolling of the churchyard chime'. At the point in the novel at which this monologue is set, De Courcy has grown weary of Zaira and, overcome with remorse, returned to Eva. Since Eva's death is not yet imminent, the 'churchyard chime' may be for Zaira herself, representing not her death but her misery, which entombs her in a living death. The knowledge that her love is 'a crime' comes from her guilt that De Courcy left Eva to be with her; as yet she is ignorant that Eva is in fact her daughter.

The second stanza opens in a manner familiar from Rossetti's later poems of resignation and endurance: 'But the fear is over; yea, what now shall pain me? | Arm thee in thy sorrow, O most Desolate!' (ll. 5-6) Many of Rossetti's poems, such as 'And now why tarriest thou?', 'They desire a better country' and 'Despised and rejected' contain this sense of weariness with life and pleas for strength to continue if death cannot end the struggle. These later poems take an entirely devotional approach to this, but the concept of life as a struggle that must be borne is one which Rossetti explores repeatedly in her work.

However, the stanza concludes in a more passionate tone, emphasizing the speaker's excessive emotions: 'Weariness and weakness, these shall now sustain me,— | Pride and bitter grieving, burning love and hate' (ll. 7-8). The emphasis in this poem is on changing moods, as the exuberant and uninhibited Zaira attempts to come to terms with her abandonment, and, like Corinne, displays great capacity for suffering. Despite the interlaced rhymes of each quatrain, in each there is a shift in emotion between the first two and last two lines: for example, the third stanza opens with a tone of relief that the fear of De Courcy's desertion is over, though realized, yet concludes with expressions of grief which border on insanity, though this is again belied by the regular rhythm of the metre. The purpose of the metre is realized as the poem progresses to become almost a curse; the last six stanzas suggest the chanting of imprecations, as part of Zaira's despairing reaction. Reading the poem with knowledge of the plot, and knowing that Zaira's heart will be again broken by Eva's death when she discovers her parentage, Zaira's extreme words contain an element of hubris:

He shall leave thee also, he who now hath left me,

With a weary spirit and an aching heart;

Thou shalt be bereaved by him who hath bereft me;

Thou hast sucked the honey,— feel the stinging's smart. (ll. 17-20)

In his Notes to Rossetti's poems, W. M. Rossetti comments that this was originally to be illustrated: 'The device to "Zara" is a foxglove plant, with insects sucking its poison-honey'.³³ This adds an interesting dimension to the poem, since the words portray Eva as a form of parasite, living off the honey of a plant; but the image of the foxglove, known to be poisonous, suggests rather that the source of evil is De Courcy himself, and logically the poem proceeds to ask why vengeance has not been forthcoming upon him: 'Hath the Heaven no thunder wherewith to denounce him? | Hath the Heaven no lightning wherewith to chastise?' (ll. 29-30) The irony here is that Zaira is still unaware of the relationship, yet her madness when the situation is revealed is not dissimilar to Lear's ravings on the heath. Zaira will suffer the punishment of remorse verging on madness after realizing her rival's true identity.

In the following stanza, however, she seems to repent, asking instead that she be struck – 'O ye thunders deafen, O ye lightning blind me, | Winds and storms from heaven, strike me but spare him' (ll. 35-6). As she softens towards him, Rossetti introduces a sacrificial stance, which is common in her poems. Finally, she reaches forgiveness, and prepares herself for the punishment for both their sins: 'May thy cup of sorrow be poured out for me; | Though the dregs be bitter yet they shall not grieve me' (ll. 38-9). Though Zaira's religious beliefs have been called into question by De Courcy, particularly given her career as an actress and the contrast with Eva's devotion, Rossetti's appropriation of Christian imagery here seems apposite. The lines echo Psalm 75. 8:

³³ *WMR*, p. 467.

For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, and the wine is red; it is full of mixture; and he poureth out the same: but the dregs thereof, all the wicked of the earth shall wring them out, and drink them.

Zaira offers herself as a sacrifice for the man she loves, wishing she alone could take the blame and punishment. Indeed the closing stanzas of the poem imply that only forgiveness and a form of martyrdom can wipe the slate clean for Zaira. Clearly for Rossetti this self-sacrifice is a sign of pure love, and it is an idea to which she returns in 'Isidora' and in 'Zara (The pale sad face of her I wronged)'. The concept of sacrifice more generally runs throughout her poetry: many refer to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, but it is also a preoccupation of 'Goblin Market', in which one sister is prepared to sacrifice herself for the other.

The notion of rivalry is also strong in this poem. The critic Dolores Rosenblum considers this element of Rossetti's poetry, and posits that 'the fantasies of sexual rivalry, betrayal, renunciation, and apotheosis which underly [sic] *Women* must have matched closely with Rossetti's own youthful fantasies' (p. 154). This is difficult to substantiate; instead, it seems more likely to have been the spiritual aspect of renouncing earthly love which attracted Rossetti, and continued to do so, not only in her poetry but throughout her life. Rosenblum goes on to argue, however, that the interest in rivalry sparked by *Women* is re-enacted in many 'sister' poems, such as 'Noble Sisters' and 'Sister Maude', though there are many more examples, in which sisters are rivals for earthly love. The rivals become doubles, she argues, which is particularly apposite for Eva and Zaira, who are presented in the novel as two sides of one coin, so physically and intellectually opposite that between them they seem to present one whole individual:

By dividing 'sisters' in narrative poems and by opposing the self who desires to the self who renounces in the lyric poems, Rossetti articulates her version of Romantic-Victorian divided consciousness: not the split between hero and villain, or between reason and emotion, but between the sister who is chosen and the sister who is spurned, and between the self who romantically asserts and the self who stoically denies... The spurned sister, though outwardly invalidated, endures as the authentic consciousness, while the rival becomes the 'other', reduced to her function as usurper.³⁴

That Eva and Zaira turn out to be mother and daughter is one more way of linking them; the obscured family connection is a familiar emblem in the Gothic novel. In the novel it is striking that De Courcy should be attracted to such diverse women, yet as the novel reaches its climax, Eva becomes stronger, though spurned and dying, while Zaira becomes weaker as her dependency on De Courcy grows. In her poems, Rossetti appears to emphasize this strength; 'Eva' is not a poem of weakness, despite its self-abnegation, while the 'Zara' poems with their increasing misery maintain the women's individual characteristics whilst bringing their emotional and spiritual attributes closer together.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem 'Jenny' uses a comparable trope of doubling characters who ostensibly have no more in common than their gender. His often-used theme of sacred and profane love is barely comparable to his sister's concern with the struggle between earthly and spiritual love, not least because for her they were closely related, but primarily due to Christina Rossetti's relative purity of tone in dealing with such subjects, compared with her brother's publicly criticized 'fleshly school of poetry'. D. G. Rossetti's

³⁴ Rosenblum, p. 146.

well-known twinning of the prostitute Jenny and the narrator's 'cousin Nell' appears to contrast the two women, so different, and sharing only their femininity:

Of the same lump (as it is said)

For honour and dishonour made,

Two sister vessels. Here is one.

It makes a goblin of the sun.

So pure—so fall'n! How dare to think

Of the first common kindred link? (ll. 182-7)

However, Rossetti's discussion places Nell little higher than the prostitute, since he emphasizes that she is 'fond of fun, | And fond of dress, and change, and praise, | So mere a woman in her ways' (ll. 185-7) which is not so far removed from 'Lazy languid laughing Jenny, | Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea' (ll. 1-2). Women, the poem suggests, may be 'fallen' through a variety of situations, not only sexual. Though complicit in Jenny's fall, the speaker clearly regrets the contrasting situations which make 'poor Jenny' an outcast while Nell, secure in 'another's pride in her' (l. 198), remains respectable. The double standard reflects the doubled women, and both Rossettis reflect on the nature of fallenness in such poems.

In 'A Triad', for example, Christina Rossetti suggests that earthly love may lead one astray, and that, despite apparent respectability, intemperate affection may cause a different kind of fall:

One shamed herself in love; one temperately
 Grew gross in soulless love, a sluggish wife;
 One famished died for love (ll. 9-11).

Though some critics have suggested that Rossetti was personally inclined against marriage, manifested in poems such as this, it seems more probable that her argument is against marriages that she felt to be corrupt.³⁵ Like Lady Montrevor's daughters in *The Wild Irish Boy*, marriage for financial gain, for example, is, to Rossetti, comparable to prostitution, as is irreligiosity, or a depraved mind. Mulock Craik also suggests this in *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1857):

Such a one cannot be too fiercely reprobated, too utterly despised. However intact her reputation, she is as great a slur upon womanhood, as great a bane to all true modesty, as the most unchaste Messalina who ever disgraced her sex.³⁶

Despite such indictments against women who were immoral in other sins than sexual sins, the fallen woman continued to haunt nineteenth-century society and culture, with institutions being set up for their reformation. Rossetti worked in one of these, the Mary Magdalene Institute for Fallen Women, and her attitude towards them may have been tempered by this, but her position might have been developed long before, in the reading of the novels of Maturin. Yet there is little rivalry between the fallen and unfallen women in Rossetti's

³⁵ For example, Rosenblum, p. 94. However, Anne Williams points out that, in the Gothic tradition, marriage cannot necessarily be read as a happy ending (p. 138).

³⁶ Craik and Rossetti, p. 190.

poems; instead, as with Zaira and Eva, the connections lie much deeper and contain more sympathy than jealous rivalry.

The rivalry of 'Zara (Now the pain beginneth)' contrasts with Rossetti's next poem, 'Zara (The pale sad face of her I wronged)' (1848), where Zaira's remorse for De Courcy's desertion of Eva is growing, though her sadness for herself remains as her anger towards the unfaithful lover grows.³⁷ Though she does not as yet realize the true relationship between herself and her rival, Zaira is conscious of an almost supernatural connection between them, which Rossetti heightens in the opening lines of the poem. Eva's face seems to haunt Zaira, and her customary demure silence is replaced with a nightmarish vision:

The pale sad face of her I wronged

Upbraids and follows me for ever:

The silent mouth grows many-tongued

To chide me; (ll. 1-4)

The poem utilizes a scheme of near-rhymes, such as *paradise/eyes*, *erred/word*, which serve to emphasize the disintegrating confidence of Zaira as she is overtaken by conflicting violent emotions. However, towards the end of the poem the rhymes become more confident with an increased number of perfect rhymes, as Zaira forms a plan and becomes calmer as she decides her own fate. For a woman such as Zaira, Rossetti seems to imply, being mistress of

³⁷ It is interesting to compare this poem with Letitia Landon's 1829 poem 'Revenge', which is in many ways a much more straightforward poem, desiring revenge upon an unfaithful lover, but in its four-line stanzas and use of bitter words as well as similar phraseology, it is clearly comparable. Rossetti read Landon's poetry in her youth and it is quite possible that she drew upon her predecessor's work as well as that of Maturin.

her destiny is vital; though alone, deserted and heartbroken, if she can maintain control over her life she will not be defeated by events.

Once again the problems and possibilities of language are a central issue of the monologue, particularly in its contrast with silence, which Eva represents despite the 'many-tongued' vision. In the third stanza Zaira asks if it is 'thought, or deed, or word' (l. 16) which caused De Courcy to desert her; perhaps it was her words, in contrast to Eva's submissive silence, which wearied him. Indeed Zaira continues in the eighth stanza to see silence as a sign of strength rather than weakness:

Therefore because she did not speak,
 Being strong to die and make no sign;
 Because her courage waxed not weak,
 Strengthened with love as with new wine. (ll. 43-6)

This strength through silence will win her De Courcy's love again, Zaira suggests, and despite her own misery she seems to desire for Eva that he 'may bring her health' (l. 49), yet with a presentiment she knows that 'it is too late' (l. 54). Zaira's words in Rossetti's poem suggest that she feels the contrast between her speaking and Eva's silence keenly as a crucial difference between them, which has caused the situation. However, in stanza ten she challenges De Courcy himself to speak:

Thou doubly false to her and me,
 Boast of her death and my despair.
 Boast if thou canst: on land and sea,
 I will be with thee everywhere. (ll. 55-8)

Rossetti, by writing monologues for Eva and Zaira, has thus far effectively silenced De Courcy himself, though her final poem based on *Women* allows De Courcy to speak. By challenging him in this poem, however, Zaira is silencing him by invoking his own guilt, especially since the stanza closes saying: 'My soul, let loose by mine own deed, | Shall make thee fear who would'st not heed' (ll. 59-60). The implication is clearly that her 'own deed' will be death at her own hand, and that should he speak of the women he has hurt, she will haunt him. By now, Zaira's stance seems to have shifted to a moral anger, which encompasses both herself and Eva. Since he was 'doubly false', the women-doubles shall reap a double vengeance.

As in the previous poem, Zaira moves on to call curses down on his head, and, having invoked Greek mythologies, including Endymion, Narcissus and Echo, her language suggests the Furies, or perhaps Euripides' *Medea*, in her desire for vengeance which supersedes reason, life and death:

Come, thou glad hour of vengeance, come,
 When I may dog him evermore,
 May track him to his distant home. (ll. 61-3)

In fact her situation has sad echoes of *Medea's*, who murdered her children as revenge upon her faithless husband; Zaira's child too will die, and the remorse will drive her to madness. Rossetti's later poems have none of this anger and vengeance, yet in her righteous anger Zaira appears akin to a pagan deity calling vengeance upon her enemies. Her own death will allow her to become an instrument of vengeance, yet she is aware that it is she who will suffer most: 'Till he shall long for death; yet shrink | From the cold cup that I shall drink' (ll.

71-2). She returns to the trope of the earlier Rossetti monologue, recalling Psalm 75. 8 once more. This time the theme is more fully developed, however, as she reaches a conclusion at which she hesitated in the previous poem. The 'cold cup' will provide her a numbness, and she expresses a desire that she might be buried 'dug deep', because 'Such quietness I would not break, | Not for my cherished vengeance' sake' (ll. 83-4). She demands the cup of bitterness and death, then, desiring 'nothingness' above all, perhaps still haunted by the face of Eva and sensing that if she, Zaira, were to die, Eva might continue living by De Courcy's side. Embracing this notion, she metaphorically toasts this future forgetfulness: 'On the grave brink I turn and think | Of thee, before I stoop to drink' (ll. 89-90). Death has become the solution to Zaira's life, and with this decision she generates a sense of calm, reflected in the verse rhythms, which lead to a serene closing stanza. Once again the poem closes with the suggestion that the lovers will be reunited in heaven, with no mention of what may happen to Eva after death. Since it is Eva who dies in Maturin's novel, rather than Zaira, however, it is Eva who eventually takes on the martyr role which Zaira seems to crave, and who presumably will be reunited in heaven with De Courcy.

In 1855, after a gap of some years, Rossetti wrote another sonnet based on *Women*, 'Zara (I dreamed that loving me)'. Once again the idea of heaven, this time in the form of eternity, is significant. The monologue opens: 'I dreamed that loving me he would love on | Thro' life and death into eternity' (ll. 1-2). This poem returns the reader to the point where Zaira has been abandoned by her lover but is not yet aware of the true identity of Eva. It is only the title which indicates it is another 'Zara' monologue, since it is otherwise a conventional sonnet of lost love and ensuing pain. The sonnet follows an especially tight and formal scheme against which the passionate misery of the words seems to strain. In the line 'I dreamt that love would be and be and be' (l. 3), for instance, the repeated words provide a sense of dreary informality in a carefully rhymed and scanned line. Zaira is haunted by her

dreams of happiness, and asks 'what drug will lull the pain?' (l. 9) It is probable that when Rossetti wrote this poem she placed it chronologically before the two earlier 'Zara' poems, since here Zaira mourns her loss and is stultified by the pain. The 'drug' she seeks here, the earlier poems suggest, lies in the 'bitter cup' she will drink, representing both the metaphorical cup of the Psalms which will allow her to exonerate both herself and De Courcy, and a physical cup of poison, with which she will end her life.

The bitterness and desire for revenge Zaira manifests in Rossetti's earlier poems are still incipient here; instead, her anger seems directed inwardly, to herself and her memory, that cannot let her reach oblivion:

Oh lying memory, when shall I forget?

For why should I remember him in vain

Who hath forgotten and rejoiceth still?

Oh bitter memory, while my heart is set

On love that gnaws and gnaws and cannot kill. (ll. 10-14)

Zaira's strength, in her battle with herself and reproach to her own memory, is demonstrated here as in the other Zaira poems. It is, of course, the aspects of relationships which cannot be forgotten that affect Zaira. In the 1857 poem 'Memory', a similar situation arises, in which the speaker both retains her memories and is pained by them. Elsewhere Rossetti mourns what cannot be remembered. In 'Monna Innominata', the speaker tries to remember 'that first day, | First hour, first moment of your meeting me' (Sonnet 2, l. 2) but it has gone from her memory; 'So unrecorded did it slip away' (Sonnet 2, l. 5). 'Monna Innominata', Rossetti's monument to women who love yet are usually silenced (Beatrice, Laura) may itself have its

roots in the monologues of Maturin's female characters, whose power and genius as well as ill-fated love and eventual resignation appear in the later sonnet sequence.

The final *Women* poem, 'Look on this Picture and on This' (1856, see Appendix One), takes its title from *Hamlet*, 4.3, 54-5, where Hamlet addresses Gertrude, saying, 'Look here, upon this picture, and on this, | The counterfeit presentment of two brothers'. The Queen's response to this is '[S]peak no more: | Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul, | And there I see such black and grained spots'. Rossetti's poem is a monologue, this time spoken by De Courcy, addressing himself rather than a third person, despite his invocation of Eva's name, and the Queen's fearful answer to the speech seems a possible response for De Courcy to make to his own speech, reluctant to turn his gaze inwards and face the painful truths of his behaviour. *Hamlet*, like *Women*, also manifests an anxiety for the inadequacy of language. Crump's notes to 'Look on this picture and on this' suggest that the line 'You my saint lead up to heaven she lures down to sin' might echo the King's words in 3.3: 'My words fly up, my thoughts remain below: | Words without thoughts never to heaven go'.³⁸ Eva's careful words and silences are ostensibly more heaven-bound than Zaira's ready wit, certainly in the early stages of this poem, so this is perhaps a suggestive context. Rosenblum states that not only are Zaira and Eva 'as incomparable as Claudius and the elder Hamlet', but that the context 'indicates violation of the incest taboos comparable to the violation that occurs in *Hamlet*' (p. 155). Since Zaira is Eva's mother, De Courcy's position as the lover of them both, whilst not incestuous, could be construed as verging on taboo, and the experienced Zaira and pure Eva might well be compared in a similar manner to Claudius and Hamlet's father. *Hamlet* thus provides an enlightening context for the poem as a whole. There is a similar concern for duality, or apparent duality, in characters. In 3.1, Hamlet tells Ophelia, 'I have heard of your paintings too, well enough; God hath given you one face, and

³⁸ Crump, p. 1134.

you make yourselves another'. This division which Hamlet believed he saw resolves itself into madness in the case of Ophelia; while, if we are to take Zaira and Eva as one being divided and manifested as individuals, it seems logical that after Eva's death, Zaira's grief also results in her madness.

Lona Mosk Packer suggests that the poem may not be inspired by *Women* at all, but is simply a poem of complex, dual love, in which 'love is portrayed as a turbulent maelstrom of emotions in which sexual hostility, jealousy, self-pity, and self-contempt each strives for dominance' (p. 101). Packer constructed a theory about Rossetti's life which involved a potential affair with William Bell Scott, and thus construed many of her poems as relating to this situation. It seems highly improbable that Rossetti would have used the name Eva and created a poem so bound to the plot of *Women* without intending it to represent the voice of De Courcy, and certainly her brother seemed convinced that the poem originated in *Women*, commenting that otherwise 'I should have been embarrassed to guess what directed my sister's pen to so singular a subject and treatment'.³⁹ That the characters of Maturin's novel might provide a screen for Rossetti to write a more personal poem is unintentionally suggested by her brother's comments, despite Rossetti's fears of her poems being thus construed. Such a possibility cannot be ruled out, but remains purely speculative.

Though this poem is her last directly inspired by Maturin, it also in many ways seems her weakest, though it is powerful in its description of the frantic state of the speaker. Written in rhyming triplets, with uneven rhythm and line lengths, it originally had forty-six stanzas; W. M. Rossetti reduced it to twenty-three, 'omitting those passages which appear to me to be either in themselves inferior, or adapted rather for spinning out the theme than intensifying it'.⁴⁰ The MS version shows W. M. Rossetti's deletions, which in many cases alter the sense

³⁹ *WMR*, p. 480.

⁴⁰ *WMR*, p. 382.

of the poem and its interaction with the novel, especially in the light of the earlier *Women* poems. His first and only textual alteration is to move a word in the first line to improve its scansion; it seems likely that the irregular rhythm caused him to abandon any further attempts to regularize the poem.⁴¹

‘Look on this picture, and on this’ is intense in its repeated rhymes, including internal rhymes, and the monologue has an unnervingly conversational tone, with the speaker interrupting himself, pausing, contradicting himself and demonstrating his divided loyalties despite his supposed commitment to Eva. The monologue appears to take place after De Courcy has begun to realize the dangerous attraction he feels for Zaira, when he is struggling against it, since at this point he is able to say ‘Have I wronged you? nay not I nor she in deed or will’. Under the pressure of the situation his sanity seems to be crumbling, for he wildly addresses Eva and seems to confuse her with Zaira. This is the only poem by Rossetti which gives voice to a masculine viewpoint, but in its internal debate it reflects the concerns of the Eva and Zaira monologues. The poem as a whole is under-punctuated, which may have been Rossetti’s attempt to adopt a more conventionally masculine tone than usual, by removing some pauses in an endeavour to produce a more forthright, unhesitating voice and leaving the poem relatively uncluttered.

The poem begins with an emphasis on ‘looking’ – that he ‘hates’ himself when he looks at Eva, presumably for betraying her in her innocence, and then in the second stanza describing the charms of Zaira’s appearance which he cannot resist, cruelly calling on Eva as a witness to her rival’s beauty. Throughout the poem, Eva is portrayed as ‘silent’, ‘dumb’, and even, in one of the deleted verses, as speaking in Zaira’s voice: ‘Tho’ your lips speak it’s her voice I flush to hear so plain’ (l. 26). The progressive confusion Rossetti creates in the

⁴¹ The full version, with W. M. Rossetti’s excisions, is held by the British Library, Ashley MS. 1364, in no. 1 of 6 notebooks. A transcript can be found in Appendix 1.

poem is considerably altered by her brother's deletions, since the stanzas removed are mostly those which appear to project Zaira's characteristics onto Eva. Though at first De Courcy is mild towards her, first calling her his 'saint' while Zaira has 'a devil' dancing in her eyes, and asking rhetorically, 'How should I choose a peacock and leave and grieve a dove?' (l. 8), he also admits that he cannot ignore her, because of 'her eyes, her witching manner' (l. 12). Zaira is indeed presented as a seductive witch, a Lorelei or Melusine who tempts him against his will. While De Courcy tells the silent Eva 'You are winning', he also adds, 'You constrain me', and appears spellbound by Zaira (ll. 13-4).

His confusion increases as he admits in stanzas eight and nine of the uncut version that despite being in Eva's presence his heart and mind are filled with Zaira, while stanza twelve beatifies Eva, placing himself and Zaira on a level with each other – sinners cast out of heaven, but together and blessed with love:

One short pang and you would rise a light in heaven

While we grovelled in the darkness mean and unforgiven

Tho' our cup of love brimmed sevenfold crowns of love were seven. (ll. 34-6)

By stanza fifteen De Courcy imagines Eva dead, 'at peace and dumb' (l. 45), though that is also how he has envisioned her in life. The deleted stanza sixteen, however, switches to referring to her in the third person, stating that 'the old love has driven the new away' (l. 46). It is this changing of both sentiment and mode of address which indicates the fluctuating emotion the speaker is experiencing, and also draws in the reader by forcing considerable concentration.

By sanctifying Eva, De Courcy is attempting to vindicate himself. Not only would she ‘thank me for the freedom of that day’ (l. 47), but he imagines her death by describing her as ‘tiring for the Bridegroom till the morning star shall rise, | Then to shine a glory in the nuptials of the skies’ (ll. 52-3). In elevating Eva’s goodness to such an extent, he suggests she is too good for him – too precious for earthly life at all and thus not in need of a husband. Eva appears like one of Neale’s virgin saints who have a higher calling than marriage. In a burst of self-abnegation he wishes himself dead, yet then shifts the emphasis:

I would that one of us were dead, were gone no more to meet,
Or she and I were dead together stretched here at your feet,
That she and I were strained together in one windingsheet. (ll. 58-60)

The sexual overtones of the last line are unmistakeable, and imply a desire to hurt Eva emotionally. The reason for this becomes apparent in the next few stanzas, with references to ‘your keener scorn’ (l. 62) and particularly the deleted twenty-second stanza:

A pitiless fiend is in your eyes to tempt me and to taunt:
If you were dead I verily believe that you would haunt
The home you loved, the man you loved, you said you loved – avault. (ll. 64-6)

The strained rhyme aside, this stanza demonstrates most clearly the confusion that is growing in De Courcy’s mind. Eva’s character shows no hint of a ‘pitiless fiend’, since she is mild and demure throughout the novel. It is clear that Zaira and Eva are beginning to merge, though in fact even Zaira is neither as manipulative nor as intentionally tempting as this poem suggests. Read with the novel in mind, the poem provides an insight into the mind of the speaker as

Rossetti saw it, and in her embellishments she brings a dimension of the temptress to Zaira that is not fully developed in the novel, where, while Zaira is a worldly woman, she is also often well-intentioned and reluctant to cause pain.

By verse twenty-four, which W. M. Rossetti did not delete, Eva has become an angel again, this time with wings and a halo. The next four stanzas, which are crucial to Rossetti's version, were deleted, but portray the fear that motivates De Courcy and causes him to become sadistic. In emphasizing the death of his love for Eva, he discloses his irreligiosity, saying 'The door will not uncloset to you tho' long you wait and knock'. The image is evocative of Jesus standing at the door, for example in Holman Hunt's painting *The Light of the World* (1851-3), and suggests that Eva's religion has put up a barrier between them which he stubbornly refuses to tear down. Insisting that he has not wronged her, he instead blames her for his failure to continue to love her, and tells her 'You it is alone that mingle the venomous cup' (l. 77). Zaira, in her guilt and misery, has in Rossetti's previous poems used the same imagery repeatedly, yet here De Courcy appears to apportion blame to Eva. Verse thirty is cruel in its desire to apportion blame:

Sit you still and wring the cup drop after loathsome drop:

You have let loose a torrent it is not you can stop;

You have sowed a noisome fieldful, now reap the stinging crop. (ll. 88-90)

It is beyond possibility, in the framework of Maturin's novel, that this could be addressed to Eva, whose intentions and actions remain good and pure throughout. Clearly in De Courcy's mind, Eva has somehow transmuted into Zaira, and he is scourging her with his anger and misery at the situation that the three of them have created. The confusion between the two women in this monologue emphasizes the dual natures of the women, who between them

seem to form one whole. As their characteristics become hopelessly confused, the reader too is uncertain whom the reader is addressing, and the women appear finally to merge into one being.

Towards the end of the poem, W. M. Rossetti's deletions become less severe, as De Courcy's sympathies swing back to Eva, telling her 'I love you yet' (l. 111), and asking for forgiveness. Her angelic status is confirmed as she enters heaven while he and Zaira are condemned to 'a searching fire and strict balances to weigh' (ll. 125). Optimistically, the final stanza seems to reunite the three of them, in a portentous omen of the relationship between the two women as yet unknown in the novel:

Be open-armed to us in love – type of another Love-
 As she forgave us ones below will she forgive above,
 Enthroned to all eternity our sister-friend and dove? – (ll. 132-5)

The poem closes hesitantly, with a dash which suggests that there must be more to come, as if De Courcy himself is uncertain about the ending of the narrative. In fact this last stanza was also deleted, leaving instead a note of self-recrimination and pessimism. The reunion in the afterlife which Zaira and Eva imagine is far more complex here, suggesting that Rossetti was aware of the debate surrounding the problem of individuality in heaven, outlined in Luke 20, which tells of a woman who was married seven times, yet the conclusion is not in line with Rossetti's other imagined heavens, some of which envisage a blissful forgetting of the earthly life.⁴² While this passage raises more theological questions than it answers, I would suggest

⁴² Luke 20: 33-36: '³³ Therefore in the resurrection whose wife of them is she? for seven had her to wife. ³⁴ And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: ³⁵ But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given

that Rossetti depicted the reunion in the afterlife in many of her poems as a device which serves to emphasize the importance of earthly love as well as spiritual. Here, while this holds true, the uncomfortable result of this meeting in heaven cannot fail to be identified by the reader.

Despite the passionate and somewhat frenzied tone of the poem as a whole, Rossetti manifests some sympathy towards the situation by demonstrating the suffering and confusion which all three characters experience. Her brother's deletions remove the pity and love for Zaira, thus allowing De Courcy to seem both less deranged by love and less culpable. Further, the excisions emphasize Eva's saintly nature, thus causing Zaira to seem more to blame for the situation. W. M. Rossetti's 'embarrassment' at the subject matter that he mentions in the notes is perhaps responsible for his swingeing excisions, which produce a more restrained poem.

Melmoth the Wanderer

Maturin's most widely-read novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) is also his most Gothic novel, of a man who has given up his soul in return for eternal life, a concept that must have both shocked and fascinated the devout Rossetti. W. M. Rossetti describes the novel's plot in his Notes:

Melmoth is a personage who has made a compact with the Devil, thereby securing an enormous length of life (say at least a century and a half), and the power of flitting at will from land to land. At the end of the term, Melmoth's soul is to be forfeited, unless he can meanwhile induce some one else to take the compact off his hands.

in marriage: ³⁶ Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection.'

Melmoth makes numerous efforts in this direction, but all abortive. One of his intended victims is a beautiful girl named Immalee, a child of Nature in an Indian island – a second Miranda. She becomes deeply enamoured of Melmoth, but resists his tamperings with her soul. She is finally identified as the daughter of a Spanish Grandee, and is then baptized as Isidora. At one point of the story she espouses Melmoth, and bears him a child. Christina's poem ['Isidora'] is her deathbed scene.⁴³

The novel functions on the traditional anti-Catholic basis of Gothic, its Calvinist author producing bitter diatribes against the superstition, corruption and blasphemy that he sees as inherent in Protestant Christianity.⁴⁴

Rossetti's sonnet 'Immalee' (1847) is set on the island on which Immalee lives, before Melmoth has met her or attempted to corrupt her. Immalee herself knows nothing of God or religion at this stage, having been washed ashore there as an infant, and is clearly a child of nature whose sympathy with and dependence on her surroundings demonstrate her purity. Though Maturin gives many pages of descriptions of the island, with its luxuriant foliage and abundance of wildlife, unlike the novel Rossetti's sonnet names specific plants and animals. When Immalee finally speaks in the novel, her first words are 'God made me'.⁴⁵ She also shows an instinctive inclination towards religion. It is arguable that Rossetti's specific naming in her sonnet is indicative of her recreation of Immalee's Christian nature. Tractarianism emphasizes the significance of typology and the understanding of symbols in

⁴³ *WMR*, pp. 466-7.

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note, however, that Anne Williams suggests that anxieties about femininity are to a certain extent reflected in the Gothic novel's concern with the Catholic 'mother' church (p. 117).

⁴⁵ Charles Robert Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, ed. by Victor Sage (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 313.

the natural world, which link to higher parallels as signs given by God to increase human understanding.⁴⁶ In Tract 80 in 1837, Isaac Williams states:

There appears in God's manifestations of Himself to mankind, in conjunction with an exceeding desire to communicate that knowledge, a tendency to conceal, and throw a veil over it, as if it were injurious to us, unless we were of a certain disposition to receive it.

It is this understanding of typological readings which the Tractarians extended from traditional Old Testament foreshadowings to include symbolism in nature which pointed to God. Using it to link the corporeal to the sublime, Rossetti employs it in her poems throughout her life. Indeed the sublime seems to be the antidote to Gothic, lifting humanity away from the fears and threats of the world and glimpsing the alternative situation of heaven, though not reaching it until after death.

Thyme, in the first line of 'Immalee', traditionally indicates strength and courage, both of which become features of her personality after she has left her Edenic island.⁴⁷ The daffodils are known as symbols of deceit, indicating the deceptions of Melmoth as he tries to ensnare her. The cherry-tree is indicative of spiritual beauty, and Maturin makes much of her beauty and its power to influence the world for good. The strawberry implies perfect goodness, which Immalee represents. This Edenic, natural landscape depicted by Rossetti in her poem is as far removed as possible from the Gothic landscapes of gloomy interiors and

⁴⁶ Roe suggests that 'Rossetti's flowers and plants are all a testimony to God's love', p. 23.

⁴⁷ Such typological and symbolic readings can be found in, for example, the Tractarian Charlotte M. Yonge's book *The Instructive Picture Book, or, Lessons from the Vegetable World* (Edinburgh: Edmoston and Douglas, 1857).

treacherous terrain which feature in Maturin's novel, and thus contrast starkly with 'Isidora', set in a prison cell. The animals that appear do not include the guard of peacocks with which Maturin endows her, but instead birds, deer, goats, squirrels and hares; less exotic animals but ones with a common cultural significance. The deer is used in Psalm 42 as a symbol of the soul's longing for God, which is appropriate since Immalee is also described as a young deer by Maturin. She declares herself to be longing to know about God, while in Song of Solomon the deer or gazelle is the soul for which Christ longs. According to the book of Leviticus, 'the goat shall carry all their iniquities', as depicted in Holman Hunt's painting *The Scapegoat* (1854), thus perhaps implying Immalee's innocence at this stage and also that she will die as a result of her lover's actions.⁴⁸

This use of specific natural symbols is common throughout Rossetti's work, but is particularly prominent in her poem 'Eve'. 'Immalee' foreshadows this later poem by translating the Gothic heroine of Maturin's novel into an emblem of unfallen womanhood. The innocence Immalee displays is not depicted in Rossetti's vision of Eve, though Immalee is presented as a convincing cipher for pre-lapsarian Eve; but instead, as Eve struggles with her responsibility for the fall, the animals around her take pity on her. This pathetic fallacy is not only significant for the demonstrable sympathy of the natural world, but also because Rossetti carefully chose the animals. However, in 'Eve' she subverts their actions and thus implicitly their meanings. For example, the hart, like a deer representing thirst for God, is producing water of its own making in the form of teardrops. The insistence in the poem on

⁴⁸ Leviticus 16:22: 'And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities, unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat into the wilderness'.

Eve's weeping (when Rossetti's heroines rarely weep) foreshadows the baptism which will remove original sin.⁴⁹

By claiming sympathy with nature and God's symbols, Rossetti is, I am suggesting, implying sympathy for Immalee's and Eve's situations whilst simultaneously allowing them both to shoulder responsibility. 1 Corinthians 15. 21-22 states: 'For since by man [came] death, by man [came] also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive'. 'Eve' makes little mention of Adam, instead allowing Eve to take responsibility for her actions, and admit that she is culpable, though there is a hint that Adam had the opportunity to refuse the fruit and save mankind. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile* (1844), by contrast, rewrites the traditional versions of the Fall to give Eve the upper hand, and celebrates the knowledge gained by the Fall rather than condemning women for it, closing with the line 'exiled, but not lost!' This provides a more theologically radical narrative than Rossetti; yet even here, Adam supports and comforts his wife, while in Rossetti's poem, the solitary figure of the grieving woman who has transgressed presents a much stronger picture of femininity than the tradition of women's poetry usually allows. Further, Nina Auerbach suggests that the fallen woman alone 'seems to embody the defiant powers of all womanhood in the face of little men who would disown them'.⁵⁰

The suffering which results from the fall is enacted for the reader in 'Isidora'. Both 'Immalee' and 'Isidora' are closely linked with certain moments in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, with 'Isidora' depicting the heroine's death, as in typical Rossettian style she attempts to come to terms with the events that have led her there. That Isidora talks for several stanzas to

⁴⁹ In 'Rossetti's Response to the Feminine Voice of Woe', pp. 18-42 of *Faith, Gender and Time*, D'Amico considers fully the question of Rossetti's response to strong women, and her unsentimental approach compared to that of Hemans and Landon, for example.

⁵⁰ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 163.

an apparently sleeping child becomes much more sinister in the context of the novel, when it becomes clear that the child is not sleeping but dead, possibly murdered by his father – and yet the unlucky mother envies her child's peace. Maternal feeling, usually so strong in the poetess tradition, is virtually absent here. Maturin aimed to produce terror in the reader, at the fate of Isidora and at the loss of one's soul. Terror 'activates the mind and imagination [...]' enabling the subject to move from a state of passivity to activity', while horror produces the opposite effect, freezing or stupefying the subject or reader.⁵¹ Rossetti depicts Isidora at moments of stasis, yet her activity is apparent in her spirituality.

Isidora is represented as a 'fallen woman' in this poem, though not in the conventional sense. Her sin is to have loved Melmoth, though her love of God is paramount, and she does not give in to his call to take his place. It is in loving the wrong man that she falls; when she leaves her Eden and becomes Isidora instead of Immalee, she represents a post-lapsarian Eve. Her secluded island, which represented a liminal space in which she was innocent, is replaced by the world, and in crossing the threshold to other lands, she transgresses. A truism of the Gothic genre is that it both transgresses boundaries itself and also represents transgression as an act of defiance against God; Immalee's transgression is made in innocence, but in leaving her island where she was secure, and entering the world, she has committed herself to a path from which she cannot turn back.

While Maturin's concern is with the blasphemy and superstition of religion, in 'Isidora' Rossetti subverts this. By assuming the inherent goodness of Christ and his ability to save, the element of despair is removed. In its place, the boundaries of female responsibility are extended beyond contemporary cultural definitions of femininity. This engenders a sense of female autonomy which strengthens the heroine, in some cases beyond the character of the hero or anti-hero. Rossetti's Eve goes so far as to suggest that if Adam had declined the fruit

⁵¹ Botting, *Gothic*, p. 48.

she offered him, he might have stayed in Eden while she alone was exiled. The argument that, as her husband, Adam was therefore compelled to eat of the fruit as she did and thus not share but take on her responsibility for the transgression is negated. Self-sacrifice for a potentially unworthy man is a shared characteristic of Rossetti's Eve and Isidora. While Isidora says: 'I would gladly give my soul | So that thine might dwell in bliss' (ll. 14-5), Eve, similarly, suggests:

I might have pined away;
 I, but none other:
 God might have let thee stay
 Safe in our garden,
 By putting me away
 Beyond all pardon. (ll. 20-5)

While both women consider taking the responsibility for their husbands' souls, they are taking on a Christ-like image of a saviour, and contravening contemporary assumptions about their place in the gender hierarchy by even contemplating the possibility that they might be in a position to do this.

'I must choose 'twixt God and man' is often quoted as a biographical note to Rossetti, who broke off two engagements on religious grounds. However, in both these poems, women transgressed not through their choice of man rather than God, but through the desire for knowledge. Immalee's fall is initially brought about, not by her love for Melmoth, but rather through her desire for knowledge, since she, who knew nothing of life other than that observed on the island and in nature, begged him to increase her knowledge of 'the world of

answers', and even after Melmoth's diatribes about the corruption of civilization she still desires knowledge more than happiness. It is this same choice which Eve makes.

The end result of their transgression, for both women, is death: for Eve it causes the death of mankind; for Immalee, however, her own death counts as nothing since her soul is saved, but the uncertainty over her husband's fate wracks her as she dies, asking in Maturin's words, 'Paradise – will he be there?' (l. 72) However, Rossetti exposes the fallacy of the Isidora plot of *Melmoth the Wanderer* with the lines 'Thy life is not in my death' (l. 30), adding: 'By the loss of my salvation | To increase thy condemnation' (ll. 35-6). Isidora, despite admitting she is prepared to exchange places with her husband, knows that by allowing him to die she will not be giving him peace, since death will not release him from the grasp of Satan, and that if he allows her to give up her soul, he will be additionally culpable for the loss of her salvation. To receive God's blessing is the best gift Isidora and Eve can give to their husbands, yet the impossibility of it means that their peace can only be found in resigning Adam and Melmoth to the care of God. The women's own repentance is not mentioned in the poem; the implication is that repentance has already occurred before the poems take place, and consequently the women are by this stage struggling to overcome their grief instead.

Both poems appear to be about transgression and punishment, significant thematic concepts in both biblical and Gothic terms. At the point at which Rossetti has set 'Isidora', the heroine is imprisoned by the Inquisition on suspicion of being an heretic. While Isidora (in the novel) remembers sadly her freedom on her island, Eve is shown as still in Eden, surrounded by the natural world from which she takes comfort, although biblically she is soon to be banished from here. Since Eve's sin is against God, her anguish is related to (and supported by) the natural world, while Isidora's sin, which is against society as much as God, and being innocent in her heart, is confined within man-made prison walls, which Rossetti

does not describe. However, with the contrasting of heaven above and hell below, and her child on one side and her husband on the other, these spiritual confinements alone provide the prison walls.

Rossetti's poem 'Shut Out' has similar implications. Also relating to Eve, it is a narrative of grief after leaving Eden, in which the banished woman cannot enter the garden but can see into it, thus increasing her misery for what she has lost:

The door was shut. I looked between
 Its iron bars; and saw it lie,
 My garden, mine, beneath the sky (ll. 1-3).

Repeated enjambments force a sense of claustrophobia on the reader, as though it is the world which is a prison, keeping Eve from the freedom of Eden. This notion of the world as a prison, with the threshold of heaven a barrier to be crossed, is one which Rossetti repeats and explores throughout her writing life. Eve's sense of imprisonment increases when the sinister 'spirit' which 'kept the gate' will not give her even a twig to remind her of her home. Instead:

The spirit was silent; but he took
 Mortar and stone to build a wall;
 He left no loophole great or small
 Thro' which my straining eyes might look: (ll. 16-20)

The fallen, corrupted and essentially Gothic world in which Eve (and, by implication, the reader also) is imprisoned can provide no delights to compensate for the loss of Eden. Instead, only the joys of heaven can await Eve.

Methods of discipline such as prisons, Foucault argues, ‘dissociate power from the body’.⁵² For Rossetti’s heroines, their bodies are virtually absent; by this stage in their development it is only their souls that are at stake, and the ‘discipline’ of their beliefs has in fact freed them. Modern feminist criticism would no doubt argue that gender itself becomes their prison, since a heroine in a Gothic novel is doomed to the fate of existing within the framework of a patriarchal culture. If, as Auerbach argues, we ‘imprison what we adore’, then it is the physical confinement, whether inside a prison or outside of Eden, and the contrasting spiritual freedom of these women, which Rossetti is emphasizing and asking us to admire in her characters.⁵³

Through God, there is an escape for these and all women, and the poem strengthens the religious element in order to provide no doubt of an escape. Botting describes *Melmoth* as a novel that does not, ‘like conventional Gothic texts, restore a moral order or explain a mystery, but suggests that the human condition is as inescapable as the narrative labyrinth itself, a relentless chain of cruel events without purpose, unity or meaning’.⁵⁴ For Rossetti, however, the reverse is true, at least in terms of the ‘inescapable’ human condition. Both Eve and Isidora have given up freedom for knowledge, yet they become free through a combination of their own beliefs and God’s grace. When Isidora says ‘I have conquered; it is done’ (l. 61), Rossetti is stressing the power of the heroine’s will to trust in God over her desire to save her husband. The final lines even indicate that she maintains a hopeless belief that her husband may yet be forgiven and redeemed as she will be. Equally, while Eve mourns that she has eaten the forbidden fruit, and the earth mourns with her, she remains

⁵² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. by A. Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 138.

⁵³ Nina Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. xi.

⁵⁴ Botting, *Gothic*, p. 108.

certain she is the 'sad mother of all who must live' (l. 26-7) – that is to say, although she has brought death into the world, future generations will be born, while the mourning of nature highlights the life that continues around her. Like Isidora, she has transgressed, but with her knowledge, despite its fatal results, she has also conquered through the power of God. Where the Gothic novel highlights the dangers of the notion of the decentring of the self, Isidora and Eve, through Rossetti's rewriting of them, become re-centred in their monologues through their acceptance of their sin and the possibility of their redemption.

In her devotional prose work *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti considers this redemption of Eve:

And yet, even as at the foot of the Cross, St. Mary Magdalene, out of whom went seven devils, stood beside the "lily among thorns," the Mother of sorrows: so (I humbly hope and trust) amongst all saints of all time will stand before the throne, Eve the beloved first Mother of us all. Who that has loved and revered her own immediate dear mother, will not echo the hope? (*FD*, p. 310)

Without doubt, both women maintain their trust in divine love and grace to forgive them and overcome their transgression. Maturin, however, implies no forgiveness or peace, and instead conforms to the pattern of the death of a transgressive woman, though not without some pity for the innocent Immalee who brought about her own fall by desiring knowledge of the world when her demonic lover offered her the choice to stay alone on her island. 'Eve' does not indicate God's forgiveness, but arguably the sympathetic natural world represents the divine love that supports mankind after death has entered the world as well as associating Eve with life rather than death. Isidora, by contrast, in contemplating the potential loss of her salvation,

accepts that she will be saved, by 'the heart's death for the soul's life' (l. 42). Her monologue ends:

Blessed Saviour, take my soul

To thy Paradise and care:—

Paradise, will he be there? (ll. 70-2)

If Gothic provides 'an analysis of the limits of rationality',⁵⁵ then this and her other Maturin poems end just beyond the confines of our understanding – 'Isidora' with her contemplation of divine forgiveness and Paradise, and 'Eve' with the gloating of the snake, which precipitated the Fall. From Rossetti's earliest poems, it is possible to trace a strand of Gothic which is concerned primarily with the supernatural and unknowable, which points to God; the shadow of the fallen world of the Gothic novel serves only to indicate the eternal glories of heaven. Rossetti's engagement with Maturin's Gothic demonstrates her ability to reshape and transform aspects of the Gothic novel, and, in the *Melmoth* poems in particular, her interest in the contrast between the fallen world and the perfection of heaven. As the next chapter will explore, this post-lapsarian world is peopled with grotesques which serve specific purposes in Rossetti's poetry, and complicate the aesthetic relationships of the Gothic.

⁵⁵ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Macmillan, 2000), p. 1.

Chapter Three: Rossetti, Ruskin and the Moral Grotesque

Rossetti's poems based on Maturin's novels concentrate primarily upon heroines, who, whilst unconventional, can be assumed to be beautiful. However, Rossetti's approach to appearances is complicated by her use of the grotesque. The grotesque is largely absent from critical studies of Gothic, but not only does Ruskin discuss it as an aspect of Gothic, it also appears in Gothic novels in their elements of distortion and excess. This is reflected in Rossetti's poetry. This chapter argues that the Rossettian grotesque has much in common with that of Ruskin, particularly in the relationship between internal truths and external appearances. Moreover, Rossetti's grotesques, like Ruskin's, serve a moral purpose, which critics have sensed since the first publication of her poems. For example, in 1893 a review of 'Goblin Market' in *The Century* magazine suggested a link between the grotesque and the moral in Rossetti's work:

It is one of the very few purely fantastic poems of recent times which have really kept up the old tradition of humoresque literature. Its witty and fantastic conception is embroidered with fancies, descriptions, peals of laughing music, which clothe it as a queer Japanese figure may be clothed with brocade, so that the entire effect at last is beautiful and harmonious without ever having ceased to be grotesque. I confess that [...] I dimly perceive the underlying theme to be a didactic one.¹

Edmund Gosse's review casts 'Goblin Market' as a poem of contrasting moods, 'beautiful and harmonious' on the surface yet remaining disturbing in its grotesquerie. Gosse's comments underline surprising elements of the poem: that a poem may be in the

¹ Edmund Gosse, 'Christina Rossetti', in *Critical Kit-Kats* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1903), 131-62 (p. 149).

‘humoresque’ tradition, and at the same time be both beautiful and grotesque. Beauty is not a generally accepted attribute of the grotesque, yet Gosse is not the only critic to have emphasized the unsettling tone and apparently contrasting aspects of the poem. Moreover, he relates the beautiful and grotesque characteristics of the poem to an underlying morality. The grotesque is rarely acknowledged as an intrinsic part of Gothic, though Ruskin identifies it as a part of the genre in *The Stones of Venice* and *Modern Painters*. This chapter will argue that Rossetti uses the grotesque as Ruskin described it throughout much of her work, emphasizing a mode of moral Gothic in which an internal grotesqueness of character is depicted as more significant than external appearance.

There are of course many contrasting and complex aspects of the grotesque, which, like Gothic, is fractured and diffuse. As Harpham has noted, it raises questions such as ‘What can possibly be “in” all these things? How can “it” be strained out so it can be observed by itself? And what is to be made of the fact that the grotesque is by no means confined to art, but can be experienced as a psychological event for which a work of art may create a favourable climate, but which can occur outside their sphere of influence altogether?’² As this suggests, the grotesque can appear in multiple forms and arenas, which art can depict to a certain extent, but which act upon the writer and the reader in diverse ways. That which is not intended to be grotesque may appear so to the reader, and the emotional and psychological impact can be intense. Harpham suggests a kind of solution to the issues presented by a study of the grotesque, by acknowledging the very presence of the issues. As he explains, ‘it is up to the culture to provide the conventions and assumptions that determine its particular forms’ (p. xx). The implication, then, is that in order to establish a logical notion of Rossetti’s use of the grotesque, some contextualization is necessary. This chapter will consider issues such as

² Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. xv.

these. Primarily, in the case of Rossetti, I will argue that Ruskin's theory of moral Gothic, relating to the grotesque as giving access to the sublime, is the most appropriate response to her use of grotesquerie, and also provides a historical and conceptual framework in which to situate it.³

The Grotesque

Scholarly work on the grotesque generally agrees on certain aspects of grotesquerie in art and literature, such as that the grotesque must appear in an apparently realistic setting, which provides a normative mode against which to contrast aberrations. The material grotesque body is thus presented in literature as part of a familiar world. As Mary Russo suggests, quoting Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*: 'The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world; "it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects"'.⁴ Thomson states that it cannot be too closely associated with the fantastic as it 'derives at least some of its effect from being presented within a realistic framework, in a realistic way'.⁵ Most convincing is Ruskin's argument that the best examples display 'a true union of the grotesque with the realistic power'.⁶

Writers on the grotesque have traced the development of the term 'grotesque' in detail, considering its original application to art and tracing its history through the works of

³ Certainly Ruskin, if not Rossetti, would have been aware of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). Burke links the sublime to terror, and describes it as causing a passion, from which 'arises the great power of the sublime' (Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas on the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. by J. T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958; repr. 1967), p. 57).

⁴ Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 8.

⁵ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), p. 8.

⁶ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* III, Cook and Wedderburn V, 137.

Continental writers such as Schlegel and Wieland.⁷ There have been many attempts to define the grotesque concisely, such as Thomson's attempts to sum up the word: 'Disharmony'; 'comic and terrifying'; 'extravagance and exaggeration'; 'abnormality' (p. 9). These are expected terms which appear frequently in discussions of the grotesque, but there are serious problems with such categorizations. As with Gothic, it is difficult to distinguish clear features of the grotesque. As Kayser suggests, by the nineteenth century the word had been 'debased', and became much more open to interpretation. Kayser writes that '[t]he word thus covers an exceedingly wide range of meanings and seems to have been shorn of its essential qualities' by the time it was defined in a German-French dictionary in 1771: 'Figuratively speaking, grotesque means odd, unnatural, bizarre, strange, funny, ridiculous, caricatural, etc' (p. 28). Thus, although the grotesque is considered here as a mode of Gothic, its history is as eclectic as that of Gothic itself.

In 1820, Hazlitt accorded the grotesque a literary status which separated it from the historical artistic category into which it had previously fallen. Discussing English literature, he states:

We may be accused of grossness, but not of flimsiness; of extravagance, but not of affectation; of want of art and refinement, but not of a want of truth and nature. Our literature, in a word, is Gothic and grotesque; unequal and irregular; not cast in a previous mould, nor of one uniform texture, but of great weight in the whole, and of

⁷ For example, Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. by Ulrich Weisstein

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), and Arthur Clayborough, *The Grottesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) provide detailed histories of the grotesque in English and European literature and history, including etymological considerations.

incomparable value in the best parts. It aims at an excess of beauty or power, hits or misses, and is either very good indeed, or absolutely good for nothing.⁸

For Hazlitt, then, the grotesque is a by-product of an excess of *gravitas*, of good intentions often over-stated and misplaced in enthusiasm. His explanation of the grotesque uses descriptors which appear frequently in discussions of grotesquerie: grossness, extravagance, truth, nature, 'unequal and irregular'. Hazlitt combines the abstract with the aesthetic, suggesting that in a peculiarly English way these aspects are the redeeming characteristics of English literature, which is as a whole grotesque. Specific characteristics of the grotesque, as Hazlitt and many others have found, are difficult to define; unlike other aesthetic categories, it is the abstract, such as 'grossness' or 'exaggeration', which marks it out, rather than specific visual features or techniques. This point is emphasized by Kayser, who suggests that Victor Hugo's 'The Preface to Cromwell' (1827) raises questions concerning what can be defined as grotesque: can a single deformed figure, for example, be so classified? To do so would place the grotesque 'among the esthetic categories determined by their external appearance, such as blank verse, Alexandrine, first-person narrative, and five-act plays' (p. 57). To attempt to define the grotesque in such specific terms is to curtail its meaning considerably.

Like Walter Bagehot nearly forty years later, Victor Hugo emphasizes the importance of Christianity in the use of the grotesque in poetry:

Christianity leads poetry to the truth. Like it, the modern muse will see things in a higher and broader light. It will realise that everything in creation is not humanly

⁸ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth: Delivered at the Surrey Institution* (London: John Warren, 1820), p. 36.

beautiful, that the ugly exists beside the beautiful, the unshapely beside the graceful, the grotesque on the reverse of the sublime, evil with good, darkness with light. It will ask itself if the narrow and relative sense of the artist should prevail over the infinite, absolute sense of the Creator; if it is for man to correct God.⁹

Hugo seems to be interested in a form of realism, a kind of Pre-Raphaelite ‘truth to nature’ which, as Ruskin said, sees the world and reproduces it ‘rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth’.¹⁰ This acceptance of the co-existence of the sublime and the grotesque in the natural world, and the duty of the artist to render it, complements Rossetti’s beliefs about the existence of a reflection of the divine in the natural world and in human beings. Indeed, the grotesque provides a framework which measures the distance between the idea of Christian perfection and the reality of fallen mankind. Hugo goes on to suggest that it is in its ability to depict such contrasting aspects of the world that poetry, like Christianity, can permit one to see clearly; in fact he suggests that this ability of poetry can itself change the world:

[P]oetry will take a great step [...] which, like the upheaval of an earthquake, will change the whole face of the intellectual world. It will set about doing as nature does, mingling its creations – but without confounding them – darkness and light, the grotesque and the sublime; in other words, the body and the soul, the beast and the

⁹ Victor Hugo, ‘The Preface to Cromwell’, in *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, XXXIX (New York: Collier, 1909-14), online edition published 26 April 2001 <<http://www.bartleby.com/39/41.html>> [accessed 18 November 2008] (para. 31).

¹⁰ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, II, Cook and Wedderburn IV, 624.

intellect; for the starting-point of religion is always the starting-point of poetry. All things are connected. (para. 31)

There can be no doubt that for Rossetti all things were connected through God, and that she endeavours to represent them as such. For the reader, however, the poems may produce a somewhat different, and distorted, view. To read the grotesque and the beautiful, or the normative, as two aspects of nature rather than as a binary opposition, provides a useful way into Rossetti's work, since for her these characteristics link directly to the body and soul.

Bagehot, writing in 1864, uses the grotesque more or less as a term of abuse for the poetry of Browning, and suggests that it is ugly, demanding, 'jagged', and the product, he seems to suggest, of a poet who desires to hide himself in obscure references:

Good elements hidden in horrid accompaniments are the special theme of grotesque art, and these medieval life and legends afford more copiously than could have been furnished before Christianity gave its new elements of good, or since modern civilization has removed some few at least of the old elements of destruction. A *buried* life like the spiritual medieval was Mr Browning's natural element.¹¹

Bagehot appears to see in the grotesque an aesthetics of ugliness which need not correspond to sublimity, or point to higher truths, though there may be 'good' elements contained within. Certainly Bagehot suggests that the grotesque is largely Christian, yet not 'pleasing' (p. 345), though he admits that it pleases the 'half-educated' public (p. 350). However, it is clear that for Bagehot as for G. K. Chesterton, Browning's grotesque relates to nature. As Harpham points out, 'By the end of the nineteenth century it was more common than not to speak of

¹¹ Walter Bagehot, *Literary Studies*, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1911), I, 344.

the 'naturalness' of the grotesque' (p. xix). Certainly for Ruskin, both 'naturalism' and the grotesque were aspects of Gothic. Paulson argues contrary to this, suggesting that by the early nineteenth century, 'the term grotesque carried both connotations of deviance from nature (the monstrous) and of a breakthrough to a higher art'.¹² To a certain extent, Bagehot's views clash with those of Ruskin, whose notions of the grotesque relate not only to the medieval but to the sublime, linked more closely to Hugo than to Bagehot in his preoccupation with realism in nature as giving access to the divine. As Thomas Mann was later to say:

The grotesque is the supratrue and the exceedingly real, not the arbitrary, false, antireal, and absurd. And an artist who would deny all obligation to life, who would carry disgust for the impression so far that he practically divests himself of all obligation to real forms of life, and who allows only the dictatorial emanations of some kind of absolute art demon to hold sway: such an artist may well be called the greatest of all radical fools.¹³

The grotesque is more than truth, Mann suggests; and it is certainly more than art. Clearly the grotesque exceeds the boundaries once placed upon it in antique art, but most importantly, Mann implies that use of the grotesque is an indication of an artist's commitment to truth. Not unlike Ruskin, Mann seems to be indicating that through the grotesque one might be able to view a portion of the writer's soul.

¹² Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution 1789-1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 171.

¹³ Thomas Mann, *Meditations of a Nonpolitical Man*, ed. and trans. by W. D. Morris (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983), p. 417.

It is Walter Scott, writing on the 1817 tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann, in 1827, who first suggests explicitly that the grotesque can be 'noble', representing a higher plane.¹⁴ With reference to Hoffmann, however, he objects to the lack of moral content, and suggests that a moral purpose in Hoffmann's work would produce a noble grotesque. In his review of the stories of Hoffmann, Scott defends 'the existence of the most extravagant fictions', including *Frankenstein* and *Gulliver's Travels*, since they permit the reader 'to extract from them philosophical reasoning and moral truth'.¹⁵ In this review, where he deals harshly with Hoffmann's flights of fancy for their lack of moral basis, Scott appears to be setting an agenda for literature, in which all events, symbols, plots and discussions should relate to the provision of a moral purpose which 'our mental faculties are too obscure to comprehend' without the aid of fiction (p. 270). Scott relates his discussion of the use of the grotesque specifically to British literature. Hoffmann, as a European, is less kindly dealt with, and Scott goes so far as to suggest that his mind is 'diseased' by the events which have occurred in his life, which caused him to resort to 'grosser means of diverting the paroxysm' than would a morally stronger man (p. 302). Hoffmann himself is not 'corrupt' but 'ill-regulated', with an 'undue tendency to the horrible and the distressing' (p. 306). Hoffmann's grotesques, therefore, are the product of a mind under wicked influences, and as such cannot be what Ruskin would term 'the noble grotesque'.

Like Ruskin, Scott sees no value in or even possibility of divorcing the creator from his work, and therefore the work itself has dubious value when measured by moral standards. Tellingly, Scott continues by comparing Hoffmann's grotesques to the arabesque mode:

¹⁴ It seems likely that Ruskin's conception of 'nobility' corresponds to that of Keble, who writes in his *Lectures* of 'the more austere qualities of purity, integrity, strenuousness, goodness' (1,71).

¹⁵ Walter Scott, *The Miscellaneous Prose Works of Sir Walter Scott*, 6 vols (Edinburgh: Black, 1878), VI, 292.

In fact, the grotesque in his compositions partly resembles the arabesque in painting, in which is introduced the most strange and complicated monsters, resembling centaurs, griffins, sphinxes, chimeras, rocs, and all other creatures of romantic imagination...while there is in reality nothing to satisfy the understanding or inform the judgement.(pp. 306-7)

The implication is that Hoffmann's lack of moral character causes his writing to produce an ornamental effect of superficial grotesquerie, which does not correspond to an underlying morality. Hoffmann's figures, such as the Sandman, are purely decorative, and serve no useful purpose. The grotesque without morality is simply ugly or bizarre, certainly pointless. It is the moral imagination which not only makes it meaningful, but also makes it effective in artistic terms.

Unlike Ruskin, Scott does not link the grotesque with the sublime, either as binaries or as related aspects of nature, stating instead that '[t]he grotesque, also, has a natural alliance with the horrible; for that which is out of nature can be with difficulty reconciled to the beautiful' (p. 324). Scott commends Hoffmann's observations of nature, but condemns the human weaknesses on display. Idealizing nature, perhaps, Scott implies that the grotesque is too divorced from the natural world to reflect it truly. This contrasts with Mann's views, as well as Ruskin's, and conflicts with Rossetti's presentation of the grotesque as a facet of nature.

The Ruskinian Grotesque

These views, with emphasis on the relation of aesthetics to morality, and the power of the imagination, are discussed by Ruskin in considerable detail. For the purposes of understanding the nineteenth-century grotesque, particularly in relation to Rossetti, it is most

helpful to consider Ruskin's discussions on the grotesque in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3) and *Modern Painters* (1844-60). The Ruskinian grotesque is particularly significant for the consideration of a Rossettian grotesque since Rossetti's poems, like Ruskin's criticism, consistently link the earthly and the divine, the deformed and the beautiful, and assume that the natural world provides an index of the spiritual world.

In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin's chapter on 'Grotesque Renaissance' sets out his views on the grotesque as a category, not just in architecture or even art, but as a more abstract concept which covers all areas of human endeavour, and reaches far beyond the aesthetic. According to Ruskin, the grotesque period of Venice succeeded its high Gothic Renaissance, and represents its fall from grace, which he links to the moral fall of its citizens. That fall was further reflected in the dilapidated state of the buildings he visited, and he presents Venice as a moral warning to Britain, with 'recognition that Venetian stones announced a larger message of human history; modern disregard for Venice's heritage was only a continuation of the greed and luxury that the Renaissance introduced and which destroyed its Gothic Eden'.¹⁶ The aesthetic alone is not enough for Ruskin's discussions of art and architecture, influenced by his reading of Hazlitt: the moral message is paramount, and gives force to his arguments. In examining his extensive discussions on the grotesque, I shall focus on what he considered to be successful, or 'noble', grotesque.

In 'Grotesque Renaissance', Ruskin suggests that the grotesque is 'composed of two elements, one ludicrous, the other fearful'.¹⁷ The grotesque may be produced with these two elements in the artist's mind, and may combine them to a greater or lesser degree. That Ruskin initially takes no account of the emotive effect of the grotesque upon the viewer,

¹⁶ John Dixon Hunt, *The Wider Sea: A Life of John Ruskin* (London: Orion, 1998), p. 196.

¹⁷ John Ruskin, 'Grotesque Renaissance', in *The Stones of Venice*, x, 135-95 (p. 151). Subsequent references will be noted as GR in the text.

incidentally, suggests that here as in other areas of his criticism, he leans towards the artist, rather than the viewer, as being of ultimate significance in the generation of meaning for any work of art, despite his role as critic. He continues to discuss these states of mind, whilst explicitly linking the ‘nobleness’ of humanity with nobility in art. Later in life, after *The Stones of Venice* was published, Ruskin was to change his views on this subject, perhaps in part due to his discovery of some of Turner’s vices, writing to Elizabeth Barrett Browning that ‘nobody can be a great painter who isn’t rather wicked – in a noble sort of way’.¹⁸ Even at this stage he qualifies his description of ‘wickedness’ to include nobility; possibly the ‘wickedness’ also relates to the need for play with which he was concerned in ‘Grotesque Renaissance’.

Looking at the idea of playfulness which leads to the ‘ludicrous’ side of the grotesque, Ruskin suggests that only a certain kind of healthy playfulness can produce healthy work; that playfulness which is resonant of laughter and recreation rather than ‘excitement of the energies’ (*GR*, p. 152).¹⁹ Play is sub-categorized as ‘men who play wisely; who play necessarily; who play inordinately; and who play not at all’ (*GR*, p. 152). The first two of these exist in those whom Ruskin terms ‘thinkers’ and ‘workers’ (*GR*, p. 154), who are best placed by pre-existing temperament to produce art. Indeed, in a Ruskinian utopia only these two types of people would exist. The third category, inordinate play, forms the conditions which led to the post-Renaissance ‘fall’ of Venice, and Ruskin avers that ‘[t]he greater

¹⁸ Cited in Dixon Hunt, p. 262.

¹⁹ The notion of the ludicrous as an aspect of the grotesque is noted by Lee Byron Jennings in *The Ludicrous Demon: Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post-Romantic Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963): ‘The familiar structure of existence is undermined and chaos seems imminent. This aspect is intensified when concrete manifestations of decay appear and a feeling of hopelessness and corruption is developed. The ludicrous aspect, in turn, arises from the farcical quality inherent in such scenes of absurdity and approaching chaos’ (p. 18).

portion of the misery of this world arises from the false opinions of men whose idleness has physically incapacitated them from forming true ones' (*GR*, pp. 154-5). Those who 'play not at all' receive little attention, being dismissed as 'morose' and 'dull' (*GR*, p. 155).

Ruskin's commentary on the significance of play has resonance for many of Rossetti's poems, particularly 'Goblin Market'. In this poem, the poet herself appears playful, creating figures of imagination in the goblins, and developing a visual world of ostensibly carefree nature. In its very excesses the poem seems playful, with catalogues of fruits, and light-hearted descriptions of the goblins.²⁰ This world is then invaded by moral danger, as what appeared harmless becomes a threat to play. A grotesque form of play is an intrinsic part of the structure of this poem. Aesthetically, this is a playful poem, however; it may be a moral tale, but its strength and appeal are formed by its surface effects, such as its uneven rhythm which breaks into passages with a regularity which becomes almost a chant: 'Crab-apples, dewberries, | Pine-apples, blackberries, | Apricots, strawberries' (ll. 12-14). The metre lurches between iambic and dactylic feet, from binary to ternary with many variations and substitutions in between; it is impossible to determine a single prevalent rhythm, just as the critic cannot pin down a final meaning.²¹ Furthermore, the poem is markedly packed with

²⁰ It is interesting to note here Mikhail Bakhtin's comment linking grotesque exaggeration and consumption: 'Such exaggeration is [...] most strongly expressed in picturing the body and food'. *Rabelais and his World*, trans. by H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 303.

²¹ There have been many attempts to produce a final, or at least possible, meaning for 'Goblin Market', particularly in essays which concentrate on a particular aspect of the poem, such as Elizabeth Campbell, 'Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Studies* 33.3 (1990), 393-410; T. Holt, '"Men Sell not Such in Any Town": Exchange in Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry* 28.1 (1990), 51-67; Morrill, '"Twilight is not Good for Maidens": Uncle Polidori and the Psychodynamics of Vampirism in "Goblin Market"'; and S. B. Shurbutt, 'Revisionist Mythmaking in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market": Eve's Apple and Other Questions Revised and Reconsidered', *Victorian Newsletter* 82 (1992), 40-4.

rhymes and pararhymes, with some cross-rhymed couplets among mono-rhymed and non-rhyming lines. It is a poem whose playfulness of style engages the reader's attention by its changefulness, and in its irregularity forms of itself a grotesque artefact.

'Necessary play', according to Ruskin, is that of the working man seeking relief from his daily labour. Satire rather than beauty in art should be the aim in this instance, he posits, but 'it is not in recreation that the conditions of perfection can be fulfilled' (*GR*, p. 157). Perfection, however, is not called for in the grotesque, as he proceeds to explain in a paragraph which draws together his strands of discussion on that playful element of the grotesque which leads to the 'ludicrous' or even humorous:

Now all the forms of art which result from the comparatively recreative exertion of minds more or less blunted or encumbered by other cares and toils, the art which we may call generally art of the wayside, as opposed to that which is the business of men's lives, is, in the best sense of the word, Grotesque. And it is noble or inferior, first, according to the tone of the minds which have produced it, and in proportion to their knowledge, wit, love of truth, and kindness; secondly, according to the degree of strength they have been able to give forth; but yet, however much we may find in it needing to be forgiven, always delightful so long as it is the work of good and ordinarily intelligent men. And its delightfulness ought mainly to consist *in those very imperfections* which mark it for work done in times of rest. (*GR*, pp. 157-8)

The grotesque is testament to man's frailty, though growing out of what is best in men's hearts. This passage seems to suggest that it develops at moments of relaxation rather than concentration. Since W. M. Rossetti stated that his sister barely worked at her poems, instead dashing them off in moments of inspiration, one might infer that her circumstances of writing

fit Ruskin's conditions perfectly. However, her brother's comments are not to be taken at face value, and, as a painstaking poet, Rossetti's effects of grotesquerie are often deliberate and considered. For Ruskin, the viewer of grotesque art is responding not so much to the physical characteristics of the work as to the spiritual dimension of the artist's mind, thus combining the significance of artist and critic in the production of meaning. This 'sympathy' between the artist and viewer suggests a much deeper significance to the grotesque than more recent writers on the subject tend to imply; it leads to the sublime, an understanding of minds on a spiritual rather than a physical plane, and related to the (wholesome) mind rather than the (deformed) body.²² In this respect, Rossetti's personal beliefs as well as her work appear to fit more closely with Ruskin's views. It is, of course, 'wise play' which produces the highest and most serious works of art. The jest in such work will be only a passing moment, yet:

'[w]e find them delighting in such inventions, and a species of grotesqueness thence arising in all their work, which is indeed one of its most valuable characteristics, but which is [...] intimately connected with the sublime or terrible form of the grotesque'.
(*GR*, p. 156)

The moral seriousness of the 'jest' is perhaps unfamiliar to the modern reader, but provides a helpful entrance into the poems of a writer such as Rossetti. Later, Freud understood the significance of play, and how it permits both writer and reader to access deeper 'truths' than one might assume. Indeed, Freud's comments on the work of Kuno Fischer suggest that 'the

²² Moreover, it is not just in linking or dividing the physical and the transcendent that the grotesque is significant. Bakhtin proposes that '[w]e find at the basis of grotesque imagery a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The confines between the body and the world and between separate bodies are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images', p. 31.

comic is concerned with the ugly in one of its manifestations', which is reminiscent of the grotesque.²³ Further on, Freud discusses the joke in relation to the world of dreams, where he posits that the joke provides a 'relief of psychical expenditure' not unlike that of dreams; further, the dream, like the joke, may provide the originator with a form of wish-fulfilment from which one can dissociate oneself (p. 211). This complex web of issues forming around the grotesque – dreams, comedy, the id – culminate in the possibility that the grotesque may also provide access to the sublime.

That the sublime can be linked with the grotesque goes some way to explain its value. In 'Grotesque Renaissance', Ruskin discusses the sublime and its relation to the grotesque, and suggests that to understand sublime truths, the human mind requires the grotesque; as we see 'through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians 13. 12), our vision of the sublime can only be dim. This dimly-perceived sublimity, combined with fear, produces a grotesquerie that, Ruskin posits, is seen often in the Bible, particularly in dreams such as those of Jacob, Joseph, Pharaoh, and Nebuchadnezzar. For example, he says that: 'Jacob's dream revealed to him the ministry of angels; but because this ministry could not be seen or understood by him in its fulness, it was narrowed to him into a ladder between heaven and earth, which was a grotesque' (*GR*, p. 181). This passage has particular implications for reading Rossetti's work in the light of the grotesque. Firstly, it implies that this grotesque was inspired by or even created by God, not unlike typological methodology, using symbols and oblique references for the benefit of flawed human understanding. Secondly, it proposes that the ladder itself was grotesque, not, presumably, in itself or its aesthetics, but in its representation of a higher truth. This is what Ruskin terms the 'symbolical grotesque'; the presence of an object which

²³ Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 40.

is perhaps unexpected or even absurd, but which represents a sublime truth in a symbolic manner.

The Rossettian Grotesque

Ruskin's explanation of the grotesque is especially helpful for examining one of Rossetti's more cryptic poems, 'My Dream', which, as she later commented in a MS note, was 'not a real dream'.²⁴ Critics have been uncertain whether this poem was written as a joke or an allegory, particularly given its unlikeness to her other works. 'My Dream' seems most obviously parallel with Pharaoh's first dream in the book of Genesis, which Joseph interprets. Here, seven well-fed cattle are devoured by seven lean kine, and Joseph offers an interpretation of the dream, which was sent by God. Pharaoh's dream is strangely inverted in 'My Dream': one crocodile eats many others; the fat crocodile eats the smaller ones rather than the reverse, and in the end the 'prudent crocodile' (l. 47) seems to repent, wringing his hands and shedding 'appropriate tears' (l. 48), that is, crocodile tears.²⁵ 'My Dream' seems to owe its provenance in part to De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (first published in *London Magazine* in 1821), which contains a passage in which the narrator recounts his 'dreams of Oriental imagery and mythological tortures', in which 'The cursed crocodile became to me the object of more horror than almost all the rest'.²⁶ De Quincey's

²⁴ WMR, p. 479.

²⁵ Rossetti's use of grotesque animal figures suggests the comment of Thomas Browne in *Religio Medici* (London: Nelson, 1940, facsimile edition of 1642): 'There are no Grotesques in Nature; not anything framed to fill up empty Cantons, and unnecessary spaces. In the most imperfect Creatures and such as were not presented in the Ark, but, having their Seeds and Principles in the womb of Nature, are everywhere, where the power of the Sun is, in these is the Wisdom of His hand discovered' (pp. 32-3).

²⁶ Thomas de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater and Other Writings*, ed. by Barry Milligan (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 82.

The English Mail Coach shows an even more grotesque figure, however: that of a coach man with a marked resemblance to a crocodile. The narrator comments on the horror this provokes in him:

This horror has always been secretly felt by man; it was felt even under pagan forms of religion, which offered a very feeble, and also a very limited gamut for giving expression to the human capacities of sublimity or of horror. We read it in the fearful composition of the sphinx. (p. 209)

De Quincey's description of this sublime horror is a vital description of the human response to the grotesque, in which an encounter with a true grotesque seems to be as much cathartic as horrifying in the accepted sense. Such a response seems appropriate to Rossetti's poem.

Rossetti's poem is linked by writers such as Marsh to Thomas Lovell Beddoes's grotesque poem 'Song by Isbrand' in his *Death's Jest Book* of 1850, which Marsh calls 'a Rossettian favourite'.²⁷ Like Beddoes's poem, which incorporates a variety of grotesque, hybrid animals, Rossetti's poem features 'young crocodiles' (l. 7), each 'girt with massive gold' (l. 13). One grows stronger, and devours the rest of them. The poem is framed as a dream, in the manner of *The Dream of the Rood* (eighth century) and *Piers Plowman* (fourteenth century), and thus set up, appears allegorical; reader expectations based on allegorical tradition are that a dream-sequence must contain a deeper meaning. Like Ruskin's discussion of the symbolic grotesque which appears in dream-form, it seems to have a deeper meaning not immediately apparent on the surface. However, Cora Kaplan argues that 'the dream-form...release[s] the poem from a conventionally moral conclusion', adding that 'The

²⁷ Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jan Marsh (London: Everyman, 1994), p. 432.

“dream” itself is overloaded with symbols – heathen, phallic and patriarchal – but they are as elusive as a gnomic folk tale’.²⁸

The concluding lines tantalisingly add, ‘What can it mean? you ask. I answer not | For meaning, but myself may echo, What?’ (ll. 49-50). Like ‘Winter: My Secret’, ‘My Dream’ seems to pose an unanswerable question, which critics have attempted to answer in a variety of ways, many by suggesting that it is not possible to answer it.²⁹ Simon Humphries, however, posits that the poem relates to the book of Revelation; that the setting, the Euphrates, recalls Babylon, and thus moral corruption, and, further, links it to the Crimean War and Rossetti’s own distress at these violent events.³⁰ This is a convincing argument, though as Humphries points out, ‘Rossetti’s application of the apocalyptic is always open, always tending towards generalization’ (p. 57). Like so many of Rossetti’s poems, it loosely fits many interpretations, and is closed to few.

In its details, the poem seems to be purely ornamental. The ‘kingly’ crocodile himself is an example of grotesque, arrayed in human adornments yet thoroughly animal:

But one there was who waxed beyond the rest,

²⁸ Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 34-5.

²⁹ For example, Chapman. Yet the very existence of a potential secret is significant; D. A. Miller suggests, in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), that ‘secrecy would seem to be a mode whose ultimate meaning lies in the subject’s insistence that he is radically inaccessible to the culture that would otherwise entirely determine him’ (p. 185). This implies Rossetti’s deliberate evasion of critical interpretation, yet in other poems, what might otherwise be a secret (for example, the paternity of an illegitimate child) is immediately laid open to the reader. Isobel Armstrong describes the poem as ‘flagrant coquetry’ in ‘Christina Rossetti – Diary of a Feminist Reading’, in *Victorian Women Poets*, ed. by Tess Cosslett (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman, 1996), pp. 158-74 (p. 164).

³⁰ Simon Humphries, ‘Christina Rossetti’s “My Dream” and Apocalypse’, *Notes and Queries* 55:1 (2008), 54-7 (p. 57).

Wore kinglier girdle and a kingly crown,
 Whilst crowns and orbs and sceptres starred his breast.
 All gleamed compact and green with scale on scale,
 But special burnishment adorned his mail
 And special terror weighed upon his frown; (ll. 15-20).

Certainly Ruskin's combination of the ludicrous and the fearful seem present here, yet the moral purpose which he emphasizes is apparently absent. This crocodile devours the lesser beasts, yet appears to escape judgment, and exhibits only a mockery of repentance. His very appearance is perhaps a sufficient moral; readers might recoil at the image of his consumption of the other crocodiles, with 'The luscious fat distilled upon his chin, | Exuded from his nostrils and his eyes' (ll. 29-30): perhaps the terrifying ugliness is a warning in itself of the perils of excessive greed.

Despite the obvious yet baffling parallels with the Book of Genesis, it is possible that this may be Rossetti's attempt at a poem which is purely fanciful, composed of an ornamental grotesque. It is a deliberate challenge, baffling and teasing the reader who seeks 'meaning' where none is intended. This early example of Rossettian grotesque may have no moral at all – apart from the suggestion that to look for the moral too hard may be a pointless exercise. If indeed she was influenced by Beddoes's poems, 'The Crocodile' and 'Song by Isbrand', she may also be imitating his ornate form of grotesque mischief, in which meaning seems lost to the overwhelming visual descriptions, and the poetry is none the less for it, causing Robert Browning to describe *Death's Jest Book* as 'fine as fine can be: the power of the man is immense and irresistible'.³¹ 'My Dream' seems part of a different milieu to Rossetti's other poems which manifest the grotesque; as with other of her earlier works which cannot easily

³¹ Robert Browning, 'To Thomas Forbes Kelsall', *Fortnightly Review* 18 (1872), 51-75 (p. 52).

be encompassed in a general survey of the trends of her poetry, it seems rather to be part of an experimental thread as the young poet began to explore the workings of her craft. Kaplan comments, reasonably, that the poem is ‘a joky lesson to critical head-hunters tracking either phalluses, patriarchs or oppressors’, though an intention to baffle critics suggests a calculation which is unlikely to have occurred to Rossetti (p. 110). What the poem does successfully achieve, however, is an open dialogue with the reader.

Ruskin’s chapter on ‘Grotesque Renaissance’ has thus far concentrated on the mental and spiritual state of the artist. Ruskin next discusses the more precise elements of what the grotesque might involve. With particular reference to landscape – though with a potentially wider application – Ruskin painstakingly distinguishes the picturesque from the grotesque. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) he described the picturesque as ‘parasitical sublimity’; that is, where the sublime is attached to the picturesque object but is not an intrinsic part of it.³² He suggests that the picturesque adds ‘to the pleasurableness of grotesque work’ whilst remaining a discrete element of it (*GR*, p. 160). The grotesque is produced ‘exclusively by the fancy of man’ (*GR*, p. 160), while the picturesque develops through the workings of nature. These two elements combined lend a grandeur and dignity to the work which depicts them.

The Ruskinian grotesque, one can infer, is a human-focused concept. Unlike other categories used for art, and the subjects of art, the grotesque is a depiction of human work, which only makes sense with the considered thought of its viewers. This might suggest that it is an unnecessary or self-seeking idea, and indeed Ruskin describes it as ‘an elaborate and luscious form of nonsense’ (*GR*, p. 162). *The Stones of Venice* considers its highest, most sublime configurations and usage, however, as well as its debased and ‘disgusting’ forms. Yet where the grotesque depicts debased humanity, Ruskin regards it as unacceptably corrupt

³² John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Cook and Wedderburn, VIII, 236.

and immoral. This is, of course, not the view of all writers on the grotesque; Russo, for example, sites the grotesque entirely in the human body, suggesting that while '[t]he classical body is transcendent, and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical and sleek', by contrast '[t]he grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing' (p. 8). Although Russo implies that her definition of grotesque fits a masculine construction of the female body, I suggest that these contrasts are exemplified in the 'classical body' of the unfallen sisters in 'Goblin Market', and the grossness of the 'grotesque body' of goblins. Ruskin's reluctance to permit that noble grotesque can feature the human form could be read as a biographical distaste, but also suggests his idealization of the human body – an idealization upon which Rossetti places limits, since the fallen sister in her poem becomes herself a grotesque.

Rossetti shows little of Ruskin's impatience with grotesque in human form; instead, she uses character as a clear indication of the grotesque, as much as physical appearance. In 'Brother Bruin', written in the 1880s, the anti-vivisectionist Rossetti reverses the accepted notion of the physical grotesque. Rossetti felt strongly about the morality of the treatment of animals; as she suggests in her unpublished poem 'To what purpose is this waste?':

The tiniest living thing
 That soars on feathered wing,
 Or crawls among the long grass out of sight,
 Has just as good a right
 To its appointed portion of delight
 As any King. (ll. 84-9)

‘Brother Bruin’, its title implying brotherhood between humanity and the animal world, is a child-like tale using emotive language to emphasize its point. In the poem Rossetti neatly reverses the expected norms of the grotesque to demonstrate a form of natural justice against the wrongdoer. The dancing bear of the title is the obvious grotesque, as the opening lines suggest: ‘A dancing Bear grotesque and funny | Earned for his master heaps of money’ (ll. 1-2). The bear, in fact, initially is hardly grotesque at all in its appearance or character; it is described as being ‘good-natured’, ‘fond of honey’ (l. 3), and it ‘danced contented anywhere’ (l. 12). As it grows older, however, and ‘scarce could prance’ (l. 16), the master becomes angry, goading it on with ‘hard blows’ which ‘battered his ears and poor old nose’ (ll. 19-20). It is this harsh treatment which causes the bear to become increasingly grotesque in his antics: ‘From bluff and gruff he waxed curmudgeon; | He danced indeed, but danced in dudgeon, | Capered in fury fast and faster’ (ll. 21-3). Eventually, the bear dies, and, angry at his loss, the master sells the bear’s skin. The bear, the poem suggests, may appear to be the grotesque of the poem; but the nature of the bear’s master has become morally deformed into that of a true grotesque. His treatment of the animal in his care marks him out as a morally deficient character. Eventually he is old and alone, with no friends and no money left, becoming increasingly physically grotesque himself in age, akin to Dickens’s Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (1843):

All doors stood shut against him, but
 The workhouse door which cannot shut.
 There he droned on – a grim old sinner
 Toothless and grumbling for his dinner,
 Unpitied quite, uncared for much (ll. 46-50).

Years of wickedness have caused him to die alone and penniless, himself a grotesque version of the animal he once maltreated. Rossetti seems to have intended a clear moral in this poem. Finally, his grotesqueness of character is manifested in his outward appearance as well as his behaviour. Physical appearance and grotesquerie are closely related in this poem; though the bear is figuratively speaking a grotesque, initially both his character and appearance are pleasant. As he is badly treated, this declines until he becomes fully grotesque. His master demonstrates a grotesque character, and as this develops it affects his physical appearance in a precisely-balanced shift of positions.

Rossetti appears to adhere to the nineteenth-century belief that character is manifested in physical appearances, though she complicates this in many instances, and it is not a straightforward association. Certainly readings of Victorian novels emphasize this belief: examples of Dickens's grotesques such as Fagin or Miss Havisham have similarly warped personalities, and in the work of the Tractarian novelist Charlotte Yonge this is particularly pronounced. One nineteenth-century writer describes the science of physiognomy thus:

[I]t may be defined as the art of decyphering the human face, and of reading in those living characters the inward faculties and emotions of the soul.... The discerning phsyionomist contemplates these with the eye of a philosopher, and the understanding of a moralist. He judges, from those parts which are visible, of certain others, not perceptible till called into action; and from the whole forms his estimate of the natural, or constitutional, character of the individual.³³

³³ Thomas Cooke, *A Practical and Familiar View of the Science of Physiognomy* (London: Camberwell, 1819), pp. 28-9.

For Rossetti's contemporary readers, versed in the ways of physiognomy and phrenology, the correlation between appearance and character would have been instantly noticed and understood, though Rossetti's poems frequently complicate this.³⁴

Further into the chapter on 'Grotesque Renaissance', Ruskin explicitly states the role of fearfulness in the grotesque:

Thus there is a Divine beauty, and a terribleness or sublimity coequal with it in rank, which are the subjects of the highest art; and there is an inferior or ornamental beauty, and an inferior terribleness coequal with it in rank, which are the subjects of grotesque art. And the state of mind in which the terrible form of the grotesque is developed, is that which in some irregular manner, dwells upon certain conditions of terribleness, into the complete depth of which it does not enter for the time. (*GR*, p. 165-6)

These states of mind, he explains, depend on the concentration of the mind of the creator: if they fully understand and appreciate the fear, which is ultimately always of sin and death, then their grotesque will be 'noble', and thus presumably allied to the sublime. If the mind 'plays with terror' (*GR*, p. 166), this mockery can only produce an ignoble grotesque. It is straightforward, according to Ruskin, to distinguish the noble from the ignoble grotesque, since the ignoble will be lacking 'Nature', 'Horror', and 'Mercy' (*GR*, p. 176). Fear is a necessary part of Christian existence, since its absence implies a lack of understanding of God and the horrors of sin and death. This sentiment accords with Rossetti's own beliefs, particularly manifested in her devotional poems which plead with God for mercy.

³⁴ The widespread impact of physiognomy, particularly among the educated urban middle classes in the nineteenth century, is examined in detail in Sharrona Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

Ruskin states that ‘the tendency to delight in fantastic and ludicrous, as well as in sublime, images, is a universal instinct of the Gothic imagination’ (*NG*, p. 239). However, in *Modern Painters* he expands upon this, dividing grotesques into categories. It becomes clear in *Modern Painters* that all art, and in particular that in the Gothic mode, has a moral element for Ruskin because it derives from the imagination, which is closely linked to the moral character and personality of the artist. It is the mind of the creator, rather than his hand, which creates; and it is the morality of the mind which assures the success, or otherwise, of the work of art. ‘The imagination is *always* right’, he claims, but in order to succeed as true art, it must be the ‘right’ imagination, imbued with an ideal morality.³⁵ Of his three proposed models of grotesque, the first implies indolence, the second an element of wickedness; the third, he posits, is the ‘true’ or ‘ideal’ grotesque. Rossetti’s grotesque, particularly in ‘Goblin Market’, appears to contain elements of each of Ruskin’s types. The second form, stemming from ‘contemplation of terrible things’, may seem unlikely in the case of Rossetti, yet the extent of her use of Gothic, as manifested in her later prose works on the apocalypse, for example, makes this a possible prospect. Ruskin’s comments on this second type suggest that the first type would become dull and moralizing in most cases, and that therefore the ‘taint of [...] evil’ is unintentionally introduced:

It hardly ever is free from some slight taint of the inclination to evil; still more rarely is it, when so free, natural to the mind; for the moment we begin to contemplate sinless beauty we are apt to get serious; and moral fairy tales, and such other innocent work, are hardly ever truly, that is to say, naturally, imaginative; but for the most part laborious inductions and compositions. The moment any real vitality enters them,

³⁵ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* v, Cook and Wedderburn VI, 145.

they are nearly sure to become satirical, or slightly gloomy, and so connect themselves with the evil-enjoying branch. (*GR*, p. 131-2)

Indeed, given Rossetti's close family connections with Ruskin, and her known enjoyment of, and interest in, his work, it seems highly likely she would have been aware of these comments prior to commencing her own 'moral fairy tale', 'Goblin Market'. His comment that such works are 'hardly ever...imaginative' is surely belied by her work, which combines the grotesque and the familiar in a distinctly Gothic blend, and which Ruskin himself commended.

In fact it is Ruskin's final category of grotesque which to him represents the 'noble' grotesque, the apotheosis of the form. In this 'confusion of the imagination', overwhelmed by the extent of spiritual truths, the grotesque as a mode of allegory comes into its own, and may serve to point humanity towards God. George Landow explicitly links Ruskin's symbolical grotesque to his Evangelical 'theories of allegory', in which man, in his fallen state, can only understand divine truths through allegorical means.³⁶ Landow cites Ruskin's comment in *Modern Painters* as evidence of this, since Ruskin unequivocally says: 'what revelations have been made by humanity inspired, or caught up to heaven, of things to the heavenly region belonging, have been either by unspeakable words, or else by their very nature incommunicable, except in types and shadows'.³⁷ For Rossetti these 'types and shadows' were part of a framework of Tractarian beliefs, in which Old Testament typology expanded to provide all earthly objects and events with a heavenly counterpart. This is discussed in Tract

³⁶ George Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin*, chapter 5.3, 'Typological symbolism in the readings of Ruskin's childhood' (2005), *The Victorian Web* <<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/atheories/5.3.html>> [accessed 29 December, 2008].

³⁷ John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* III, Cook and Wedderburn IV, 208.

80 of *Tracts for the Times*, 'On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge', in which Isaac Williams discusses the use of 'figurative expressions' as an intrinsic part of the use of reserve and typology.³⁸ There can be no doubt that Rossetti makes extensive use of typology in 'Goblin Market', but, in the case of the grotesques of the poem, this index linking the physical with the spiritual world is complicated by Rossetti's extensions to Ruskin's theories.

In his short story for children, 'The King of the Golden River' (1851), Ruskin utilizes his own theories of grotesque. In line with traditional fairytales, there are three brothers who differ in physical appearance as well as character traits. The 'ugly' brothers, Schwartz and Hans, are carefully described to present a vivid picture of ugliness: 'the two elder brothers, were very ugly men, with overhanging eyebrows and small, dull eyes which were always half shut, so that you couldn't see into *them*, and always fancied they saw very far into *you*'.³⁹ Hans and Schwartz are equally deformed in temperament: '[T]hey never went to mass, grumbled perpetually at paying tithes; and were, in a word, of so cruel and grinding a temper, as to receive from all those with whom they had any dealings, the nickname of the "Black Brothers"' (KGR, pp. 314-5).

Gluck, the youngest brother, provides a contrast: 'Gluck was as completely opposed, in both appearance and character, to his seniors as could possibly be imagined or desired. He was not above twelve years old, fair, blue-eyed, and kind in temper to every living thing' (KGR, p. 315). Gluck provides the normative contrast which sets up the conditions for the grotesque to operate. However, it is not enough that a character should be ugly in order to be grotesque, as Ruskin's criticism discusses. The combination of the internal and external grotesque, encompassing the playful and the fearful, and to a certain extent the human and

³⁸ Isaac Williams, 'Tract 80'.

³⁹ John Ruskin, *The King of the Golden River*, Cook and Wedderburn I, 305-48 (p. 314). Subsequent references will be noted as *KGR* in the text.

the animal, provides the element of grotesquerie. It is their ugliness of spirit as well as appearance which makes the wicked brothers into grotesques, as it does with Charles Perrault's Ugly Sisters.

Ruskin's model of the grotesque provides three key possibilities for this chapter. His discussion of the playfulness of the grotesque, with the implication that it need not be taken quite seriously, and the detailed discussions of the state of mind in which such works are successfully created, have implications for many of Rossetti's poems, particularly those which are often termed inscrutable, or those with a multiplicity of interpretations. Closely related to this, Ruskin's insistence on the moral implications of the grotesque, in the mind of its creator, and in its effect on the reader or viewer, alongside the concept of the moral jest, sheds light on Rossetti's poems.⁴⁰ His discussion throughout his work notes identifying features of the grotesque, many of which correlate with those identified by other critics, but notably adding some such as Horror, Nature, and Mercy in the noble grotesque. Finally, Ruskin links the grotesque to the sublime – or, rather, suggests that the grotesque can provide a way of accessing the sublime. Particularly taking Ruskin's (and Rossetti's) view of nature as a divinely-inspired book, which contains many natural grotesques, this route to the sublime is the most pertinent aspect of Ruskin's discourse. Ruskin's constructions of the grotesque lead to a primarily moral form of grotesque, in which the mind of the craftsman, artist, writer or stonemason, determines the potential effects of the grotesque. Moreover, the morality of the mind is manifested, usually unintentionally, in the work. The best grotesques give access to the sublime, and yet can present a straightforward moral, as in the cautionary tale of the 'fall' of Venice. For Rossetti's work this moral is especially applicable.

⁴⁰ In discussing *Sing-Song*, Hassett also refers to Rossetti's work as incorporating a form of 'serious play', which 'provides direct access to the pleasure of form, the source of the poet's "inward laughter," and demonstrates the range and mix of her tonalities' (p. 119).

A comparable moral stance towards the grotesque is demonstrated in many of Rossetti's early poems, such as 'The Dead City', written in 1847. This poem, which has been related to *Melmoth the Wanderer*, as well as to Dante's *Inferno*, details a visit to a city where the inhabitants have become statues, which are grotesque parodies of humans. The poem demonstrates the morality later indicated in 'Goblin Market', that moral decline leads to 'spiritual petrification'.⁴¹ Rossetti further explores this metaphor by illustrating a physical result of immorality. Marsh suggests that Rossetti's poem betrays the influence of Tennyson's poem 'The Sleeping Palace' in 'The Day-Dream', which takes a similar setting, but largely precludes the moral view which the young Rossetti emphasizes. An apposite comparison might also be made with Shelley's 'Ozymandias', a ruined and grotesque statue of a figure who was once great: 'Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown | And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command' (ll. 4-5). The moral is obvious, though ironic: "Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" (l. 11). Though Rossetti extends the tale, her moral is similar. Ruskin uses examples of Venetian architecture to make a similar point: the lowest grotesques to be found in Venice are those which are '*entirely destitute of every religious symbol, sculpture or inscription*' (GR, p. 146), and serve as a monument to human endeavour rather than to God, even in ecclesiastical architecture. Ruskin adds drily: 'Throughout the whole of Scripture history, nothing is more remarkable than the close connexion of punishment with the sin of vainglory [...] the forgetfulness of God, and the claim of honour by man, as belonging to himself, are visited at once...with the most tremendous punishment' (GR, pp. 146-7). While Venice still stands, though scarred, Ruskin suggests that its architecture remains as a warning to those who see it to avoid the 'insolent atheism' (GR p. 148) of the past.

⁴¹ Marsh, *Poems and Prose*, p. 441.

‘The Dead City’ opens with a carefree ramble through a forest, with lush descriptions of the natural world which catch the narrator’s eye, and which are related to the spiritual world: ‘Where the woods are ever vernal, | And the life and joy eternal | Without Death’s or Sorrow’s rest’ (ll. 38-40). From a seemingly deathless natural world, the narrator moves into a place where the trees are sparse, and the birds have vanished, and ‘the pale sun | Shone with a strange lurid sheen’ (ll. 64-65). Entering a ruined city, with remnants of its former beauty, she walks on noting the deserted place until encountering a palace, gilded and bejewelled. It is interesting to consider this city in the light of Ruskin’s Venice; he describes the Renaissance Venetians as immoral, occupied in the ‘unscrupulous pursuit of pleasure’, and posits that consequently their standards of architecture fell as did their virtues. Consequently their architecture became ‘the worst and basest ever built by the hands of men, being especially distinguished by a spirit of brutal mockery and insolent jest, which [...] can sometimes be hardly otherwise defined than as the perpetuation in stone of the ribaldries of drunkenness’ (*GR*, p. 135). Ruskin gives two examples of grotesque consequent to this: the noble and the ignoble. The noble is a fourteenth-century griffin; the ignoble a debased human face from Renaissance Venice. The implication seems to be that it is the debasing of humanity which spoils art. Similarly, Ruskin suggests that grotesque ornaments which represent grotesque humankind are the most unnecessary and unpleasant, comparable to ‘the most disgusting types of manhood and womanhood which can be found amid the dissipation of the modern drawingroom; yet without either veracity or humour, and dependent for whatever interest they possess, upon simple grossness of expression and absurdity of costume’ (*GR*, p. 162). Similarly, later in the same chapter he explains his reasons for this, stating that if one can ‘draw the human head perfectly’ (*GR*, p. 170), one has no right to ruin it by turning it into a grotesque. The human form is closely allied to nature, and thus to God, being in God’s image, and should not needlessly be malformed. In ‘The Dead City’, the

architecture is ornate, the objects bejewelled and glistening, a grotesque parody of beauty in themselves; ironically, the inhabitants become no more than a part of that stone city themselves, and less allied with nature and natural beauty than with the stones of the architecture.

Rossetti's extensive description of the man-made and natural beauties of the palace and its grounds pre-empts the disclosure of the moral purpose of the poem:

Then the breezes whispered me:
 Enter in, and look, and see
 How for luxury and pride
 A great multitude have died. (ll. 161-4)

Though the moral is clear, that indulgence turns life to death, what caused this petrification is never disclosed; one assumes it to be the judgment of God – or, perhaps, the beginning of a fairytale, as Tennyson's poem is. At a great banquet table, the revellers are seated, turned to stone. Their fate seems that of the suppliant in 'A Better Resurrection', who says 'I have no wit, no words, no tears; | My heart within me like a stone' (ll. 1-2), and whose life 'is like a frozen thing' (l. 13). Yet that speaker had hope through Christ; these statues have none, like the object of the poem 'Dead before Death', whose physical appearance reflects death as does his spiritual state, though he is still alive.

Though many of the figures in 'The Dead City' are portrayed as beautiful, in their form of petrified flesh they are grotesques, as Rossetti emphasizes:

Here a dead man sat to sup
 In his hand a drinking cup;

Wine cup of the heavy gold,
Human hand stony and cold. (ll. 241-4)

Rossetti describes the guests – children, lovers, mothers, the elderly – and suggests that their eyes are stonily staring. A moment later, the palace has vanished, and the narrator is returned to the wood where she began, and kneels to pray. It is an apparently straightforward moral tale, yet it demonstrates Rossetti's belief that the moral state will, in time, be reflected by the physical. These statues are grotesque in their very life-likeness; it is what they are, or represent, that is repulsive, rather than their bodies.

'Goblin Market' provides one of the most obvious examples of the Ruskinian grotesque in Rossetti's work, particularly in relation to the goblins themselves, yet the issues are more complicated than in other poems. The poem is framed to project the goblins as the centrepiece, not only in the title but with the opening lines, which concentrate on the goblins and their fruits up to line 31. In the next stanza, Lizzie and Laura's introduction into the poem provides a normative function, since they are recognisable as figures which permeate Victorian fiction, young girls anxious to avoid wrongdoing, and living in a familiar domestic space. They serve as a contrast to the exotic descriptions of fruit which precede them. The otherness of the goblins and their wares is emphasized by the sisters' words:

'We must not look at goblin men,
We must not buy their fruits:
Who knows upon what soil they fed
Their hungry thirsty roots?' (ll. 42-5)

Not only the fruits but the goblins themselves seem included in these lines, merging animal and vegetable forms, which suggests grotesque images without any physical description. Their exoticness is contrasted with the 'blushes' and 'golden head' of the girls, and presents a sharply-defined danger, setting up the goblins as a grotesque element in the poem. Rossetti's description of the goblins initially depicts them as half-animal, though not yet frightening:

One had a cat's face,
 One tramped at a rat's pace,
 One crawled like a snail,
 One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
 One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry. (ll. 71-6)

The true nature of the goblins is revealed when their desire to force their fruits on Lizzie is thwarted, and their appearance as well as their behaviour becomes threatening:

No longer wagging, purring,
 But visibly demurring,
 Grunting and snarling...
 Their tones waxed loud,
 Their looks were evil. (ll. 391-7)

This contrast is emphasized by the illustrations which have accompanied the poem, from Dante Gabriel Rossetti's to Arthur Rackham's. The girls are familiar fairy-tale figures, as are the goblins. They occupy an expected and traditional role, a facet of the Beauty and the Beast tale which sets virtuous young women against male evildoers. The goblins of 'Goblin

Market' and their function as seducers in the poem are superficially clear-cut: they are described as bestial, at first, yet with voices 'kind and full of loves', and the girls have no fear of them. When Lizzie refuses to eat the fruit, however, the domestic animals become savage; they attack her, and eventually they run away. Illustrations of the goblins bring out these different elements, with most showing the goblins as they attempt to lure the girls, rather than as the vicious creatures they are to become. Nevertheless these depictions of the goblins are grotesques, albeit more in the arabesque mode than the true grotesque – they seem powerless, and are considerably smaller than the sisters. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's illustrations play down the grotesquerie of the poem, instead producing a bland fairytale scene which normalizes the content of his sister's poem, portraying the goblins as small furry creatures rather than as a genuine threat to their safety.

For Rossetti, therefore, physical appearance is misleading, and to assume the grotesque status of the goblins as opposed to the normative and virtuous appearance of the sisters is to oversimplify the poem. Though much is made of the girls' appearance by illustrators, drawn from lines such as 'Laura stretched her gleaming neck', and 'Golden head by golden head', Rossetti provides relatively little physical description of the sisters, instead concentrating on heightening the grotesque appearance of the goblins. After Laura has sampled the goblin fruits, there is no more description of the goblins' appearance, but only of their behaviour. This suggests that no physical descriptions were needed, even in their worst excesses, since their behaviour towards the girls demonstrates what the reader needs to know.

The girls may have an expected natural beauty, but they have other attributes too, especially 'curious Laura'. Arguably there is a grotesquerie in the girls' behaviour which is not entirely divorced from physical appearance. While Lizzie restrains her feelings, demonstrating no curiosity but only fear of the goblins, which is in itself a surprising

behaviour, Laura's succumbing to temptation creates a grotesque figure of excess. In her curiosity, Laura is presented as a figure verging on the grotesquely beautiful:

Laura stretched 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. (ll. 81-6)

Here, she appears allied to the natural world as the goblins are; the images Rossetti uses are unexpected, and imply a kinship with the goblins. This is in stark contrast with Laura's appearance as she falls into a decline after tasting the goblin fruit. Maureen Duffy discusses the possibility that, having tasted forbidden fruits with the goblins, Laura afterwards exhibits what William Acton in 1857 described as the classic hallmarks of the habitual masturbator: 'The pale complexion, the emaciated form, the slouching gait, the clammy palm, the glassy or leaden eye, and the averted gaze, indicate the lunatic victim to this vice'.⁴² This description of the supposed grotesque outcome of a grotesque 'vice' corresponds with Laura's behaviour and appearance; she 'sat up in a passionate yearning, | And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept' (ll. 266-7). 'Her hair grew thin and grey' (l. 277), and she has 'sunken eyes and faded mouth' (l. 288). She is becoming a grotesque herself, after her experience with the goblins, yet her longing for the fruit still appears symbolic; it is not the fruit itself which destroys her, but her longing for it. Her changed nature is due to her succumbing to

⁴² Maureen Duffy, *The Erotic World of Faery* (St. Albans: Granada, 1972), p. 272.

temptation, not necessarily to the effects of the fruit. In her desire for the forbidden, Laura is a grotesque, a moral example, and yet not one beyond redemption.

This chapter seeks to suggest, then, that for Rossetti as for Ruskin, it is the morality of the grotesque which is its strongest characteristic; the appearance is secondary to moral character. The goblins, grotesque though they may be, are closely allied with nature, not only in the fruits they sell but also in their appearance, as animal-human hybrids. They appear only in the glen, devoid of any man-made setting, and their attributes are described in terms of the natural world. While nature may be a face of the divine, it can also be a source of temptation and evil. Rossetti may be suggesting that the forces of evil, of temptation, are simply an aspect of the post-lapsarian world. Moreover, one could extrapolate the moral that in the eyes of God, all humanity is grotesque in its changed post-lapsarian state.

Several of Rossetti's poems suggest that the grotesque surrounds us, yet she subverts expectations neatly in a poem such as 'The World'. Once again, there is an attempt at seduction with natural objects such as fruit and flowers, while beauty and ugliness are starkly contrasted.⁴³ It is 'the world' which attempts to seduce the righteous from their sight of heaven, seeming lovely by day but hideous by night:

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair:

But all night as the moon so changeth she;

Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy

And subtle serpents gliding in her hair.

⁴³ It is interesting to contrast this with an extract from William Morris's long poem, *The Earthly Paradise* (see Appendix 2). In this extract, Morris offers two perspectives of the earth: from God's point of view, telling the 'dwellers on the lovely earth' to 'take heed of how the daisies grow'; and from a human perspective, asking the 'brooder on the hills of heaven', reminding God of 'to what a heaven the earth might grow'. Morris's poem figures the earth, not as fallen, but as essentially good and beautiful, though doomed by mankind's own failures.

By day she woos me to the outer air,
 Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety:
 But through the night, a beast she grins at me,
 A very monster void of love and prayer.
 By day she stands a lie: by night she stands
 In all the naked horror of the truth
 With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands.
 Is this a friend indeed; that I should sell
 My soul to her, give her my life and youth,
 Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell? (ll. 1-14)

What seems real, beautiful, and wholesome to many people is here transformed into an object of disgust, where Ruskin's concept of grotesque fear certainly prevails over the playfulness. Rather than fear of death, it seems here that Rossetti depicts a fear of life.⁴⁴ This is complicated by the world's symbolic representation of sin: 'Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy', which leads to eternal death. To simplify Rossetti's theology, rejecting earthly life leads to eternal life; this poem personifies the world which leads one astray as beautiful, but deceitful in its beauty. Like a fairytale creature whose appearance is designed to mislead, the beauty of 'sweet flowers' hides 'a very monster' with wicked intentions.

It is clear that one of the reasons that the grotesque fits into Rossetti's work is because her poems maximize visual content in the way she liberally uses image and symbol in her poetry; her aesthetics thus lend themselves to the grotesque, which is essentially understood

⁴⁴ It is worth noting, however, that Harrison writes that the final tercet of the poem 'enables the speaker (and prospectively the reader) to escape the traditional dialectics – of beauty and horror, desire and destruction, seduction and damnation', *Christina Rossetti in Context*, p. 90.

as a visual category. Like Fuseli's 'The Nightmare', or the engravings of Dürer, 'The World' appears to be a poem of apparitions in dreams, yet the logical voice of the speaker in the final three lines shows the grim rationale of the poem. One might go so far as to argue that Ruskin's picturesque and grotesque are both represented in this poem as oppositional forces combined in one concept. The beauty of the natural world which Ruskin deems picturesque is present in the fruits and flowers, while the grotesque, horrifying creature which haunts the narrator is Sin, made by man at the Fall. The grotesquerie is not only in the appearance but in the very existence of the creature, a kind of Frankenstein's monster, created by the Fall of humankind. This creature, 'the world', is a caricature of grotesque, however. The beauty with which it is contrasted fades in comparison with the horror of its ugliness, which breathes moral corruption, and in its explicit moral this appears to be the least subtle of Rossetti's grotesques examined here.

Rossetti's grotesque, then, contains many of the elements which for Ruskin are required in order for a grotesque to be noble, as opposed to debased and ignoble. Her grotesque figures, with the possible exception of the crocodile, are grotesque for a reason, appearing designed to lead the reader to a moral conclusion. Though her poems incorporate the necessary elements of the humorous and the fearful, the balance of the two varies considerably, and the fearful overtakes the ludicrous as her work matures. There can be no doubt that Rossetti herself did have the serious understanding of the Christian fear of sin which Ruskin impresses upon his readers. However, many of her poems which do not seem to fit in with stereotypical notions of Rossetti as a devout and moralizing reader, for example, 'Goblin Market', and the ballads of 'fallen women', suggest that she also had a deep understanding of the 'wickedness' which Ruskin admired. Yet in the moral aspects discussed by Ruskin, and also Scott, Rossetti's work certainly manifests an ennobling grotesque which is tailored to her own religious and poetic ends. She maintains a sympathy between reader

and writer which is testament to the efficacy of Ruskin's commentary on architecture, requiring her readers to work to understand the moral, and to appreciate her restrained poetics.

However, it is of course not possible to map Ruskinian grotesque neatly onto Rossettian poetry. There are modes of grotesque – in landscape and architecture, a visual mode, which are Ruskin's preoccupation; and in poetry, as an element of the wider Gothic mode of literature. It appears that though both may concentrate on morality, and, especially in the poetry of Rossetti, an inclination to exaggerate her fears leads the frightening to become terrifying, and the threat to the virtue of her readers to be intensified. Ruskin's construction of the grotesque provides a framework in which it is helpful to situate Rossetti's work, yet she sometimes evades that framework. Her inclination towards the 'monstrous' discussed by Paulson is a step away from Ruskin's more restrained notion of the ideal or noble grotesque, particularly in such poems as 'The World'. The Rossettian approach to nature is more complicated than Ruskin's appears to be, seeing it both as the face of the divine, and a temptation to mankind. The corruption secreted in the most beautiful images of the world is sensed and feared by Rossetti, and this strengthens her approach to the grotesque, and to Gothic. The grotesques deployed by Rossetti appear throughout her work, including in *Sing-Song*, where they are designed to appeal to children; here, the illustrations heighten the grotesquerie, and once again offer a moral perspective for the child-reader.

Chapter Four: The Fractured Gothic of *Sing-Song*

This chapter will argue that there are strands of Gothic in *Sing-Song*, which are intricately worked into her innovative use of language to appeal to children, and which, furthermore, continue a strain in English literature for children which is almost unrecognisable to the modern reader. Though recent children's books (such as *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which advertises itself as a Gothic novel for children, and *Horrible Histories*, which plays upon children's presumed innate love of the gruesome) appear to follow this trend, they lack the crucial seriousness which earlier children's literature manifested.¹ Moreover, what appears to be a link to Gothic in children's literature is sometimes simply a sense of the macabre, or use of the supernatural, yet Rossetti's poems in *Sing-Song* demonstrate some unexpected use of Gothic tropes, such as the threshold, and the construction of the child as a hero/ine in a threatening world.

In 1851, an article published in *Household Words*, 'A Witch in the Nursery' by Richard Henry Horne, discussed, semi-ironically, the violence of nursery rhymes and tales, with particular reference to the well-known Halliwell's *Nursery Rhymes of England* (1842). Indeed, Halliwell's collection was criticized for a variety of reasons, including its nonsense language and the damage it might cause to children's developing language skills. Horne discusses the well-known nursery rhymes collected by Halliwell, pointing out with exaggerated horror the bloodthirstiness and immorality of many of the poems included. 'Little Jack Horner' encourages young readers to believe greediness will be rewarded, Horne claims, while 'Cock Robin' suggests even murder may go unpunished. Even children

¹ Daniel Handler, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, 13 in series (London: HarperCollins, 1999-2006), and Terry Deary, *Horrible Histories*, 23 in series (Witney: Scholastic, 1993-2009). More recently, this fascination has led to several series of books on vampires, which combine a moral element with the supernatural.

themselves do not go unscathed: 'Hush-a-by Baby' receives the commentary: 'Bravo! excellent fun – a smashed baby! – well done old Nursery Witch! In short, the grand staple commodity of the nursery songs and tales of England [...] is death, or the excitement of killing something'.² Of course, Horne's interest in the subject becomes clear towards the end of his article, where he writes of his own, more wholesome books for children; but the essay ends with a plea for reform in nursery reading, begging parents to reconsider their children's literary tastes, since children 'are fascinated by what they fear' (p. 194), and thus cannot make wise decisions themselves. However, children's literature in something approximating its modern form 'emerged as a genre largely in reaction to the popularity of the adult Gothic romance'.³ From *Jane Eyre* (1847) in particular, Gothic seeps into children's literature, such as Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* (1911). However, poetry for children is itself a relatively little-studied field, and Gothic in poetry even less so.⁴

Christina Rossetti's book of poems for children, *Sing-Song* (1872), has been critically neglected; and, when noticed, frequently dismissed. While some critics, such as Isobel Armstrong, have acknowledged the gap in criticism of Rossetti, others suggest reasons for it.⁵ Peter Hunt, for example, states:

² Richard H. Horne, 'A Witch in the Nursery', first published in *Household Words*, 78, 20 September 1851; reprinted in *A Peculiar Gift: Nineteenth Century Writings on Books for Children*, ed. by Lance Salway (Middlesex: Kestrel Books, 1976), pp. 173–94 (p. 179).

³ Karen Coats, Anna Jackson, Roderick McGillis, eds., *The Gothic in Children's Literature: Haunting the Borders* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 1.

⁴ Despite this, Mary V. Jackson comments that '[t]he real breakthrough in imaginative and humorous or adventurous books [for children] came in poetry rather than prose, perhaps because the latter had been so exclusively pre-empted in the service of Church and State' (*Engines of Instruction, Mischief and Magic: Children's Literature in England from its Beginnings to 1839* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 199).

⁵ Isobel Armstrong, *Diary of a Feminist Reading*, pp. 158–75.

Christina Rossetti's reputation in the history of children's literature is a curious one; [...] [It] is a collection of highly sentimental, not to say maudlin poems, [...] which may have struck the temper of the times – but it is hard now to imagine that it speaks to *any* childhood. The poems are largely from an adult point of view [...] and several pieces would no doubt have drawn tears from parents.⁶

Hunt's views are themselves curious; those scholars who have discussed *Sing-Song* generally take the view of Marsh, who suggests that the poems for children draw on Rossetti's own happy childhood by invoking a 'sense of utter security' and echoing the rhymes and word-games of her own family.⁷ Other critics have seen *Sing-Song* as emblematic of Rossetti's spinsterhood and longing for children of her own, which not only provides an excessively biographical approach but also dismisses her poetics in favour of emotion.⁸

Hassett, whose chapter 'Nonsense and Wisdom of *Sing-Song*' constitutes one of the fullest discussions of these nursery poems, asserts that there is 'very little scholarship on the light-hearted aspects of Rossetti's work'.⁹ Smulders suggests that '*Sing-Song* [...] occupies a position at the center of Rossetti's career' (p. 103). It is, however, not only for the reasons

⁶ Peter Hunt, ed., *Children's Literature: An Anthology 1801-1902* (Oxford: Blackwell 2001), p. 263.

⁷ Marsh, *Biography*, p. 1.

⁸ For example, Marya Zaturenska, *Christina Rossetti. A Portrait with Background* (New York: Macmillan, 1949); Thomas Burnett Swann, *Wonder and Whimsy: The Fantastic World of Christina Rossetti* (New Hampshire: Marshall Jones, 1960).

⁹ In Hassett, p. 118.

suggested by Hunt that the book has suffered what Rossetti herself called 'a chronic eclipse'; the nursery rhymes are not all as light-hearted as one might expect.¹⁰

The initial reception of the collection was favourable, despite Rossetti's views that the book was a failure. Christabel Coleridge, writing in the *Monthly Packet* in 1895, praises Rossetti's love of nature demonstrated in *Sing-Song* as comparable to that of Samuel Taylor Coleridge; Arthur Symonds, in *The London Quarterly Review* in 1887, describes the book as one which 'evades analysis' and contains 'a careful absence of emphasis' yet reflects 'a child's moods, a child's fancies and ideas'.¹¹ F. J. Harvey Darton goes so far as to suggest that in the nineteenth century, only Blake, Rossetti and Robert Louis Stevenson wrote poetry truly meant for and appreciated by children.¹² Most significantly, the work seemed to find favour in nurseries, a fact which is often overlooked. Hassett suggests that this is largely due to their appeal as 'wiser, less conventional and more engaging than the uninitiated reader might suppose, [repaying] critical scrutiny by making visible, or rather audible, the richly sustained playfulness of Rossetti's serious work' (p. 118).

Recent criticism of *Sing-Song* tends to concentrate on its moralizing tendencies and its occasionally gloomy subject matter, which have caused it to fall out of favour in nursery use since the 1930s. Until then, the poems were praised for their Blakean tone, demonstrating

¹⁰ Christina Rossetti to Lucy Madox Rossetti, quoted in Packer, p. 377. Despite Rossetti's concerns, the book became much more popular, and remained so for several decades (see Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti and Illustration: A Publishing History* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2002) for further discussion of this).

¹¹ Cited in Edna Kotin Charles, *Christina Rossetti: Critical Perspectives 1862-1982* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), pp. 46-7.

¹² F. J. Harvey Darton and Brian Alderson, *Children's Books in England: Five Centuries of Social Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 314-15.

‘her love and veneration for innocence’.¹³ It is true that Rossetti uses her poems to instil a kind of nursery wisdom into childhood reading, and an element of melancholy moralizing, such as the oft-quoted poem, ‘A baby’s cradle with no baby in it, | A baby’s grave where autumn leaves drop sere’ (ll. 1-2). Yet literature which inculcates civilizing behaviour has been common, indeed expected, in material for adult consumption from Aristotle onwards, and it is hardly surprising that literature for children might be expected to do the same. Indeed, the educative powers of literature for children have become a truism in the criticism of children’s literature. As one scholar of children’s literature, Mary Jackson, summarizes:

At every point in its early history, children’s literature was rooted in the conditions and imperatives of the adult world and was regarded first and foremost as a tool to shape the young to the needs of that world.¹⁴

Jackson later suggests that as writing for children developed and became more sophisticated, there was a ‘breakthrough’, in which ‘imaginative and humorous’ books for children began to appear, and, significantly, that this change occurred in poetry rather than in prose initially, but eventually spread to writers of prose (p. 197). Whilst there is no doubt that writing for children grew to be more considerate of children’s enjoyment of literature, Jackson’s division between instructive literature that cannot be enjoyable, and fantasy works that are not instructive, is not constructive here. It is often difficult for the modern critic to discern if the author’s aim was didactic in many of these works, and preferable instead to rely on the evidence of the text. Besides, the instructive and the entertaining can and perhaps should combine, though G. K. Chesterton, writing on *Alice in Wonderland* in 1932, pointed out that

¹³ Fredegond Shove, *Christina Rossetti: A Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931), p. 60.

¹⁴ Jackson, p. xi.

Alice had fallen into the hands of scholars, and consequently had become herself an instrument of education: 'She has not only been caught and made to do lessons; she has been forced to inflict lessons on others'.¹⁵ Yet by the 1850s, there was a considerable body of children's literature available intended to entertain as well as perform a didactic function.¹⁶ The poems in *Sing-Song*, and their use as nursery rhymes, thus provide a number of problems for the critic, the greatest of which is the intended audience of children rather than adults, and the changing tastes in children's literature. There seems to be a dominant assumption that what adults (and literary scholars) see as 'suitable' literature for children has changed, while the demands of children for their own reading matter has not; this seems an unstable premise on which to predicate a reading of *Sing-Song*, yet it is the basis on which it has been dismissed.

Morag Styles describes successful poetry for children as 'simplicity without stupidity'.¹⁷ In tracing this simplicity, she compares *Sing-Song* with the nursery lyrics of Jane Johnson, noting the gulf between 'one of the greatest poets of the Victorian period' and 'an obscure middle-class woman who produced stories and poems for her own children with no thought of publication'. These similarities raise, Styles suggests, 'some interesting questions about gender, literacy and childhood' (p. 142). Her conclusion is that poetry is one of the few

¹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, 'Lewis Carroll', in *On Lying in Bed and Other Essays*, ed. by Alberto Manguel (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2000), pp. 233-40 (p. 235).

¹⁶ However, Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher, in *Forbidden Journeys: Fairytales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992) suggest that childhood was seen as a secure period of life, and consequently the literature written for children by women, with its potentially subversive subtext, was not carefully scrutinized (p. 3).

¹⁷ Morag Styles, 'Of the Spontaneous Kind?: Women writing poetry for children – from Jane Johnson to Christina Rossetti', in *Opening the Nursery Door: Reading, Writing and Childhood 1600-1900*, ed. by Mary Hilton, Morag Styles and Victor Watson (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 142-58 (p. 147).

areas in which the bond of affection between mother and child can be publicly explored, as well as a tool to enable publication of poetry by women. Similarly, Touché relates *Sing-Song* to the sexual and maternal frustrations of spinsterhood. Writing of the poem 'My baby has a mottled fist', she suggests:

Already the beginning of the poem raises the question of the lyrical self. Who is the speaker that starts the poem with 'my baby'? Is this an imagined situation or Rossetti's own wishful thinking? This question cannot be answered with certainty. It has to be noted though, that the way the baby is described is of a special motherly tenderness.¹⁸

Though Touché writes of Rossetti's poems in *Sing-Song* as a kind of poetics of childhood, she foregrounds biographical conclusions and assumptions about maternal instincts, and thus declines to take the poems as texts in themselves, instead relating them to preconceived ideas of Victorian motherhood. While Styles stops short of suggesting that this book represents Rossetti's maternal longings, her study of the poets and poems appears to favour an emotional reading of motherhood rather than a consideration of the poetic value of the texts. Rossetti's biographer, Marsh, likewise comments, 'The true inspiration of her nursery rhymes was surely the children she herself would not now have'.¹⁹ The book was dedicated 'without permission to the baby who suggested them', which is assumed to be Charles Cayley's nephew Henry.²⁰ This chapter proposes, however, that Rossetti was a poet first and foremost, and her writing for children had less to do with the frustrations of spinsterhood and was

¹⁸ Touché, 'The Longing for Motherhood and the Concept of Infertility in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti'.

¹⁹ Marsh, *Biography*, p. 379.

²⁰ Christina Rossetti, *Sing-Song* (London: Macmillan, 1872; repr. 1907), p. vii.

instead related to her experiments with new forms and a language usage which appealed to children. This chapter will demonstrate that it is productive for the purposes of this argument to consider the figure of motherhood in the Gothic genre, and how this emblem is employed in *Sing-Song*.

Gothic and Poetry for Children

Rossetti's deeply-rooted Gothic in *Sing-Song* is not the bloodthirsty kind deplored by Horne; no murders or violence occur in her nursery rhymes, though there are some instances of death. Moreover, it eschews the Evangelical characteristic of the use of overt fear and terror to promote good behaviour in children, a feature of children's poetry from Jeremy Taylor's *The Golden Grove* (1655) to Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* (first published 1715, illus. edition 1840). The line which divides Rossetti's work from the poems and tales criticized by Horne is one of moral seriousness. Consistent moral lessons are apparent throughout *Sing-Song* – though in contrast to other critics, this chapter suggests that the morals are couched in terms likely to appeal to a child, certainly free of the more proselytizing aspects of Watts's *Divine Songs*, for example.²¹ While Watts's verses for children are perhaps more simply phrased than earlier works for children, his verse remains dense and complicated, using images of terror to instil a fear of sin, and presenting terrifying images to the reader. *The Golden Grove*, which Rossetti owned, is said by the author to be for the 'use of the Devout; especially of Younger Persons'. The poems include 'A Meditation of Death', a poem clearly designed to strike fear into the heart of any reader:

²¹ Dale Townshend, 'The Haunted Nursery: 1764-1830', in Coats et al, pp. 15-38, describes Watts's work as 'a form of hell and brimfire theology informed by a sense of the child's innate wickedness' (pp. 26-7). He posits that Watts offers 'an Augustinian conceptualization of childhood: the child as heir to the doctrine of Original Sin, or childhood as the utterly depraved receptacle to the transgressiveness of countless former generations' (p. 27).

Horrid Darkness, sad and sore,
 And an Eternal Night;
 Groans and Shrieks; and Thousand more
 In the want of glorious Light
 [...]

Every corner hath a Snake
 In the accursed Lake,
 Seas of Fire, Beds of Snow
 Are the best Delights below.²²

Such phrases as 'Every corner hath a Snake' seems likely to produce a fear of the dark in any child (and indeed adult), evoking the unnamed fears on which Gothic fiction often relies. The picture of hell is vivid and unsettling, yet this poem is accompanied by many others which inform the reader of how to avoid such torments, in poems such as 'The Sluggard', 'The All-Seeing God' and 'Obedience to Parents'. As a warning to children, it may be effective, since the lessons to be learned are unequivocal, but the words sound uncomfortably harsh.

To define *Sing-Song* as participating in a Gothic tradition is as problematic as to classify the book as purely children's literature, and to dismiss it on these grounds from serious studies of Rossetti's work. It has been suggested that '[t]he Gothic was soundly suppressed in children's literature in favour of morally uplifting texts that suited the desires of adults to construct an innocent child that could be trained up into a rational adult of

²² Jeremy Taylor, *The Golden Grove, or, a Manuall of Daily Prayers and Letanies* (London: printed by J. F. for R. Royston, 1655), p. 128.

Enlightened values'.²³ Therefore, this chapter will suggest that Rossetti reworks Gothic forms with which she is preoccupied in her other work, and uses them to produce a book of nursery rhymes which is consistent with the larger body of her own work but quite different from other poetry for children available at the time. The vestiges of Gothic are there, but this is the Rossettian Gothic in its most fractured form.

These traces of Gothic include the use of nature as a direction to the sublime, the contrasting of innocence and experience, and the juxtaposition of image and text to produce a dialogic poetics between mother and child. In addition to this, a central element of the book must be the maternal space in which the reading of nursery rhymes is presupposed to take place, and the relationship with the mother which is crucial to the Gothic mode. Additionally, as I shall suggest, Gothic is present at the edge of the poems, almost invisible, but not quite, and available to the child reader. As Townshend suggests of Anna Letitia Barbauld's literature for children, the terror is at the margins of the work.²⁴ Much of Rossetti's work seems designed to keep that terror in abeyance, but it is present nonetheless. As Sedgwick states, writing on primary learning and poetry, 'poetry exists on the frontier between the known world and the world of the imagination'.²⁵ The known world of the child may be small, but the potential for the horrors of the imagination are exponentially greater. *Sing-Song* does not increase these horrors in the manner of Gothic fiction for adults, but rather acknowledges the fears of childhood and manages them, presenting them in a form understandable by children.

Though Rossetti was familiar with such material as the works of Watts and Jeremy Taylor, and indeed is likely to have drawn upon them in some of her work for adults, *Sing-*

²³ Coats et al, p. 2.

²⁴ Townshend, p. 23.

²⁵ Fred Sedgwick, *Read My Mind: Young Children, Poetry and Learning* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 2.

Song is closer in tone and content to poetic predecessors such as Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1789) and Jane and Ann Taylor's *Rhymes for the Nursery* (1806), whose books appear in the Rossetti library sold after W. M. Rossetti's death.²⁶ This latter is the most significant precedent for Rossetti's nursery poems, and was reissued six years after the publication of *Sing-Song* with illustrations by Sir John Gilbert. Jane Taylor, more celebrated than her sister, was, like Rossetti, childless, yet wrote extensively for children. It has been said that she wrote intentionally in the style of Watts and Barbauld, being almost reverential towards them, but her work has a more childlike appeal.²⁷ *Rhymes for the Nursery* is, like *Sing-Song*, an illustrated book of nursery rhymes, intended for much the same age-group as Rossetti's though with fewer and inferior pictures. The subject matter is broadly similar: nature and animals, the life of the nursery, the world of the child. In some poems there is a close affinity with Rossetti's, in both content and tone.

The poems of the Taylors included in *Rhymes for the Nursery* broadly form two contrasting groups: those which are designed to have a childish appeal to their readership, both in language and in imagery, and those which are strictly moral in tone and have a clear message to impart to their young readers. In the first category are poems such as 'The Cow', which begins:

Thank you, pretty cow, that made

Pleasant milk to soak my bread

[...]

But the yellow cowslips eat

²⁶ For further information on books owned by the Rossettis, see Fredeman.

²⁷ Sylvia Bowerbank, 'Taylor, Jane (1783-1824)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/27039>> [accessed 17 April, 2009].

They perhaps will make it sweet.²⁸

In many ways similar in content is Rossetti's poem, which opens *Sing-Song*:

Brownie, Brownie, let down your milk
 White as swansdown and smooth as silk,
 Fresh as dew and pure as snow:
 For I know where the cowslips blow,
 And you shall have a cowslip wreath
 No sweeter scented than your breath. (ll. 1-6)

It does not seem too extreme to suggest that Rossetti's poem is a reworking of the Taylors', yet her emphasis, style and tone are different. Though 'The Cow' encourages children to understand the provenance of their breakfast milk, in Rossetti's version the poem is presented as a monologue to a present cow, by the milker, who will weave a wreath for it. Rossetti encourages engagement with nature, as a part of it rather than an onlooker. This potential activity on the part of the child is a persistent preoccupation in Rossetti's book, as the child is encouraged not only to observe, but to act. For example, in 'A motherless soft lambkin', the poem concludes: 'I'll run to him and comfort him, | I'll fetch him, that I will' (ll. 5-6).

Rossetti's child-reader is not confined to the nursery, and is constructed as an active force for social good, beyond mere obedience to maternal control.²⁹ By contrast, the constructed reader

²⁸ Ann and Jane Taylor, *Rhymes for the Nursery* (London: Routledge, 1878), p. 7.

²⁹ Not only is the child able to leave the nursery, but the external world, especially the natural world, is brought into the nursery in books such as *Sing-Song*.

of *Rhymes for the Nursery* is chided to be good, and subject to parental rules, in moral poems such as this:

And when you saw me pale and thin,
By grieving for my baby's sin,
I think you'd wish that you had been
A better baby. (p. 13)

The Taylors' rhymes present a distinctly domestic space, in which the child may engage with nature, with siblings and with parents, but as an onlooker, largely confined to the nursery and appearing to view the world through the nursery window. Moreover, the Taylors project adult concepts onto the child, as in the poem above, mapping the mother to the child, or by using tones of admonishment coming from the speaker of the poem.

A different point of view is suggested by Marina Warner in her book *No Go the Bogeyman*. Discussing lullabies, she says that their purpose is 'to settle infants to sleep, to banish the fear of the dark'.³⁰ In addition to this, they serve to calm the mother as well as the child, but most significantly, lullabies 'often situate the child – and those who care for it – in a perspective of life's risks; their thoughts surprisingly wander into zones of suspicion, aggression, violence and fear' (p. 196). This may be unexpected, but Warner ventures a convincing argument:

[L]ullabies obsessively spell out such dangers, attempting to encompass every possibility [...] Lullabies dip infants prophylactically in the imaginary future of

³⁰ Marina Warner, *No Go the Bogeyman: Scaring, Lulling and Making Mock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), p. 192.

ordeals and perils; nightmares are uttered in order to chase them from the impending dreamworld – a manoeuvre akin to a blessing in the form of a curse [...] such verses name those bogeys, and as in fairy tales like ‘Rumpelstiltskin’, naming can undo evil forces and banish them. (p. 201)

One can find several examples of such naming in *Sing-Song*: the ‘mournful linnets’ whose nest was destroyed by unkind children; the child on its mother’s shoulder as she trudges, homeless, through a storm; the dead lamb, and a plethora of dead children and parents. Although the defiant naming discussed by Warner may not be a conscious intention of any writer of rhymes for children, it seems possible that the principle of airing one’s fears is at play in their construction.

However, although *Sing-Song* can be read as consisting of the words of mothers who are enclosed (or even trapped) in the nursery with their child, this is not the case. Smulders, for example, posits that ‘the construct of the child ironically reconstructs the experience of Victorian wives and mothers’ (p. 103). While to a certain extent this is true, the child is not confined in Rossetti’s work as it appears to be in the Taylors’ book, though it is reasonable to say that ‘the inspirational baby functions as an ideological cipher that not only yields before feminine power in the nursery but reproduces feminine powerlessness outside the nursery’.³¹ As Smulders suggests, the mother-child relationship is essential in the structure of *Sing-Song*, which is reinforced at the opening of the book and at various points throughout it, as well as in the juxtaposition of image and text. Hughes’s first image in the book is of a mother and child seated under a tree, surrounded by animals and with cherubs looking down upon them.

³¹Smulders, *Christina Rossetti Revisited*, p. 104. Significantly, Auerbach and Knoepfelmacher posit that though the woman writer might conform outwardly to stereotypes, the writing of literature for children gave her the opportunity to be psychologically free and to enact freedom through the creation of child-characters (p. 9).

This sets the tone for the content of the book; it ‘guide[s] the reader’s reception of Rossetti’s nursery rhymes’.³²

The Gothic heroine is so frequently sequestered in a convent or prison in novels that a child to share one’s confinement could be read as a projection of the desires of the heroine. However, Rossetti’s child is not imprisoned in a nursery, but free to experience the outside world. Rossetti’s poems present possibilities to a child, secure in maternal devotion but able to encounter different lives and different worlds outside the nursery. Some poems are clearly situated within the nursery, such as: ‘Mother’s arms under you, | Her eyes above you’ (ll. 5-6). This supports Smulders’s comment that feminine powerlessness, encircled – or imprisoned – by patriarchy, is reproduced in the baby, whose body in the image which accompanies the text is virtually indistinguishable from that of the mother. Moreover, the body of the mother becomes itself not only an extension of the baby’s body, but itself an embodiment of the domestic space. This trope is evident in Sylvia Plath’s poem ‘By Candlelight’, in which the mother cradles the baby in darkness, while ‘The yellow knife | Grows tall’ and the baby appears, no longer an unseen presence but re-presented for the reader as a ‘Balled hedgehog’.³³ Plath’s Gothic has been discussed by critics including Botting and Christina Britzolakis, but here, as the speaker addresses the child, Gothic is present only on the margins.³⁴ These margins are more clearly defined in Plath’s poems which address children, perhaps in part because the poems address children as adults; there is little attempt to present ideas in the language of childhood. In ‘By Candlelight’, the Gothic

³² Kooistra, p. 102.

³³ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1981; repr. 1989), p. 236.

³⁴ For example, Fred Botting, *Gothic: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), p. 142, and Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

presence of darkness creeps outwards from the centre of light, framing the mother and child as a distinct unit warding off the encroaching night.

Similarly, some poems evoke a familiar nursery routine, simply described, though incorporating the natural world as a part of the nursery world:

Bread and milk for breakfast,
And woollen frocks to wear,
And a crumb for robin redbreast
On the cold days of the year. (ll. 1-4)

The accompanying image shows a child leaving crumbs for the birds and gazing rather gloomily out of the window, though later poems concentrate on movement and activity rather than this early passivity.

The domestic space in the poems is thus constructed as a secure area where a child will be safe and loved, though a number of poems, such as 'Bread and Milk for Breakfast' and 'If the moon came down from Heaven', depict, in conjunction with Hughes's illustrations, the child gazing out of the window. Certainly the poems taken as a whole, with their emphasis on nature and the outside world, encourage an outward-facing or extroverted approach. There is some emphasis on appreciating the comforts of home, however:

There's snow on the fields,
And cold in the cottage,
While I sit in the chimney nook
Supping hot pottage.

My clothes are soft and warm,
 Fold upon fold,
 But I'm so sorry for the poor
 Out in the cold. (ll. 1-8)

The child in the illustration is an Alice-like figure, eating by the fireside in a gloom which casts the room into shadow. The child is doubly-enclosed, in the cottage and in warm clothes, yet the poem encourages the reader to look beyond their own comfort, a notion reflected in the enjambment of the final lines, creating a lack of division between those inside and those outside.

To read this in terms of Gothic suggests that the poems permit the child to take on the role of hero or heroine, able to cross thresholds without giving way to fear, and explore the world and take on its mysteries and challenges. These challenges are central to *Sing-Song*. The fear of what lies beyond a threshold is crucial to the Gothic novel, where heroines are entombed in castles where to cross a threshold means to move from light to darkness, and to seek the unknown. Frequently, in the novels of Ann Radcliffe, for example, to cross a threshold means to enter a Gothic world, or to leave it.³⁵ For example, in *A Sicilian Romance*, Julia leaves the castle, thus facing unknown threats but ultimately evading patriarchal authority by doing so, and in the process finding her mother. In *Sing-Song*, Rossetti subverts

³⁵ This Gothic necessity of leaving a castle to find freedom is predicated in literary criticism on the understanding that the castle is a symbol of an oppressive patriarchal regime; as Richard Davenport-Hines explains in *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998): 'new gothic forts symbolised the assertion of patrician culture over the manners, habits and ambitions of the burgeoning middle class. The primacy of old families was [...] a matter of superior sentiments and taste. For many men, the symbolism of castles evoked more material forces. The style of a man's house sent eloquent messages to his dependents, his rivals and his monarch' (p. 69).

this norm, ensuring that to leave the nursery is not to cross a threshold into a Gothic and frightening space, but rather to enter the world prepared. In poems such as ‘Minnie and Mattie’, she encourages the reader with a tale of a day ‘Out in the country’ (l. 3), exploring the natural world. In other poems, the contrast of the domestic and natural world is explored. In ‘A Linnet in a gilded cage’, the first stanza sets up a conventional binary:

A linnet in a gilded cage, -
 A linnet on a bough,-
 In frosty winter one might doubt
 Which bird is luckier now. (ll. 1-4)

The image of the caged bird is common throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, frequently interpreted as the woman trapped within the domestic space. Here, the reader is encouraged to appreciate the warmth of the ‘cage’ during the cold weather, yet in the second stanza it becomes clear to what the poem directs:

But let the trees burst out in leaf,
 And nests be on the bough,
 Which linnet is the luckier bird,
 Oh who could doubt it now? (ll. 5-8)

The natural world, often described by Rossetti in her poems, is contrasted with the artificial ‘gilded cage’ and shown to be preferable, yet the stanzas suggest there is a place for both in the world, and that both are to be appreciated for their merits.

In Gothic the thresholds can be read as metaphors for the boundaries of the self, which is particularly pertinent when considering writing for children, who are learning about boundaries and their relation to the world around them. At this pre-linguistic stage in its development, the child is beginning to learn of its separateness from the mother, and to establish its individual identity. The thresholds to be crossed at this stage, then, are many, and *Sing-Song* appears structured to facilitate this movement between spaces. Not only does Rossetti allow her protagonists (and consequently her readers) to come out of the 'castle' of Gothic sequestration, but frequently they are located outside, in familiar countryside. Traditionally, the home, the domestic centre, is seen as women's space, but is constructed in Gothic as an enclosed 'other', where dark deeds may happen. Yet the child is not restrained or confined in a Gothic space in Rossetti's poems; the child at the centre of her book is not enclosed or restricted, but free to move between spaces, and indeed encouraged to do so. The threshold, when crossed, represents a crucial moment in the development of the Gothic heroine, as a step towards adulthood and away from parental authority. The child's boundaries are at first uncertain, inextricably linked with the mother, first physically and then mentally throughout the nursery years. Hassett suggests that the nursery rhymes 'acknowledge the distresses and trials of a child's existence' (p. 135), without trivializing them, but rather familiarizing them and couching these 'mortal shocks' of nursery life in language intended to reassure rather than frighten (p. 139). Many of Rossetti's poems not only encourage activity in the child which draws it away from mother and nursery but also teach the child how to make these steps without fear, a concept which is reinforced by the structure of the book as a whole, which interlaces poems set in the nursery with those in the outside world. This moving between spaces is reflected and reinforced in the images which accompany the text of the poems.

The Construction of the Romantic/Gothic Child

Rossetti's poems in *Sing-Song* frequently concentrate on the fears that a child – or indeed a Gothic heroine – might have, and attempt to remove the terror, as discussed earlier. For example, one aspect of Rossetti's poems in *Sing-Song* is the insistence on the beauty and sublime significance of nature. While this is true of not only much of Rossetti's work but also of poetry for children in general, it is particularly significant in conjunction with the mode of Gothic employed by Rossetti. The natural world offers relief from the man-made construction of manufactured threats and fears of the fallen world, which only God can destroy, *Sing-Song* suggests.³⁶ Moreover, the natural world in this theological view not only points to the sublime, or God, but also reminds the reader of the presumed innate innocence of the child, particularly in relation to the Romantic construction of the child developed by Wordsworth, in particular. Judith Plotz calls this 'the Romantic fixation'.

Paradoxical, like all heavily laden symbols, the Wordsworthian child ('A simple Child') is a compound figure signifying the compensatory simplicity of what the adult is not. The Wordsworthian child [...] is a [...] border figure moving lightly, unselfconsciously, and ahistorically between Nature and Spirit.³⁷

³⁶ Rossetti's poems in *Sing-Song* 'provide spiritual comfort by representing nature in accordance with the Tractarian principles of analogy and reserve. The ulterior or sacramental significance of "Brown and furry", for example, resides in the poet's use of nature to impart the mystery of the resurrection [...] In "Why did baby die?", on the other hand, nature supplies a tacit answer to the anguished question of infant mortality' (Smulders, *Christina Rossetti Revisited*, p. 109).

³⁷ Judith Plotz, *Romanticism and the Vocation of Childhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 45.

This idealization makes it clear that Wordsworth was not writing for children, but about them, for world-weary adults. Yet, as Plotz discusses, this is not an unproblematic construction, but one which takes into account the darker aspects of childhood, of which Wordsworth was himself aware. Moreover, Plotz cites Leigh Hunt's essay, 'Deaths of Little Children', to demonstrate that 'the transcendentalizing of a child as idol dehumanizes that child'.³⁸ Hunt suggests that the idolizing – or idealizing – of the state of childhood exists in part due to the uncertainty of the life of a child. If all children grew up to be adults, he states, 'Girls and boys would be future men and women, not present children'.³⁹ Instead, he suggests, in associating the idealized child with nature, it becomes itself connected to the sublime, more associated with God than with earth, detached from reality and a prop of the adult world of decay, leading to 'an aesthetically embalmed apartheid' between adult and child.⁴⁰ This is apparent in Mary Jacobus's comments on the children depicted by Wordsworth in 'We are Seven':

Adult and child reckon the facts of their existence in a different way, and inevitably they arrive at different answers. For one the living child runs about and the dead does not; for the other, the child beneath the ground is no less a brother or sister. The matter-of-factness of the child's response – 'I sit and sing to them' (line 144) – beautifully suggests the peaceful continuity which for her exists between life and death, in contrast to the adult's consciousness of division and finality.⁴¹

³⁸ Plotz, p. 46.

³⁹ Leigh Hunt, 'Deaths of Little Children', *Essays of Leigh Hunt*, ed. by Reginald Brimley Johnson (London: Dent, 1891), pp. 1-7.

⁴⁰ Plotz, p. 63.

⁴¹ Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads 1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 103.

Rossetti, whilst associating the child with nature, and undoubtedly building on the Romantic concepts of childhood, does not separate and idealize; rather, she provides a holistic approach to childhood which places an emphasis on the presence of the mother which Wordsworth did not, particularly in her 'baby' poems. In later poems, while the mother may not appear in the text, Hughes's illustrations include a mother-figure, appearing protectively behind the child's activities.

Ulrich Knoepfmacher suggests that in Wordsworth's *Prelude* and more markedly still in 'Tintern Abbey', the mother-figure is conflated with nature, who becomes literally 'Mother Nature'.⁴² This is clear in lines such as:

The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being. ('Tintern Abbey', ll. 109-111)

The role traditionally expected of the mother, that of providing moral guidance, as well as a spiritual and emotional home, is here assigned to the natural world. The sense of being nurtured by nature, pointing the child as well as the man towards the sublime, is a popular trope in Wordsworth's poetry, present in poems such as 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood', and 'Influence of Natural Objects, in calling forth and strengthening the imagination in boyhood and early youth', a poem usually collected with his juvenilia. This poem suggests that the 'Wisdom and spirit of the universe' (l. 1) teach

⁴² Ulrich C. Knoepfmacher, *Ventures into Childland: Victorians, Fairytales and Femininity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 13-4.

The passions that build up our human soul;
 Not with the mean and vulgar works of man, –
 But with high objects, with enduring things,
 With life and nature; purifying thus
 The elements of feelings and of thought. (ll. 7-11)

These lines are particularly suggestive of the impact nature should have, rather than necessarily has, upon the child; the final line quoted combines the two crucial elements of the ‘purifying’ effect of nature: feelings and thought. Moreover, in this idealized image of the child, it implies a creature of the most sensitive kind – that is, a Romantic child.

Knoepfmacher highlights the rationalism of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers for children, concentrating on good behaviour above all else, commenting on Charles Lamb’s ‘derision of writers such as Anna Barbauld and Sarah Trimmer as malignant censors of the child’s unreason’ (p. 19). A dynamic of male Romantic writers against female Utilitarian writers is set up by Knoepfmacher’s discussion. This, he posits, is in part due to the female writers’ resistance to the idealization of motherhood and children due to their proximity to these apparently hallowed states. Rossetti conflates these two inherited positions, adopting, if not the Romanticist view of childhood, at least the idealization of nature which accompanies it. For example, Rossetti writes in *Sing-Song*:

When a mounting skylark sings
 In the sunlit summer morn,
 I know that heaven is up on high,
 And on earth are fields of corn.

But when a nightingale sings
 In the moonlit summer even,
 I know not if earth is merely earth,
 Only that heaven is heaven. (ll. 1-8)

Rossetti here appears to take a Wordsworthian aesthetic approach in permitting the natural world to indicate the sublime. However, rather than describing scenery with lofty grandeur, as does Wordsworth, she takes a homely approach which is more likely to appeal to children, rooting her spiritual meaning in familiar sights and sounds.

This approach is not only an extrapolation of Romantic ideals. It is also particularly embedded in Tractarian thought, with its emphasis on the natural sublime as a motif emblematic of God's creation. Though Rossetti's approach to nature is by no means unproblematic, as is demonstrated by the seduction of Laura by the tainted fruit in 'Goblin Market', she broadly follows the comments of Keble in Tract 89, *On the Mysticism Attributed to the Fathers of the Church*, in which the relationship between the natural world and the spiritual is explained through 'a particular set of symbols and associations, which we have reason to believe has, more or less, the authority of the Great Creator Himself'.⁴³ The path from earthly to spiritual is laid out here as a typological explanation for human understanding. It is precisely this form of extrapolation of the spiritual from the apparently mundane which Rossetti employs in many of her poems, not only in *Sing-Song* but throughout her work. These 'familiar Tractarian evidences of God in Nature' form the fundament of Rossetti's beliefs, and in particular provide her with ample material for

⁴³ John Keble, 'Tract 89: On the Mysticism Attributed to the Fathers of the Church', *Tracts for the Times* <<http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts/tract89/section6.html>> [accessed 22 May 2009].

Christian teaching.⁴⁴ This is true also of the Tractarian writer Charlotte Mary Yonge, who wrote extensively for children.

For Rossetti, the natural world and the spiritual are thus connected specifically by mortality, suggested by a comment in *Time Flies*, where she links her understanding of death to an incident with a mouse's corpse which she had buried. All on earth is temporal, though part of God's creation. *Time Flies* contains many similar incidents, concerning spiders, birds and flowers, for example, in which it is not the sublime side of nature but its commonplaces which Rossetti employs to teach her young audience. In this particular passage she concludes that we must learn not to reflect too much on the physical side of death but to consider with joy its spiritual element. This is reflected in her treatment of death in *Sing-Song*, using the natural world to accustom children to otherwise difficult or uncomfortable concepts. Distant from Wordsworth's approach to the natural world, the child can learn sometimes painful truths from Rossetti's depiction of nature. Perhaps inspired by the event detailed in *Time Flies*, a poem about a dead thrush in *Sing-Song* familiarizes the concept of death for a child:

Dead in the cold, a song-singing thrush,
 Dead at the foot of a snowberry bush,-
 Weave him a coffin of rush,
 Dig him a grave where the soft mosses grow,
 Raise him a tombstone of snow. (ll. 1-5)

The dead bird might be read as a metaphor for the dead child which figures throughout the book, especially given the reverence with which the dead bird is treated. Like the early nursery rhyme 'Cock Robin', Rossetti's poem treats the bird's death with respect, according

⁴⁴ G. B. Tennyson, p. 151.

it a burial similar to that of the dead mouse. As a calm acceptance of the death of living creatures, it is a poem to accustom the child to the realities of the natural world.

Other poems take a different yet still didactic stance. One of the most well-known poems in *Sing-Song* begs the child to:

Hurt no living thing;
 Ladybird, nor butterfly,
 Nor moth with dusty wing,
 Nor cricket chirping cheerily,
 Nor grasshopper so light of leap,
 Nor dancing gnat, nor beetle fat,
 Nor harmless worms that creep. (ll. 1-7)

This simple poem appears little more than a list, but its range and descriptive powers are significant. Not only does Rossetti exercise a range of adjectives designed to appeal to children ('cheerily', 'dancing', 'fat'), she employs an alliterative mode which enables the apparently loosely-structured poem to remain in the minds of her readers. The list begins with insects familiar from other nursery rhymes, brightly-coloured and appealing creatures, yet moves to those of which children (and indeed adults) are often afraid. By associating the gnat, beetle and worm with the ladybird and cricket, Rossetti extends the range of insects of which, she implies, small children are the natural guardians. Marsh comments that Rossetti was always uncommonly fond of insects such as spiders, beetles and worms; here it becomes clear that rather than associating them with death and decay, she instead places them in the

spectrum of God's creation, to be loved along with the rest of the natural world.⁴⁵ Another poem suggests:

Plodding toad, plod here and be looked at,
 You the finger of scorn is crooked at;
 But though you're lumpish, you're harmless too;
 You won't hurt me, and I won't hurt you. (ll. 5-8)

The accompanying illustration shows two children looking at a toad, one holding out a hand towards it. The implication goes further than the need to treat animals kindly, carrying the implicit moral that the appearance may be deceptive, and kindness an imperative. Certainly Rossetti's lesson is kinder than that of Ann Taylor, who writes of a cat injured by cruel children in 'The Last Dying Speech and Confession of Poor Puss', which tells a heart-rending tale of a cat whose ears and tail were cut off, who was beaten, starved and had her kittens drowned.⁴⁶

Indeed, Rossetti's approach frequently places the child in kinship with small animals, particularly lambs, an idea replete with Biblical connotations as well as familiar from Blake's poems in *Songs of Innocence*:

I a child & thou a lamb,
 We are called by his name.

⁴⁵ In fact, Sullivan notes that in Rossetti's work, 'images of decay, destruction, and threat are often starkly juxtaposed with images of renewal, creation, and harmony', p. 1.

⁴⁶ Ann and Jane Taylor and Adelaide O'Keefe, *The Original Poems and Others*, ed. by E. V. Lucas (London: Wells, Gardner, Darton, no date), p. 125.

Little Lamb God bless thee,

Little Lamb God bless thee. (ll. 17-20)

Similarly, Rossetti's poems include 'A frisky lamb | And a frisky child | Playing their pranks | In a cowslip meadow' (ll. 1-4) and 'A motherless soft lambkin', in which the child cares for an orphaned lamb which seems akin to the 'motherless baby' of which she also writes.

Blake's poems are, however, much darker than Rossetti's; his constructed child of *Songs of Innocence* may be 'Infant Joy', full of innocence and peace, but the innocence is haunted by the experience to come. Though in 'Laughing Song' Blake invites the child to join the narrator: 'When the green woods laugh with the voice of joy | And the dimpling stream runs laughing by' (ll. 1-2), he later limits this, writing in 'Night': 'Farewell green fields and happy groves, | Where flocks have took delight' (ll. 9-10). The Chimney Sweeper and the 'flowers of London Town' are in the shadows of Blake's poems, for which the reader has no agency to help; while for Rossetti's reader the darker troubles of the world are more distant, and they are invited to alleviate suffering. The child is allowed to play an active role in a moral world in *Sing-Song*, visiting 'The dear old woman in the lane' who 'Is sick and sore with pains and aches,' and offering solace: 'We'll go to her this afternoon, | And take her tea and eggs and cakes' (ll. 1-4). The moral role of the child Rossetti introduces earlier in the book, of kindness to animals and respect for the natural world, is eventually transferred to the human world.

As previously discussed, *Sing-Song* examines the concept of death through the child-friendly medium of the cycles of nature. The death of animals, such as lambs and thrushes, features in the collection, but it has been suggested that it is the appearance of 'dead babies' that has caused *Sing-Song* to fall out of favour as a nursery book. It is possible, as Warner suggests, that Rossetti named the fears of the mother and child in her poems. The fear of the

death of a child is predominant, and features in several of the poems in *Sing-Song*. Some poems feature the death of a bird or animal, but there are several which present the reader with a direct truth, of the possibility of the death of a child.

Poems such as 'A baby's cradle with no baby in it' depict a waiting mother, remaining constant although the child has died. Nearly all of Rossetti's poems which contain child mortality suggest that the mother is unchanging:

Our little baby fell asleep
 And may not wake again,
 For days and days, and weeks and weeks;
 But then he'll wake again,
 And come with his own pretty look,
 And kiss Mamma again. (ll. 1-6)

The permanence of the mother's love is reassuring to the child, as is the insistence on other aspects of the child's death, such as the hope of resurrection, and the peaceful element of 'Baby lies so fast asleep', which would indicate a potentially familiar scenario to children who were likely to have siblings who died young, given that the rate of infant deaths throughout the nineteenth century was around 153 per thousand.⁴⁷

Portraying the death of the child, therefore, while perhaps seeming inappropriate to modern ears in the context of nursery poems, was commonplace at the time, and similar poems feature in the books of Ann and Jane Taylor. Yet the poems offered in *Sing-Song* attempt, not to explain, but to demystify, once again aligning it with nature:

⁴⁷ Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 11.

Why did baby die,
 Making Father sigh,
 Mother cry?

Flowers, that bloom to die,
 Make no reply
 Of 'why?'
 But bow and die. (ll. 1-8)

A feature of the poems in *Sing-Song* is a distinctive divide between subject matter and tone. Here, for example, a simple rhyme, with few words and no adjectives, is used to sum up death in childhood. The content may be verging on the macabre, but the poem itself is childlike; Rossetti treats her potentially Gothic subjects here with a lightness of touch which minimizes the fear which such motifs might engender. The dead infant is compared to a flower or a lamb throughout the book, yet Rossetti was aware of the macabre symbol of the child's corpse which appears in Gothic novels from Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* to Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*. In the latter, Isidora's illegitimate child by Melmoth dies whilst in prison, possibly by its mother's hand, and the description is grotesque. As the Inquisitors search for her child to take it away, she draws it from her embrace:

Isidora placed in their hands the corse of her infant daughter. Around the throat of the miserable infant, born amid agony, and nursed in a dungeon, there was a black mark [...] By some it was deemed as the sign impressed by the evil one at its birth – by others as the fearful effect of maternal despair. (p. 593)

In her poem 'Isidora', however, Rossetti depicts a more emotional moment, in which the doomed woman speaks to her daughter, who is now dead:

Little infant, his and mine,
 Would that I were as thou art;
 Nothing breaks that sleep of thine,
 And ah! nothing breaks thy heart;
 And thou knowest nought of strife,
 The heart's death for the soul's life. (ll. 37-42)

These darker moments of childhood from Gothic novels were familiar to Rossetti, yet it is clear that she consciously resists the macabre in the dead children of *Sing-Song*, even though it appears in other ways. The shadows of Gothic which hang heavily over 'Isidora' are all but absent in the tone of *Sing-Song*, even where the subject matter lends itself to a Gothic treatment.

Despite the poems on infant death included in *Sing-Song*, the death of the infant itself is not the only significant loss. The death of the mother, as Carolyn Dever suggests in *Death and the Mother*, opens up possibilities for the child.⁴⁸ This is certainly the case in the Gothic of Ann Radcliffe, for example, where the mother of the heroine is frequently dead or absent. Not only does this leave the child vulnerable to both threats and opportunities, as in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, but moreover where the mother is still alive (albeit unknown to the child) the finding of the mother can open up further possibilities. In *A Sicilian Romance*, Julia finds her mother hidden away by her father in underground tunnels. The mother, presumed

⁴⁸ Carolyn Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

dead, is paradoxically the 'ghost' who has been haunting the castle. The symbolism of the mother's whereabouts is striking; in their reunion one can detect both wish-fulfilment and the locating of the absent mother in the child's unconscious. For the child, therefore, while its own death may be unthinkable, the loss of the mother is hardly less so, at least in the early stages of development, and consequently the mother must haunt not only the castle, but also the text, as she does in *Sing-Song*.

While the infant cannot visualize or comprehend its own death, Melanie Klein shows in her work on 'Love, Guilt and Reparation' that the child's imaginative world constructs the death of its mother, and restores her recurrently. Since the infant, at first, cannot distinguish between itself and the other, when it becomes aware of its own dependency on another for food and comfort, a fantasy world is created in which it can take revenge when food is not immediately available:

The early phantasies which go along with the baby's feelings are of various kinds [...] Pleasant phantasies also accompany actual satisfaction; and destructive phantasies go along with frustration and the feelings of hatred which this arouses. [...] If the baby has, in his aggressive phantasies, injured his mother by biting and tearing her up, he may soon build up phantasies that he is putting the bits together again and repairing her.⁴⁹

This cycle of desire for the mother, followed by destruction and restoration, forms the basis for the adult emotions of love, guilt and reparation. In the child's dependence, however, the

⁴⁹ Melanie Klein, 'Love, Guilt, and Reparation', in *Love, Hate and Reparation*, by Melanie Klein and Joan Riviere (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1937; repr. 1953), pp. 57-119 (pp. 60-61).

death of the mother equals the death of the child; the infant imagination cannot conceive of life without the mother. As the child grows, this realization weakens, and it is at this point that Rossetti's poems, of the death of child or mother, offer comfort for the child.

A book intended for use in the nursery is likely to be framed to include the mother, as reader of the nursery rhymes to the child. This framework is clearly in place in *Sing-Song*, from the first illustration which shows a mother and child under an oak tree, watched by animals and cherubs. While the first poem shows 'Angels at the foot | And Angels at the head' (ll. 1-2), the place of the mother is already signified by the words 'My pretty babe in bed' (l. 4). The mother is not 'seen' in any of the poems, but as narrator she is always present, which is confirmed by the illustrations. The mother, in the poems and in the nursery, occupies a generic space which is designed to fit the role.

Motherhood has been theorized as a recurring approach to Gothic, notably by Ellen Moers. She suggests that though the term 'Gothic' is difficult to define, it 'has to do with fear' – not the far-reaching and cathartic fear of tragedy, but with provoking and allaying physiological terror, much as Ann Radcliffe discusses in her essay on Gothic (p. 90). In particular Moers construes Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* as 'a birth myth, and one that was locked in the novelist's imagination' (p. 92). She describes the 'revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences' which characterize the novel (p. 93). Moers reads this element of the novel biographically, considering Shelley's own maternity as linked to the powers of her imagination, which is both irrelevant and unhelpful in the case of Rossetti. She describes the notion of birth as 'a hideous thing' in *Frankenstein* closely linked with fear and death, as well as with the elements of guilt and love which are considered to be the normal elements of motherhood. The uncontrollable and destructive child-monster that Victor Frankenstein

creates implies both a projection of the fears of the mother, and of the unconscious of the child.

The work of psychoanalysts who have considered the child-mother relationship frequently focuses on the mutual desire and rejection which complicates this relationship; the mother 'is the referent toward whom all rhetorics and all desires tend'.⁵⁰ This is clearly relevant to Shelley's novel; *Sing-Song*, however, represses the fear of birth and the child in order to allay the dormant fears of the mother as well as the child, not unlike fairytales and lullabies where situations are enacted symbolically as a form of exorcism of fear. Moreover, the poems in *Sing-Song*, and others in the same tradition by women writers, provide the mother with the opportunity to facilitate the role of 'good-enough mother' outlined by D. W. Winnicott in his book *Playing and Reality*. Winnicott suggests that the adaptable, or 'good-enough' mother, at first permits the new-born infant the illusion that she is herself a part of the infant, but in time the mother's task becomes disillusionment, of causing the child to identify the *me* and *not-me* and to begin the task of 'reality-acceptance' (which Winnicott suggests is never fully completed even in well-adjusted adults). This disillusionment 'continues as one of the tasks of parents and educators'.⁵¹ The poems in *Sing-Song* take on a new resonance when examined from this angle: the educative poems, from the pragmatic about 'How many seconds in a minute?' to the more philosophical, such as 'What is heavy? sea-sand and sorrow', form a continuing part of the very young child's disillusionment, as the magical aspects of the world are replaced with the pragmatic.

While the second poem in the text demonstrates the protective power of maternal love, both asking the infant for its love, with the words 'Love me, my baby' (l. 2), and providing a space of security in the mother's arms: 'Mother's arms under you, | Her eyes

⁵⁰ Dever, p. 40.

⁵¹ Winnicott, p. 13.

above you' (ll. 5-6), the next poem begins to move towards the possibility of the absent mother:

My baby has a father and a mother,
 Rich little baby!
 Fatherless, motherless, I know another
 Forlorn as may be:
 Poor little baby! (ll. 1-5)

Death in *Sing-Song* does not thus only happen to children and animals; it can also deprive the child of its mother. This poem offers a sense of security for the child with its present mother, but simultaneously raises awareness of the possibility of the mother's absence. Though there are more poems in the text which consider the death of a child, it becomes clear that, from the 'motherless soft lambkin' to the 'motherless baby', the poems are teaching that life is finite. The effect of this is mitigated through a protective God:

Motherless children –
 Cared for from their birth
 By tender angels. (ll. 3-5)

and also by social common-sense:

Motherless baby and babyless mother
 Bring them together to love one another. (ll. 1-2)

The fact of death is considered more generally in other poems, so that the child would develop an awareness of the impermanence of life. Yet the fear has been raised, and Rossetti conscientiously endeavours to soften the blow with poems such as these.

While in many of the poems the mother is present only by presumption – that she is speaking the poems of love and play to the child – there are others in which she is either absent or irrelevant, where the child's adventures take place without her. The position of the mother, and particularly the absent mother, is a complex and often ambiguous one in nineteenth-century literature. Despite the Victorian idealization of the role of motherhood, mothers are, as Dever points out, often more productive in their absence than in their presence:

It is paradoxical that the predominant generic template of the nineteenth century British novel blatantly undermines these ideologies of the family it is commonly thought to uphold [...] the narrative will pursue the story of a child or adolescent protagonist who, motherless, is left to decode the mysteries of the world [...] alone.⁵²

This absence of the mother in permitting the infant to begin to establish independence is crucial for the development of the child, according to Melanie Klein. Although Rossetti demonstrates in her personal life a great respect for the figure of the mother, and although her depiction of the mother in *Sing-Song* is largely traditional and loving, paradoxically these poems explore the possibilities offered by freedom from the maternal influence. Poems such as 'Minnie and Mattie' see three children exploring the countryside, discovering flowers and

⁵² Dever, pp. 1-2.

animals by themselves.⁵³ The mother-figure does feature in the poem, though only in the animal world:

Cluck! Cluck! the mother hen
 Summons her chickens
 To peck the dainty bits
 Found in her pickings. (ll. 17-20)

This example of motherhood appears to serve more as a reminder of the absence of their own mother, perhaps with a note of guilt at the children's enjoyment of freedom from her presence. Indeed this could be read as a call to return to the home, which Minnie and Mattie ignore. The poem encourages this exploring, suggesting that they 'Don't wait for roses | Losing today' (ll. 29-30), but rather free themselves from the nursery to enjoy the wider world instead.

Moreover, the 'advice' in the book which endeavours to instil virtue suggests an inculcation of values in the nursery which would make it more likely that an orphaned child would be able to negotiate the world successfully in the permanent absence of parental guidance. Certainly the death of the mother while the child was young was not unlikely, since 'in the second half of the nineteenth century maternal deaths in childbirth averaged between four and five for every thousand births'.⁵⁴ Even a temporary absence has a strong effect on the very young infant, however. Dever uses Freud's 'fort-da' theory, 'in which the boy

⁵³ As Samuel Pickering argues in *Moral Instruction and Fiction for Children 1749-1820* (Athens, OH: University of Georgia Press, 1993), '[t]o counteract the tendency of education to produce narrow, calculating children, some children's books celebrated high spirits' (p. 155). This was particularly true of stories for boys, but is equally applicable to Rossetti's poems.

⁵⁴ Wohl, p. 13.

constructs his mother's symbolic departure and return', to demonstrate how the child must renounce the mother in order to overcome feelings of abandonment or betrayal.⁵⁵ The child must build up the ability to stand alone and begin to see for itself, a development which is reflected progressively in the text of *Sing-Song*. The poems appear to move through cycles, covering death, nature and aspects of childhood such as sibling relationships, yet they return constantly to the comforting poems of maternal reassurance which underpin the text as a whole. Dever argues that 'A culture's superego, the mother's influence, is ideally strong even – or especially – in her absence. A culture's ghost, the mother lurks unseen but powerfully heard in the recesses of the Victorian conscience' (p. 9). The mother's presence is not explicit throughout the intensively child-focused text of *Sing-Song*, but is therefore no less significant in the text for her absence from it. *Sing-Song* appears both to substantiate and to undermine this ideology. The text itself stands in for the mother-figure, for although there is some mention of physical affection in the poems, even this is necessarily reduced to words on the page which fulfil the functions of a purely textual or hypothetical maternity. The reading of the poems in a nursery by a mother can thus be read as a fulfilment of the cipher, but it is not a pre-requisite; the poems themselves do not demand maternal input. The figure of the mother stands on the margins, in the shadows; she is implicit throughout the book, both in the text and as the conduit by which the child hears the poems read.

Moreover, Klein suggests that the desire to explore, be it foreign countries, nature, or creatively, is inspired by the infant's desire to know, to discover and to possess the body of its mother. In 'Love, Guilt and Reparation' she discusses Keats's sonnet 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' as an indication of this unconscious desire for exploration in connection with the body of the mother. Klein explains that:

⁵⁵ Dever, p. 3.

In Keats's perfect poem the world stands for art, and it is clear that to him scientific and artistic enjoyment and exploration are derived from the same source. [...] The exploration of the unconscious mind [...] shows that [...] the beautiful lands stand for the loved mother, and the longing with which these lands are approached is derived from our longings for her. (p. 106)

This theory of the desire to recreate the maternal body is extensively applicable to artistic creativity, as Klein and Winnicott, among others, have demonstrated. The poems in *Sing-Song* explore the world from the child's perspective, covering areas which might seem mundane to the adult but are still mysteries to be explored by the child, such as numbers, time and nature. Spirituality, love and death also feature in many of the poems, and, as already discussed, the child-reader of (or listener to) the poems in the book is encouraged to cross thresholds, to explore and develop their acquaintance with the world, and moreover to establish an identity separate from that of the mother.

For the more sophisticated child, who has learned the rules of nature, Rossetti's poems also include several nonsense rhymes, which provide a very different form of exploration: that of the imagination. Some of these poems provide an opportunity for the child to learn why these poems are in fact nonsense, such as:

When fishes set umbrellas up
 If the rain-drops run,
 Lizards will want their parasols
 To shade them from the sun. (ll. 1-4)

Critics such as Hassett have commented on the ‘proximity of logical syntax and surreally disconnected images’ in such poems, yet find a logic which the child will relate to:

[O]ne has the impression of discerning or making some kind of sense about the social conditioning of desire: if some have the resources they want when they want them (umbrellas), others will want comparable benefits (parasols). (p. 143)

Other poems are clearly intended to stimulate the imagination, exploring, for example, their own wishes and desires alongside the flowers in the garden:

I am a King,
Or an Emperor rather,
I wear crown-imperial
And prince’s-feather; (ll. 1-4)

The poem goes on to assign roles of councillors and court to other plants in the garden, and the child’s view of himself at the centre of his universe is established, but within the safe domestic bounds of the garden. The exploration of the internal and external world is taking place away from mother and nursery, yet still within her sight; the separation of child from mother has begun, but is controlled.

Such poems may delight and inform, yet others display a barely-repressed fear which is characteristic of many of the poems in *Sing-Song*:

If hope grew on a bush,
And joy grew on a tree,

What a nosegay for plucking

There would be!

But oh! in windy autumn,

When frail flowers wither,

What should we do for hope and joy,

Fading together? (ll. 1-8)

It is possible to trace this linking of pleasure (particularly in the natural world) and dormant fear of the loss of 'hope and joy' throughout Rossetti's work, but in *Sing-Song* it has the quality of a talisman, asking the questions rhetorically, perhaps in the hope that they need never be answered. The 'logical syntax' of this poem suggests that, since hope and joy are not seasonal and do not grow on trees, the child need never fear the joyless and hopeless winter. Yet the question *is* asked, and the fear is not completely allayed. *Sing-Song* remains outside the conventional bounds of Gothic writing, both in its intended audience of children and its genre as poetry, but in its treatment of fears and opportunities for the child-reader the Gothic is perceptible. Moreover, there are aspects of the nursery rhymes, particularly the reflection of the sublime in the natural world and the encouragement to the reader to cross thresholds and enter different worlds, which anticipate Rossetti's later prose works.

Chapter Five: Shadows of Heaven: Rossetti's Prose Works

'There is one dangerous science for women — one which they must indeed beware how they profanely touch — that of theology'.¹

Late in her life, having already established herself as a poet, Rossetti produced six volumes of devotional prose, which combined biblical exegesis with poetry and excerpts from scripture. *Annus Domini: A Prayer for each day of the year, founded on Holy Scripture* (1874), *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Meditations on the Benedicite* (1879), *Called to be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied* (1881), *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (1883), *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885) and *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1892) must be Rossetti's least-studied works today, despite their publication in facsimile in 2003. Yet as Maria Keaton points out: 'Recovering Rossetti's religious prose allows the reader of her poetry to understand some of the foundations of her poetic experience, because these prose texts are largely devoted to correlating her spiritual and philosophical ideas with her aesthetics'.² Keaton's comment relates to Rossetti's tendency to demonstrate spiritual truths by reference to the natural world, and to her deep absorption in biblical texts. This chapter will suggest that it is in her faith that the roots of Rossetti's Gothic lie, and that these Gothic threads can be traced in her prose works. For this purpose, the most significant volumes are *Letter and Spirit* and, particularly, *The Face of the Deep*, which will be discussed in detail in this chapter. These two texts

¹ John Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens', in *Sesame and Lilies*, Cook and Wedderburn, xviii, 5-187 (p. 127).

² Christina Rossetti, *Called to be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied*, ed. by Maria Keaton (London: SPCK, 1881; repr. Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2003), p. vi. Subsequent references will be noted as CS in the text.

demonstrate the way in which Gothic interacts with the Christian faith in Rossetti's works, particularly with reference to some of the topics that have been discussed in previous chapters. It is through these later devotional works that the root of Rossettian Gothic becomes apparent.

This chapter will therefore examine Rossetti's prose works in the light of the aspects of Gothic covered in earlier chapters, particularly with reference to her depiction of women and the use of thresholds and boundaries to denote the crossing or transgressing of a barrier, be that literal, as is often the case in Gothic novels, or social or spiritual. For example, particularly in this latter instance, I suggest that it becomes clear on reading *The Face of the Deep* that Rossetti locates the often rather vague and generalized Gothic trope of the threshold specifically in the Book of Revelation, where the final crossing of the barrier between earth and heaven is achieved. As this chapter will discuss, this crossing of thresholds is further reflected in the reading experience offered by Rossetti's texts. Throughout the prose, moreover, her aesthetics, from the grand sweep of the mountains to the tiny decomposing body of a mouse, appear to refer to the Gothic genre, when in fact they relate most closely to biblical sources. From this, it is possible to infer the extent to which Gothic may derive from the Bible, especially the Book of Revelation.

Although the prose works tend to be considered as a homogenous group, in fact they are remarkably different in many ways, though a range of similarities emerges. Rossetti's departure from writing mostly poetry to producing such extended works of theology was in many ways due to the strengths of her faith, but also to her desire to write in prose, and experiment in different genres. *Called to be Saints*, for example, examines saints of the Christian year, offering biographical detail, scriptural reference, a relevant prayer and a commentary on a living creature, semi-precious stone and a plant associated with each of the twenty-one saints. Tractarianism revived Anglican interest in the lives of the saints, such as

those by Tractarian writer J. M. Neale, whose book *Annals of Virgin Saints* (1846) Rossetti is known to have read, and, later, Sabine Baring Gould's sixteen-volume *The Lives of the Saints* (published 1914). Neale's work in particular considers the devotional benefits for his readers of an understanding of hagiography. In our falls, he implies, we are comforted by the saints. Yet Neale's text is clearly aimed at women, not only in his choice of female 'virgin saints', but also in his discursive prose, which addresses women directly:

you are, in a double degree, indebted to her [the Holy Church]. To woman she has given even more than to man; — more in a spiritual sense she could not; more in a temporal sense she could and did bestow. Before that Blessed above woman had been privileged to reverse the curse of Eve, so that as death came by a woman, by a Woman should also life come.³

Addressing unmarried women in particular, Neale is clear about the benefits of Christian faith, and the examples of this set by the martyrs. Clearly Rossetti also intended scriptural readings and reflections on their lives to serve as a devotional aid to her readers, yet her work is far less gender-specific than Neale's. In this volume, she also defends her exegetical work:

But if one object that many of my suggestions are exploded superstitions or mere freaks of fancy without basis of truth; and that if I have fancied this another may fancy that, and another again that, till the whole posse of idle thinkers puts forth each his fresh fancy, and all alike without basis; I frankly answer, Yes: so long as with David our musings are on God's works, among the chief whereof is His sinful Saint

³ Neale, p. xxxii.

made perfect; and so long as with St. Timothy our meditations are on charity, faith, purity, which array the Saints of Christ in a robe more excellent than the glory of Solomon or the loveliness of a lily. (CS, p. xiv)

Only a few years before Dean Burgon's 1884 sermon against the admission of women to Oxford colleges, in which he expressed some doubt about the advisability of educating women to the same level as men, Rossetti's erudite published discussions of scripture demonstrate the validity of women's religious writings.⁴ Her stalwart defence of her work in *Called to be Saints* affirms the significance of exegetical writing with no reference to gender, but rather to the necessary purity of the heart which writes, a theory familiar from Ruskin's earlier writings. This defence not only evades the gender debate, but opens the way for Rossetti to discuss aspects of Christian life and faith in her own idiosyncratic way. Many of the issues on which she touches in these volumes, including the Fall and the nature of evil, are controversial, yet, couched in Rossetti's careful prose and scrupulously linked with biblical references, controversy appears to have been largely avoided. Although contemporary reviews of her prose are scarce, the sales were good, and, as D'Amico points out, 'Certainly, both men and women were buying and reading these works. Possibly, Anglican vicars read Rossetti and occasionally drew upon her teaching for their sermons'.⁵ Unlike many of her contemporary female writers of Christian prose, Rossetti does not choose to concentrate upon advice on Christian life for women, but rather exercises her interest in

⁴ For example, Burgon stated: 'Inferior to us GOD made you: and our inferior to the end of time you will remain'; and 'If you set about becoming Man's rival, or rather if you try to be, what you can never become, Man's equal [...] you have in a manner unsexed yourselves, and must needs put up with the bitter consequence.' Edward Meyrick Goulburn, *John William Burgon, late Dean of Chichester: a Biography, with Extracts from his Letters and Early Journals*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1892), II, 236-7.

⁵ D'Amico, *Faith, Gender and Time*, p. 148.

theology much more widely, and indeed much more boldly, despite the apologies for her work which she offers in several of these volumes.⁶ Roe argues that, in its structure and form, ‘her devotional prose work was written with a Christian female audience in mind, and much of its content is geared toward the female experience of reading the Bible’ (p. 97). Yet when reading Rossetti’s prose it is rarely evident that she aimed primarily at a female reader.

Indeed, Julie Melnyk makes a clear distinction between religious and theological prose produced by women in the nineteenth century, arguing that ‘Women’s writing on religious topics – those related to devotion, conduct, worship – was tolerated and even encouraged’ while ‘this encouragement of women’s religious work and literature did not extend to theological writing. While Victorian religious discourse was gendered neutral or even slightly feminised, theology [...] remained a clearly masculine discourse’ (p. xi). Yet, as Melnyk goes on to explain, clearly the theological activity among some women writers was seen as enough of a threat for Ruskin to comment vehemently upon it in *Of Queens’ Gardens* (1865).⁷ Despite such tirades, women including Rossetti felt drawn to write exegetical prose.

⁶ Examples of contemporary women writers’ religious prose include Yonge’s *Womankind* (1876), while more theological prose was produced by writers such as Josephine Butler (*The New Era* (1872) and *Hour Before the Dawn* (1878). Mark M. Freed also argues that with the publication of *Robert Elsmere* (1888), ‘Mary Ward became a high-profile player in Anglican theological debate’: ‘The Moral Irrelevance of Dogma: Mary Ward and Critical Theology in England’, in *Women’s Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*, ed. by Julie Melnyk (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), pp. 133–47 (p. 134).

⁷ The sentence quoted as epigraph to this chapter continues: ‘There is one dangerous science for women—one which they must indeed beware how they profanely touch—that of theology. Strange, and miserably strange, that while they are modest enough to doubt their powers, and pause at the threshold of sciences where every step is demonstrable and sure, they will plunge headlong, and without one thought of incompetency, into that science in which the greatest men have trembled, and the wisest erred. Strange, that they will complacently and pridefully bind up whatever vice or folly there is in them, whatever arrogance, petulance, or blind incomprehensiveness, into one bitter bundle of consecrated myrrh. Strange, in creatures born to be Love visible,

Called to be Saints

Called to be Saints draws upon the lives of the saints in the Anglican liturgical calendar, all of whom, with the exception of the Virgin Mary, are male. Though Rossetti had an interest in hagiography generally, it appears that she chose to focus expressly on the saints of the Anglican Church. Each saint is examined exhaustively: much scripture relating to each one is quoted, and some additional biographical material provided. Rossetti's narratives are generally fairly brief, due, she admits, to a lack of information in many cases. The book opens with a chapter entitled 'The Key to my Book', in which she explains: 'Much of my material can only be drawn from uncertain traditions' (CS, p. xvi). Scrupulous as ever, she emphasizes that her work is based on the Authorised Version of the Bible, and that she will provide scriptural references so that her readers can trace the original sources, but the information about the saints may be based on legend: 'nor have I hesitated partly to construct my so-called 'Memorials' on a legendary foundation' (CS, p. xvi). Her belief that legend, rather than fact, will suffice, points to the purpose of the book: it is not a history of the saints, but rather an exposition designed to aid the reader's devotions. Her free use of myth is perhaps a writerly trait which is prepared to favour a story, especially a moral tale, over facts obscured by time. The devotional aspect of the volume is emphasized by Rossetti's inclusion

that where they can know least, they will condemn first, and think to recommend themselves to their Master, by scrambling up the steps of His judgment throne, to divide it with Him. Strangest of all, that they should think they were led by the Spirit of the Comforter into habits of mind which have become in them the unmixed elements of home discomfort; and that they dare to turn the Household Gods of Christianity into ugly idols of their own;—spiritual dolls, for them to dress according to their caprice; and from which their husbands must turn away in grieved contempt, lest they should be shrieked at for breaking them.' John Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens', pp. 127-8.

of prayers and, particularly, the natural imagery of gemstones, plants and animals associated with saints. As Keaton suggests in her introduction:

The use of natural objects as symbols for the spiritual is present in Rossetti's Christian tradition from its inception, but with the Tractarian movement and its revival of the use of many kinds of sensory symbols, the idea that nature itself provided the first and most available way by which human beings might both know and explain more about the divine gained considerable currency within the Anglican Church. (CS, p. x)

It is impossible to ignore the importance of natural imagery in the Bible, which may have secured its centrality in poetry in the Christian tradition. Tractarianism, however, restores a theological significance to the use of natural imagery, moving it away from the pantheistic poetry of the Romantics, for example. Certainly in Tract 89, *On the Mysticism Attributed to the Fathers of the Church*, Keble discusses the relevance of the natural world to the divine, as reminders in this world of the next:

But the one great and effectual safeguard against such idolizing of the material world, or rather of our own minds acting upon it, is the habit of considering it in that other point of view, to which Christian Antiquity would guide us, as earnestly as it would withdraw us from the speculations of the mere natural philosopher. I mean the way of regarding external things, either as fraught with imaginative associations, or as parabolical lessons of conduct, or as a symbolical language in which God speaks to us of a world out of sight: which three might, perhaps, be not quite inaptly entitled, the Poetical, the Moral, and the Mystical, phases or aspects of this visible world.

Of these, the Poetical comes first in order, as the natural groundwork or rudiment of the other two. This is indicated by all languages, and by the conversation of uneducated persons in all countries. There is everywhere a tendency to make the things we see represent the things we do not see, to invent or remark mutual associations between them, to call the one sort by the names of the other.

The second, the Moral use of the material world, is the improvement of the poetical or imaginative use of it, for the good of human life and conduct, by considerate persons, according to the best of their own judgment, antecedent to, or apart from, all revealed information on the subject.

In like manner, the Mystical, or Christian, or Theological use of it is the reducing it to a particular set of symbols and associations, which we have reason to believe has, more or less, the authority of the Great Creator Himself.

Keble indicates a precise trajectory of association from the earthly to the spiritual, ranging from the loose transcendence of the 'Poetical' to the ideal exactness of the 'Mystical'. It is difficult to pinpoint the use of natural imagery by individual writers on Keble's scale, and indeed each of these elements builds upon the previous, so that it is possible, in fact, to see all of these in Rossetti's work: all nature gives a 'poetical' image of the divine, a hint of the supernatural, yet the moral and Christian uses to which she puts her associations, especially in biblically-derived work, are notable. Such reminders of the divine provide access to the sublime, and aim to uplift and transport the reader. This use of natural imagery features throughout Rossetti's work, and of course throughout many works of the period. Yet for Rossetti, it is clear that such signs of the divine in the earthly have specific meaning: not only do they relate to the theology of the Tractarians, but they also feature as a kind of access to the spiritual or sublime in many Gothic novels, especially those of Ann Radcliffe, where the

heroines frequently reflect upon their awe-inspiring surroundings and connect these directly both to God and to a sense of earthly fear which reflects their coming trials in the novel.⁸

Time Flies

This aesthetic of Gothic and deployment of Gothic tropes and imagery characterizes *Time Flies* more than any structural incorporation of Gothic. This 'reading diary' is fragmentary in its nature, being a day-by-day book of devotional readings incorporating a wide range of styles, including poems, commentary, notes on saints' days and verses of scripture. It is, as such books tend to be, an aid to daily devotion and a source of solace in the trials of a fallen world. Its format thus permits Rossetti to vary the style and imagery of her writing and to employ diverse means of provoking the thoughts of the reader. As Roe points out, 'these "entries" are very intimate and personal, written in a plain, simple style, yet containing worlds of complexity' (p. 131). Once again the surface appears straightforward, but conceals a wealth of spiritual depths which the reader is expected to plumb. Rossetti uses personal anecdotes to provide insight, illustrating her points with descriptions of a variety of living creatures including a mole, earthworms, spiders, millipedes, jackdaws, frogs and a snake; all creatures associated with darkness or decay, and which she uses to suggest a moral. Additionally, she employs scenery which is again reminiscent of the Gothic novels of Ann

⁸ For example, in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, the following passage describes the journey of Emily, Valancourt and St Aubert through the Pyrenees: 'The ruggedness of the unfrequented road often obliged the wanderers to alight from their little carriage, but they thought themselves amply repaid for this inconvenience by the grandeur of the scenes; and, while the muleteer led his animals slowly over the broken ground, the travellers had leisure to linger amid these solitudes, and to indulge the sublime reflections, which soften, while they elevate, the heart, and fill it with the certainty of a present God! Still the enjoyment of St. Aubert was touched with that pensive melancholy, which gives to every object a mellower tint, and breathes a sacred charm over all around.'

Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 28.

Radcliffe, for example, such as the ‘mass and loftiness’ of mountains,⁹ a turreted bedchamber infested with insects, or a castle (*TF*, p. 111). The visual motifs of decay and enclosure create an atmosphere of Gothic, such as the entry for October 4, in which a mourning narrator is inspired by a glimpse of the sublime:

Life is a losing game, — with what to save?

Thus I sat mourning like a mournful owl,

And like a doleful dragon made ado,

Companion of all monsters of the dark:

When lo! The light shook off its nightly cowl, (*TF*, p. 192)

Images which conjure the atmosphere of Gothic are packed into these few lines, where the contemplative and brooding narrator appears as a monster or ‘doleful dragon’, returned to human life by the light, adorned in a ‘cowl’. Here Rossetti may use the language of Gothic, but she reverses its expectations: it is not that the narrator can hear an owl, but in fact is herself like one. Nor is she terrorized by monsters, but is their ‘companion’. And while a ghostly monk, perhaps, might remove his cowl and frighten a Gothic heroine, here it is the beauty of daylight, dispelling the terror of night, which is revealed when the habit is displaced. *Time Flies* in this way both deploys the imagery of Gothic whilst undermining it, to a purpose which becomes clearer in *The Face of the Deep*. Similarly, the uncanny imagery of a room of waxworks is described, and the uncomfortable sensation which it inspired, yet

⁹ Davenport-Hines discusses a shift in attitude towards mountain scenery as the result of the writings of Thomas Burnett (1635-1715), whose work ‘identified mountain scenery in all its horror as product and symbol of the Fall: such terrain was punitive of desire, a reminder of how God obliterates the perverse and the transgressive’, p. 25.

Rossetti adds, 'looking back I laugh at my own absurdity' (*TF*, p. 36). Unlike Emily's response to the wax model of a decaying body in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Rossetti's instinctive reaction of fear is laughed off. Her anecdotes themselves are thus structured to demonstrate the passing of time, and the benefit of hindsight; unlike a Gothic heroine (except perhaps Catherine Morland), Rossetti projects herself as a narrator who can laugh at herself and demonstrate the wisdom of age.

Time, and its passage, is an obvious theme of the reading diary, embedded in its form. There are frequent reminders of the rapid passage of time and the need to use one's time wisely. The entry for January 28 concludes, 'From sudden death, Good Lord, deliver us' (*TF*, p. 23). Several entries indicate the problems of 'mortal frailty' and warn of the passing of time (*TF*, p. 90). Perhaps the most significant of these describes her own 'first vivid experience of death' in 'early childhood':

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.

[...]

Only now contemplating death from a wider and wiser view-point, I would fain reverse the order of those feelings: dwelling less and less on the mere physical disgust, while more and more on the rest and safety; on the perfect peace of death, please God. (*TF*, p. 45)

Not only does the confessional tone of this entry vivify the moral tale, but the dual aspect of death is emphasized; the physical, relating to the *memento mori* of *The Castle of Udolpho*, or the crypt scene in *The Monk*, for example, and the fear which these are designed to engender; and the metaphysical, or spiritual, in which there is, for Rossetti, eternal hope. The appearance of the corpse, be it man or mouse, becomes irrelevant when compared to the soul's rest after death.

The Gothic novel has a complicated relationship with the symbiosis of inner and outer beings, or character and appearance, in repeated motifs. Examples of the misleading disjunction between the appearance and personality include the appearance of Melmoth, able to make Isidora fall in love with him despite his satanic secret; Zaira, in *Women*, is possessed of remarkable beauty but her soul is not as spotless as the equally beautiful Eva's. Beauty, in literature not only of the Gothic genre but of many kinds, is both an indicator of the pure heart and happy temperament, and simultaneously not to be trusted, being only a surface which may not match the depths. Perhaps the most striking example in Gothic literature of the untrustworthiness of appearance features in Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Gil-Martin, whom the reader is expected to recognize as an incarnation of Satan, exposes the fallacy of appearance in the Gothic novel, in particular by his remarkable ability to change his appearance to suit his purposes:

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said I. 'But, surely, if you are the young gentleman with whom I spent the hours yesterday, you have the chameleon art of changing your appearance; I never could have recognised you'.

'My countenance changes with my studies and sensations,' said he. 'It is a natural peculiarity in me, over which I have not full control. If I contemplate a man's features seriously, mine own gradually assume the very same appearance and character. And

what is more, by contemplating a face minutely, I not only attain the same likeness but, with the likeness, I attain the very same ideas'.¹⁰

The shape-shifting nature of the stranger alerts the reader to his evil status, but Hogg's nuanced depiction of Gil-Martin goes further than that. Not only can this personification of Satan take on the physical characteristics of a potential victim, but he can also assume their thoughts. Yet this is not to assume that he *becomes* another person. He may be able to read the mind of another man but he remains himself, essentially evil. The figure of Gil-Martin does not change in essence during the course of the novel, despite his remarkable abilities. Nonetheless, at moments of anger, Gil-Martin's appearance becomes too terrible to behold, suggesting that in some way his personality is reflected in his façade. This affinity, or disjunction, between the inner and outer person has been examined in the chapter on the grotesque, where the duality of body and spirit is discussed. In *Time Flies*, Rossetti instead constructs a dual space, of fallen and unholy earth and of pure heaven, with Christ as the intermediary. It is in human inability to comprehend God's truths that the fear and mystery of Gothic truly lies, partly through God's desire to protect our limited human minds from what we cannot comprehend, and partly through our own sin-obscured vision. How we best live on earth, with the celestial world in mind, is the true subject of her books.

Letter and Spirit

Letter and Spirit provides a very different reading experience. Unlike *Called to be Saints*, into which the reader may dip at random, Rossetti's exegetical discussion of the Commandments is a more sustained effort at theological writing, with fewer passages of

¹⁰ James Hogg, *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. by John Carey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969; repr. 2009), p. 86.

scripture and more commentary. The title is presumably taken from the text ‘Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life’ (2 Corinthians 3. 6). The phrase is familiar, with the most common usage referring to the ‘letter and spirit of the law’; for example, in *The Merchant of Venice*, where Shylock, insisting on the letter of the law, is proved to be a mean-spirited villain. Similarly, Romans 2. 29 reads: ‘But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God’. The significance of the spirit, that is, of true obedience to God, rather than empty obeisance to a rule, is the implication of Rossetti’s writing.

In *Letter and Spirit*, the meaning is made clear in its usage. Given Rossetti’s extensive use of typology, it is likely that the ‘letter’ is represented by the Old Testament – that which sets examples, explaining the laws of Christianity, while the ‘spirit’ is the New Testament, in which the connotations of the Old Testament are carried forward and enacted or interpreted. *Letter and Spirit* aims to demonstrate the importance of interpreting the spirit of the Ten Commandments rather than becoming obsessed with the letter of the law, like the Pharisees in the New Testament, who observe ritual but discard true faith: ‘Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone’ (Matthew 23. 23).

Rossetti examines the Ten Commandments closely, using the types of the Old Testament and the anti-types of the New Testament. Her text consists of a juxtaposition of the theological elements of the Commandments interspersed with a more devotional reading of scripture which encourages personal holiness in a manner typical of Tractarian writing. For example, Rossetti emphasizes the spiritual need to examine oneself for wickedness, selecting

as her text what appears to be a conventionally Gothic image of a light shining in darkness.¹¹ Quoting Proverbs 20. 27, she then writes: ‘The spirit of man is the candle of the Lord, searching all the inward parts’. This verse provides an image of a tiny light in darkness, seeking out wickedness. Moreover, implicit in this verse (and Rossetti’s discussion of it) is the notion of boundaries. The self – physically and metaphorically – contains this darkness. Rossetti’s constructed self is thus inherently separate from the rest of the world, with an inner darkness but also potentially filled with the spirit of God. Christian faith provides for Rossetti’s writing the possibility of an inner and outer unity. Notably, in the passage concerning the Pharisees in the Gospel of Matthew, it is the disjunction between the inner and outer being that is criticized:

²⁷Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness.

²⁸Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. (Matthew 23. 27-8)

¹¹ For example, in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, a faint light from the moon illuminates and then vanishes from the scene of Isidora and Melmoth’s wedding ceremony, casting the sinister rites into a gloom that is not just physical but spiritual: ‘At that moment the moon, that had so faintly lit the chapel, sunk behind a cloud, and everything was enveloped in darkness so profound, that Isidora did not recognize the figure of Melmoth till her hand was clasped in his, and his voice whispered, “He is here – ready to unite us”.’ Maturin, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, p. 394. A different approach can be seen in *The Romance of the Forest*, where the light shining in darkness has a transcendent and spiritual effect: ‘The first tender tints of morning now appeared on the verge of the horizon, stealing upon the darkness; — so pure, so fine, so ethereal! it seemed as if Heaven was opening to the view’. Ann Radcliffe, *The Romance of the Forest*, ed. by Chloë Chard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 30.

The imagery is striking in these verses, which emphasize the problems of excessive concern with appearance whilst paying no attention to the cleanliness of the soul. The visual imagery, particularly of verse 27, is itself anticipatory of Gothic in its apparent macabre aesthetic appeal, concealing decay within. In *Time Flies*, with its exhortations to search oneself inwardly, and its insistence on the transitory nature of human life, this concentration on the permanence of God as opposed to the ephemeral existence of humanity becomes particularly prominent.

Unity and duality are matters which recur throughout Rossetti's religious prose, and are a particular concern of *Letter and Spirit*. The First Commandment, Rossetti states, 'is characterized by unity'. Moreover, 'within this unity is bound up the entire multitude of our duties; out of this one supreme commandment have to be developed all the details of every one of our unnumbered obligations' (*LS*, p. 8). Rossetti's conception of unity, therefore, is that it can encompass many aspects of one thing; there is no requirement to separate the multitudinous facets of one concept, but rather to understand them (in the spirit rather than the letter, perhaps) as being intrinsic to one another. The complexities of this argument are further problematized by the concept of the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, consisting of three individual parts, separate yet indivisible. As biblical scholars have long pointed out, this is a concept which is beyond human understanding; the combined unity and separateness is not something fallen humanity can comprehend. Yet aside from its theological implications, the nature of the Trinity also usefully indicates shifting boundaries; the Trinity is both utterly one and yet quite separate, with no defined boundaries or sense of where one begins and another ends.

It is possible, therefore, through Rossetti's insistence on unity in *Letter and Spirit*, to trace an interest in boundaries and their dissolution. One way of crossing these boundaries is in fact through typological readings; Rossetti suggests in *Letter and Spirit* that it is because of the Trinity that God created humankind, and that therefore corresponding archetypes exist: 'If [...] God is not to be called like His creature, whose grace is simply typical, but that creature is like Him because expressive of His archetypal Attribute, it suggests itself that for every aspect of creation there must exist the corresponding Divine Archetype' (*LS*, p. 13). Such interpretations encourage reading back and forward through the Old and New Testaments, unifying the biblical text by considering it holistically. The boundaries between the earthly and the divine, therefore, are not where we might think; if not only the natural world but also humanity reflect God Himself, the boundary between the two is elided. Moreover, Rossetti adds that: 'And even as our God is One, so does He summon us to become one in His service. The powers and passions of our complex nature must be concentrated in one only love of Him alone: His many gifts to us must be returned to Him in one self-exhaustive gift of all we are and all we have' (*LS*, p. 13-4). Not only the Trinity, but also humanity, are both separate and unified.

Following this assertion of unity, however, Rossetti immediately divides the self which must love God with an undivided heart into four aspects: heart, soul, mind and strength, and presents biblical examples of characters who have erred in each of these areas. These preoccupations with unity and division, with the dimly-perceived crossing of boundaries both physical and spiritual, have resonance for a study of Gothic in Rossetti's work. As earlier chapters have discussed, Gothic is frequently preoccupied with issues of physical and emotional space, and the passage between them, which Rossetti translates into the spiritual. The perceived boundaries between earth and heaven, the spiritual and the

material, represented in Tennyson's poem 'Crossing the Bar', are the concomitant thresholds in Rossetti's devotional works, but she indicates a surprising bridge:

Looking back for a moment at what the Tenth Commandment seems to indicate as the wife's position, we observe that the clause which forbids coveting the house is repeated word for word on behalf of the wife; not so, as regards aught else specified; whence she appears to stand as connecting link, akin to both, between what the man is and what he has; even as Christ's sacred humanity, bridging over the severing gulf, unites the Godhead to the Church. (*LS*, p. 193)¹²

Rossetti is evidently concerned to remove any indication that the woman is the property of her husband, alongside his servants and animals. Yet the unexpected leap from the nature of the wife's position to the 'sacred humanity' of Christ demonstrates Rossetti's desire to place women at the heart of Christianity. Her Tractarian interest in the Incarnation constructs an image of Christ as a bridge between this world and the next, but she extends the metaphor to apply it in other circumstances. Like the heroine of the Gothic novel whose function as character is to move between the sheltered domestic world of home and the terrors of the unknown, the 'wife' figures as a character both possessed of free will and yet also bound by the cultural rules of the society in which she is placed, subject to patriarchal laws. Womanhood alone, it appears, provides sufficient power to cross thresholds, and, by implication, to do so for the benefit of others.

¹²The Tenth Commandment reads: 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's' (Exodus 20. 17).

The Face of the Deep

Such concerns with thresholds and the 'place' of women are yet more evident in *The Face of the Deep*, a detailed discussion of the Book of Revelation, taken verse by verse, combining the exegetical with devotional and reflective discussion, and interspersed with poems. Robert Kachur suggests that 'female devotional authors [...] were attracted to the Apocalypse precisely because it allowed them to begin to articulate arguments with controversial implications'.¹³ Kachur's argument is that since it was more acceptable for women to write devotional works, a number of theologically-minded women produced works that were ostensibly devotional but in fact contained a considerable proportion of 'original biblical exegesis' (p. 15). Though he gives only a few lines to *The Face of the Deep*, this comment is as pertinent to Rossetti's work as to other texts; Kachur's suggestion that the Book of Revelation appealed to a few women as a subject for theological work is in part due to its diverse reception history, which permitted further works, even by women, particularly those which appeared to take a devotional line. Hassett posits that Rossetti's work may also have been inspired by Isaac Williams's devotional works.¹⁴ An examination of Williams's book *The Apocalypse, with Notes and Reflections* (1852) suggests that this is highly likely; for, at least in concept and construction, Rossetti's work is very similar to Williams's, using every verse of Revelation with exegetical discourse, though, as closer examination will demonstrate, Rossetti's content and analysis take a more personal approach. Like Rossetti,

¹³ Robert M. Kachur, 'Envisioning Equality, Asserting Authority: Women's Devotional Writings on the Apocalypse 1845-1900', in Melnyk, pp. 3-36 (p. 15).

¹⁴ Hassett, p. 213.

Williams also emphasizes in his introduction the 'divine simplicity' and 'deep and hidden analogies' of the book.¹⁵

It is not possible to consider in any detail the theology of Rossetti's extensive work on the Apocalypse, though it is worth noting that her approach falls into what Kachur determines the 'spiritual-allegorical' category, in which 'the Apocalypse must be approached as allegory,' operating on the understanding 'that the book describes timeless spiritual realities rather than specific historical events' (p. 9). My consideration of *The Face of the Deep* is, however, predicated on the assumption that Rossetti was at least in part attracted to the Book of Revelation for its Gothic affinities. In its depiction of the end of the world and the coming of a new world order, the book of the Apocalypse is saturated with endings and beginnings, depicted in grotesque visual imagery that is often violent and extreme. It is full of 'mysteries', in the Christian as well as the secular sense of the word, which many have attempted to unlock, though Rossetti's work tends to concentrate on a devotional and explanatory interpretation of the book rather than a literal or historical exegesis. Yet in the threat that the Apocalypse offers to the world as it exists, and its promise of a better world which will appear through suffering, Revelation's potential influence upon Gothic is remarkable. In terms of the Apocalypse, it is useful to note Julia Kristeva's suggestion that the 'horror of being' consists of 'the abyss of abjection' which is 'the other facet of religious, moral, and ideological codes'. It is, she states, the resurgence of repressed abjection which creates a human apocalypse.¹⁶

It is notable that the threshold between heaven and earth will be dissolved upon the realization of St. John's revelation, and that it thus predicts an end to the boundaries and

¹⁵ Isaac Williams, *The Apocalypse, with Notes and Reflections* (London: Rivington, 1852), p. iii.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 208-9.

thresholds which preoccupy Rossetti's work. Roe discusses the problem of contradiction in Revelation and Rossetti's response to it, suggesting that 'Rossetti posits God as the answer to contradiction, and heaven as the place where all contradictions will be resolved' (p. 176).¹⁷ In the meantime, however, Rossetti's writing concentrates on 'man's fallen relationship to God' – that is, how one forms and maintains a relationship across the threshold between earth and heaven.¹⁸

The title *The Face of the Deep* itself suggests the existence of surface and depth and, significantly for a metaphoric reading of Revelation, the sign and its signified. The phrase is taken from Genesis 1.2, 'And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters'. The 'face of the deep' is the earth, covered with darkness before the creation of light. Rossetti emphasizes the necessarily superficial nature of her work, which can only hint at the spiritual depth, saying 'Only should I have readers, let me remind them that what I write professes to be only a *surface* study of an unfathomable depth: if it incites any to dive deeper than I attain to, it will so far have accomplished a worthy work' (*FD*, p. 365). This is significant not only for its theological implication that an exegesis of biblical work can still only remain on the surface, requiring further study, thought and prayer, but it also resonates with nineteenth-century devotional reading practices, particularly those of the Tractarians, who encouraged deep and

¹⁷ Furthermore, Barbara Garlick, in her essay 'Defacing the Self: Christina Rossetti's *The Face of the Deep* as absolution', in *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry*, ed. by Barbara Garlick (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 155-75, states that Rossetti 'gestures towards a possible transcendent moment, a stepping through the mirror to confront the beatific vision, not through mystical union in the afterlife, but through language' (p. 158). Not only in heaven, but in her own written glimpse of heaven, can the threshold be crossed.

¹⁸ Roe, p. 173.

thoughtful reading, and aimed to provoke further thought, relating writer and reader in a two-way relationship that was operative through faith.¹⁹

It is clear, therefore, that the metaphorical 'face' is what is presented and can be seen, while the 'deep' is what is hidden from view. Once again there are thresholds to be crossed, as the two are divided by a lack of understanding, though a glimpse of the divine presence is available in the Eucharist, or in prayer, which George Herbert refers to as 'heaven in ordinary'.²⁰ This is crucial to an understanding of Rossettian Gothic; we do not understand because we *cannot* understand, as fallen humans; yet we also do not understand because we are blinding ourselves by ignorance and lack of faith. Yet it is important to remember that for Rossetti, as Roe points out, it is heaven that is real, while earth is transitory (p. 170). It is the absence of human understanding which Rossetti, with her theological writing, intended to address.

Rossetti's theological Gothic examines and questions the nature of unity and division, and it seems probable that this may be related to concerns about the position of women. In her reflections on the nature of the Book of Revelation, Rossetti necessarily considers the future for Christians, and her ultimate conclusion is regardless of gender. Kachur's

¹⁹ Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick, in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London: Methuen, 1986), offers some pertinent comments on the necessity of the linking of surface and depth. Stating that the surface or aesthetics of Gothic are ignored at the risk of losing the meaning, she stresses the inextricable nature of surface and depth, discussing as an example markings on flesh and veils which serve as signifiers. She suggests that surface is in fact all that a writer *can* present; the meaning comes from the reader (pp. 140-67).

²⁰ Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,

The milky way, the bird of Paradise,

Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,

The land of spices, something understood. (ll. 11-14)

'Prayer', by George Herbert, in Helen Gardner, ed., *The Metaphysical Poets* (London: Penguin, 1957), p. 124.

interpretation of many women's theological writings on the Apocalypse is that 'its emphasis on the redeemed's unification as one body under God provided a way for women [...] to justify their vision of an egalitarian community' (p. 6). Such a view of future unity of the body of Christ, the Church, is reflected in the Anglican liturgy, deriving from 1 Corinthians 10. 17: 'For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread'. The notion of faith promotes the concept of unity and division, of individuals which are part of a larger body, and of the oneness and separateness of Trinity. Rossetti provides a highly visual description of this:

Multitude no less than Unity characterizes various types of God the Holy Spirit. Water indefinitely divisible, and every portion equivalent in completeness to the whole. Fire kindling unlimited flames, each in like manner complete in itself. Dew made up of innumerable drops: so also rain, and if we may make the distinction, showers. A cloud as a cloud is one, while as raindrops it is a multitude. And as in division each portion is a complete whole devoid of parts, so equally in reunion all portions together form one complete whole similarly devoid of parts: let drops or let flames run together, and there exists no distinction of parts in their uniform volume. (*FD*, p. 15)

Rossetti's construction of 'God the Holy Spirit' demonstrates a potential collapsing of boundaries, resonant of the future indicated in Revelation in which, post-Apocalypse, the boundaries and limitations currently imposed on fallen humanity will be dissolved and replaced with a unity between Christ and his Church.

It would perhaps be natural for nineteenth-century women to be drawn to a vision of an entirely equal society which makes no distinctions based on gender, which many

theologians have seen as suggested by Matthew 22. 30: 'For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven'. This unification, in which all are equal, if not the same, is indicative of an idealized unity of believers reflected by the more specific unity of Christ with his Church. Such unity, of course, eliminates thresholds, representative of fear and danger as well as adventure and possibility in Gothic, and points to a New Jerusalem in which the complexities and latent evils of Gothic become redundant. For Rossetti, gender differences are not to be eliminated by the Apocalypse, but rather celebrated. Though much of her writing in *The Face of the Deep* does not appear to have a specifically gender-based appeal, she concentrates at times upon positive images of women, including the figure of the Church as the Bride of Christ.

The book of the Apocalypse presents issues which feminist theologians have struggled to overcome. It is in many ways an 'especially misogynist text'.²¹ The figure of the prophetess Jezebel in Revelation 2 and the Whore of Babylon in Revelation 17-18 are viciously presented and suffer horrible fates, which, as Tina Pippin has suggested, 'would be totally unacceptable to biblical scholars' if this violence was perpetrated against a male,²² whatever the circumstances.²³ Rossetti's comments on Jezebel are restrained and, without emphasizing her womanhood, indicate that it is for her licentious and corrupting behaviour

²¹ Kachur, p. 5.

²² Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 94.

²³ Revelation 2. 20-23: '²⁰Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. ²¹And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. ²²Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. ²³And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.'

that she is condemned, since she was ‘an abandoned woman and a witch, [...] a nursing mother of idolatry. But whatever witch she may have been, there appears about her no trace of the genuine prophetess’ (*FD*, p. 76). However, Rossetti goes on to argue gender difference in favour of the masculine, which suggests that in fact Balaam’s responsibility must therefore be the greater:

As Balaam in comparison with Jezebel, so men in comparison with women may usually be expected to exhibit keener, tougher, more work-worthy gifts. Therefore if Jezebel the woman, going about to establish her equality with Balaam the man, poses as *prophetess* to his *prophet*, nothing is more likely than that she will have to eke out and puff up her pretensions by a whiff of imposture, conscious or unconscious imposture. (*FD*, p. 76)

Hassett suggests that *The Face of the Deep* ‘elides what terrifies’ in Revelation, remarking that this may be due to the recent death of Rossetti’s atheist brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (p. 200). In fact, Rossetti’s result was to create an aid to devotion which does not require an elucidation of the threats hidden in Revelation; these are already explicit in *The Face of the Deep* through the inclusion of verses of scripture, thus allowing the apocalyptic terror to speak for itself. However, what she does endeavour to minimize is the negative treatment of womanhood. In her commentary on subsequent verses (Rev. 2. 21-22) she writes of the need for repentance, describing it as a ‘space’ which cannot be neutral: ‘Empty space, neutral space, is impossible; it must be occupied by accumulating guilt or by repentance unto progressive amendment’ (*FD*, p. 76). This space, then, in which the reader can repent, is the liminal space of human life, in which sins occur and repentance must follow in order to obtain God’s forgiveness. This repentance, theologically speaking, begins the process of

dissolving the barriers between heaven and earth. In contrast, Isaac Williams's response to these same verses concerning Jezebel is more specific, and indeed harsher, though he comments that 'it is her sufferance, not her active participation, which is reproved'. Moreover, he posits that 'allusion is made not to any women, but to a heresy', taking the figure of a woman entirely as a metaphor for a heretical church (p. 35).

The Whore of Babylon, or the Great Harlot, of Revelation 17-18, receives rather different treatment at the hands of Rossetti and Williams.²⁴ While Williams concentrates on explaining what he understands to be the fate of Babylon, identifying the Harlot with 'a Christian Church', he is more concerned with facts than with extrapolating moral lessons (p. 314). Clearly he is comfortable with the identification of Babylon with a harlot, adding that the term 'adulteress' would be insufficient, since 'the impure Church barter and prostitutes her faith to Christ for the advantages of the world' (p. 315). Northrop Frye illuminates the biblical language used for this figure, suggesting that 'The word 'whoredom' in the Bible usually refers to theological rather than sexual irregularity'.²⁵ However, Williams, it appears, is keener to identify the figure of the woman with sexual than with religious sins. In *The Face of the Deep*, however, Rossetti, perhaps less comfortable with labels concerning women's morality after her work in the Mary Magdalene Penitentiary for Fallen Women, is vociferous concerning 'the vileness and ruinousness of idolatrous defection', thus clearly associating the

²⁴ Revelation 17. 3-6: 'So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness: and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. ⁴And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: ⁵And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH. ⁶And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.'

²⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 141.

‘harlot’ figure with the city of Babylon rather than womanhood (*FD*, p. 396). Yet it is therefore surprising that she later advocates that this imagery is to be taken as a warning to women, specifically, for the penalties for female sins:

As it seems possible to study the sun-clothed exalted Woman (ch.xii) as a figure of the all-glorious destiny awaiting the Virtuous Woman, so now I think this obscene woman may (on the surface) be studied as illustrating the particular foulness, degradation, loathsomeness, to which a perverse rebellious woman because feminine not masculine is liable. (*FD*, p. 400)

Scrupulously fair, if the best of women’s destiny can be extrapolated from the positive images of woman, then the reverse must also be true; Rossetti is never an apologist for her sex. Indeed, she characterizes Babylon as a femme fatale, who ‘proffers filthiness in a golden cup’ (*FD*, p. 400). Not unlike her figure of ‘The World’ in a much earlier poem, this woman ‘tyrannizes by influence’, dissembling and hiding her true nature under her assumed beauty. Once again this Gothic figure of the dangerous woman – Madame Montoni, Zaira, Matilda de Villanges – poses a threat, though here it is a global rather than a personal menace. Furthermore, this woman is grotesquely united with a ‘beast’; ‘by a foul congruity [they] seem to make up a sort of oneness’ (*FD*, p. 399). This grotesque image, half woman and half beast, is reminiscent of the Gothic heroine’s fear of unity with an unknown other.

Rossetti provides an imaginative poetic illustration of Babylon, demonstrating the seductive beauty which comes with familiarity, and the face of evil hidden behind it:

Foul is she and ill-favoured, set askew:

Gaze not upon her till thou dream her fair,

Lest she should mesh thee in her wanton hair,
 Adept in arts grown old yet ever new.
 Her heart lusts not for love, but thro' and thro'
 For blood, as spotted panther lusts in lair;
 No wine is in her cup, but filth is there
 Unutterable, with plagues hid out of view. (*FD*, p. 406)

The poem, opening with the incontrovertible 'Foul', attempts to reveal the hidden loathsomeness of the depiction of Babylon, which, as one becomes accustomed to it, may come to seem 'fair'. This woman's femininity is accentuated by her 'wanton hair', and her panther-like inexorable move towards her victim is reflected in the slow and steady pace of the alliterative consonants. As she seeks her prey and longs for blood, she is akin more to the vampiric Lucy Westenra than the typical femme fatale of earlier Gothic, although her 'plagues' are concealed beneath a dissembling exterior. The connection of the evil woman with a dangerous animal more than with humanity suggests both that she is beneath contempt and also that she poses a serious threat. Another poem, 'Standing Afar Off for the Fear of her Torment' again demonstrates the woman's 'pride' and 'foulness', yet here she is alone, in the flames as Babylon burns, indicating the consequence of her sins. As the wicked in the Gothic novel receive justice and are punished, so in Revelation, where the ultimate punishments, of which all others are shadows, are finally seen.

The Face of the Deep is also concerned with the positive images of women in the Book of Revelation. The Church as the Bride of Christ receives less attention than might be expected, though the figure is clearly equipped with ideal feminine virtues in Rossetti's

commentary.²⁶ Chaste and arrayed in splendour, the Bride and Bridegroom are depicted as the sun and moon, united in eternal love and glory. Such union, 'longed for, toiled for, Self-sacrificed for, bought with a great price' is the finale to the struggles for unity which are reflected on earth, in which journeys must be undertaken, thresholds crossed and fears faced (*FD*, p. 481). All earthly conception of unity, including the sacrament of marriage, which is a pale reflection of heavenly union, reaches its apotheosis for Rossetti in the vision of woman restored to her rightful place as the Bride of Christ.

The book of the Apocalypse is noted by theologians for its imagery of doubleness. The notion of the double incorporates both unity and division, as the two parts appear to form one whole, yet are divided, often by apparently insuperable barriers. For example, the structure of the book poses the earthly Babylon, represented by the 'Great Harlot', as the polar opposite to the New Jerusalem, depicted as the Bride of Christ. These two women, or cities, are divided by their places, in heaven and on earth, but also by the gulf created by their different characteristics. Theologian Richard Bauckham indicates the oppositional, yet parallel, characteristics of these cities, of which a few examples are cited below:

- (1) The chaste bride, the wife of the Lamb (21. 2,9)
 - v. the harlot with whom the kings of the earth fornicate (17. 2)
- (2) Her splendour is the glory of God (21. 11-21)
 - v. Babylon's splendour from exploiting her empire (17.4; 18. 12-13,16)
- (3) The nations walk by her light, which is the glory of God (21. 24)

²⁶ Revelation 21. 2: 'And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.'

v. Babylon's corruption and deception of the nations (17. 2; 18. 3,23; 19. 2)²⁷

When the attributes of the Harlot and the Bride are placed side by side, the gulf between them, as well as the similarities, becomes increasingly apparent. The dividing line of the threshold of heaven cannot be crossed; these two characters are mirror images, one evil and one holy, a prototype for the figure of the doubled woman in literature, such as Una and Duessa in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-6), Zaira and Eva in *Women*, and indeed Laura and Lizzie in 'Goblin Market'. As Tennyson suggests in 'Merlin', in *Idylls of the King*, 'For men at most differ as heaven and earth | But women, worst and best, as heaven and hell' (812-3). These extremes are repeated ad infinitum in both Gothic and Victorian literature. The unity as well as the separateness of these figures is emphasized by Auerbach, who suggests that 'The Victorian queen is not the anti-type of the Victorian victim, but the release of the victim into the full use of her powers'.²⁸ The implication is that the unity of these two apparently oppositional figures – the 'good' and 'bad' woman – is stronger than one might expect. Certainly in Gothic literature these figures are often literally related or physically similar. In literary terms, the space between these women is minimal, though morally and theologically it may be an unbridgeable gulf. Auerbach's argument, unsurprisingly, is that the masculine is thus afraid of the hidden power of the feminine, perhaps hidden under a beautiful face, and consequently attempts to repress all feminine power. Such stereotypes have evolved from biblical sources such as Revelation, as Gothic may also have done.

Though Rossetti concentrates on the female virtues of both these figures, it is notable that, as with the Maturin characters, it is the 'wicked' figures about whom she writes poetry;

²⁷ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 131.

²⁸ Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon*, p. 39.

the virtuous women are more highly prized, one senses, but seem to provide less poetic inspiration. The 'woman clothed with the sun' is described in intense language as:²⁹

weakness made strong and shame swallowed up in celestial glory. For thus the figure is set before our eyes. Through Eve's lapse, weakness and shame devolved upon woman as her characteristics, in a manner special to herself and unlike the corresponding heritage of man.

And as instinctively we personify the sun and moon as *he* and *she*, I trust there is no harm in my considering that her sun-clothing indicates how in that heaven where St. John in vision beheld her, she will be made equal with men and angels; arrayed in all human virtues, and decked with all communicable Divine graces: whilst the moon under her feet portends that her some time infirmity of purpose and changeableness of mood have, by preventing, assisting, final grace, become immutable; she has done all and stands; from the lowest place she has gone up higher. (*FD*, p. 309-10)³⁰

This is the closest one can get to a form of Rossettian feminism; she will not entirely excuse Eve's weakness, but she sees that the grace of God can redeem womankind, and make her 'equal with men and angels'; she depicts this with confidence that it will come to pass, remaining convinced not only that women will be made equal to men, but that Eve herself 'will stand before the Throne', despite her sins.³¹ This is certainly not a possibility in

²⁹ Revelation 12. 1: 'And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars.'

³⁰ Hassett suggests that 'A favourite figure [of Rossetti] is the half-moon' (p. 213). The moon features in poems such as 'A Face of Plaintive Sweetness', clearly symbolic of as yet unredeemed womanhood.

³¹ Such complete final redemption is not to be assumed; usually it is a hope rather than a conviction:

Williams's commentary, in which he is somewhat grudging in his admittance of the feminine characteristics of these positive female figures.³² Rossetti understands the nature of Eve's sin and Mary's purity, however, and sets them up against each other in a direct comparison:

Eve exhibits one extreme of feminine character, the Blessed Virgin the opposite extreme. Eve parleyed with a devil: holy Mary 'was troubled' at the salutation of an Angel. Eve sought knowledge; Mary instruction. Eve aimed at self-indulgence: Mary at self-oblation. Eve, by disbelief and disobedience, brought sin to the birth: Mary, by faith and submission, Righteousness. (*FD*, p. 310)

The use of femininity as ciphers of such apparent strength of good and evil in Revelation reinforces the stereotypical dichotomy of woman as Madonna/whore, and Rossetti apparently does little to diminish this. Certainly not only nineteenth-century thought but also Gothic novels have a tendency to promulgate this split. However, she refuses to see femininity in such extreme terms, and instead problematizes traditional femininity in her discussions of Eve. Though in biblical tradition Eve is the opposite of the Virgin Mary, the originals of the dual images of women in the early church, and though Rossetti acknowledges

'As elaborated in Augustinian theology, the condition of fallenness derives from the act of original sin. But although fallenness traces to an act of will, no amount of remorse or repentance enables us to transcend our fallen state through our own resolution. One can hope for a divine, uplifting act of grace, but such a dispensation will come only if one is among the predetermined number of the elect'. Anderson, p. 3.

³² Williams's response is of his time; other responses to the female figures of Revelation have been unequivocal and even extreme, such as D. H. Lawrence's response to Revelation 12. 1: 'She has brought into the Bible what it lacked before: the great cosmic Mother robed and splendid, but persecuted. And she is, of course, essential to the scheme of power and splendour, which must have a queen'. D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (London: Martin Secker, 1932), p. 155.

this once throughout her body of work, quoted above, she otherwise refers to Mary relatively little, bypassing the elements of Mariolatry which appear in some Tractarian writings and instead focusing her attention on Eve, who, without Mary to throw her into relief, has the potential to appear as a more human and believable character. It seems that the dividing line between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ woman is dissolved and united in the character of Eve, whom Rossetti refers to as ‘Eve the beloved first Mother of us all. Who that has loved and revered her own immediate dear mother, will not echo the hope?’ (*FD*, p. 310-11) However, the position of the ‘daughters of Eve’ is made abundantly clear in her poem ‘A Daughter of Eve’, in which the narrator mourns her own foolishness:

A fool I was to sleep at noon,
 And wake when night is chilly
 Beneath the comfortless cold moon;
 A fool to pluck my rose too soon,
 A fool to snap my lily. (ll. 1-5)

Rossetti’s desire to inspire compassion for Eve is partially undermined in her work by her determination not to excuse her. Poems such as this relate to Rossetti’s many fallen women poems and ballads.

A significant way in which the influence of Gothic manifests itself in Rossetti’s work is through the depiction of women, specifically transgressing or ‘fallen’ women. Many critics have dealt with ‘Goblin Market’ as a parable of sexual sin, referring to Jeanie ‘in her grave, | Who should have been a bride; | But who for joys brides hope to have | Fell sick and died’ (ll. 312-315), or arguing that the ‘precious golden lock’ which Laura offers the goblins as

payment is in fact pubic hair.³³ The tone of the poem is undeniably sensual, but it is possible that Rossetti's depictions of fallen women centre on the idea that they have suffered, not necessarily a carnal lapse, but one in the original sense, of Eve's sin of disobedience to God. Consequently, one could argue that many of her devotional poems also reflect the fallen state of the speaker, on behalf of womankind. For example, 'A Better Resurrection' depicts the speaker as a broken vessel: 'My life is like a broken bowl, | A broken bowl that cannot hold | One drop of water for my soul', echoing Ecclesiastes 12. 6, 'the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain'.

Some of her poems reflect the fall of Eve directly, such as 'Shut Out' and 'Eve', which use the character of Eve, while others use the contrast of innocence and experience in a representative manner.³⁴ 'Goblin Market' can be read in this way, particularly with reference to typological readings, as D'Amico does:

The list of similes in which Lizzie is compared to a lily, a rock, a beacon, a blossoming fruit tree, and a royal town can all be read within the context of Christian symbolism.... The obedient maiden, who first knew when to flee evil, now also proves herself to be a maiden who can face and resist evil for another's sake. In other words, she becomes a figure of self-sacrificing love, and thus she becomes a figure of Christ Himself. Rossetti underscores Lizzie's Christ-likeness, in her call to Laura, which recalls Christ's words to his apostles at the Last Supper. (pp. 74-5)

³³ Duffy, p. 272.

³⁴ Waldman, however, discusses 'Shut Out' with reference to the figure of Eve, but without directly linking the narrator who is 'shut out' with Eve herself. Instead, it is figured as a Gothic poem which 'provides a warning that the subject must carefully discriminate between different opportunities for submission' (p. 38).

Such readings seem convincing in the context of Rossetti's beliefs, but they also permit a consideration of her use of Gothic. The fall of Laura is indeed described in sexual terms, but the fact that she is tempted by luscious fruits proffered by sub-human species clearly allies her temptation to that of Eve. In succumbing, Laura's fall is moral, not sexual. When Lizzie exposes herself to the same temptation to save her sister, the goblins attack her in a scene which can be compared to rape, but it is the attack on her morality and senses which is paramount here. It would be convenient to read Laura as the weaker side of Lizzie, to see them as two sides of one character, but to do so would negate the implication behind the poem, that salvation is both external (through Christ) *and* internal (through repentance). Further, by broadening the boundaries of 'fallenness', Rossetti achieves a certain classlessness, since from her experience of working in the penitentiary, a sexual fall would most likely be found among the working classes, unlike a moral fall. Rossetti is thus not only doubling the fallen and the unfallen, but also twins the working and middle-classes. This is linked to the dual nature of women which is also underlined in the novels and poems, since the virtuous woman is frequently only half of the whole; the fallen woman with her different attributes completes the picture. Rossetti's preoccupation with the figure of Eve provides a useful point of reference.

Rossetti demonstrates an interest in Eve in several of her poems and much of her prose, in particular, discussing the theologically complex problem of Eve in her prose. Her earliest work on Eve is 'Shut Out', which reverses the Gothic trope of the enclosed woman in a domestic space by configuring Eve in exile, mourning after her expulsion from the Garden of Eden. At first, Eve is able to look through the 'iron bars' (l. 2) of the door which excludes her from Eden, but there is a 'shadowless spirit' (l. 9) at the gate to prevent her from re-entering. Having once crossed that threshold, there is no return – and yet Eve retains hope that she will return, begging fruitlessly to 'bid my home remember me | Until I come to it

again' (ll. 15-6). The spirit builds a wall to prevent any further sight of Eden, which places Eve in the position of being imprisoned in the world, locked out of Eden. Forced from her home, she becomes a figure for pity despite her sin, and she is forced into the situation of a Gothic heroine, facing an uncertain future in an apparently inhospitable world. The unspoken irony is that these threats derive from her own actions, yet the image of Eve 'Blinded by tears' (l. 22) anticipates Rossetti's hope in *The Face of the Deep* that Eve too will be redeemed. In 'Eve', the anti-heroine is placed upon the threshold:

While I sit at the door
Sick to gaze within
Mine eye weepeth sore
For sorrow and sin: (ll. 1-4)

It is noteworthy that Rossetti situates Eve on the brink of two worlds to speak her narrative in this poem; her act of eating the apple is barely past as we see her grief for what she has lost. The abbreviated lines give a sense of disjointed emotion which the speaker can barely control; this emotion, one suspects, is exacerbated by passing through the gate which will exile her from her home. As the chapter on Maturin has discussed, the image of Eve in 'Shut Out' and 'Eve' is foreshadowed by Rossetti's early poem, 'Immalee', in which the innocent island girl of *Melmoth the Wanderer* can be read as a cipher for pre-lapsarian Eve. The sympathy of nature with Eve's plight as she gazes into a lost Eden presupposes that Eve's sin which precipitated the Fall was a 'natural' sin, of curiosity as well as disobedience, which paves the way for Rossetti's unusual exegetical approach in her devotional prose.

Rossetti exploits verbal ambiguities in her interpretation of scripture to present an unusual case for Eve; for example, in *Letter and Spirit* Rossetti considers the Fall, and her

conclusion suggests that language may be at the root of it, similar to Milton's argument in Book IX of *Paradise Lost*:

Adam and Eve illustrate two sorts of defection (I Tim 2:14). Eve made a mistake, 'being deceived' she was in the transgression: Adam made no mistake: his was an error of will, hers partly of judgment; nevertheless both proved fatal....By birthright gracious and accessible, she lends an ear to all petitions from all petitioners. She desires to instruct ignorance, to rectify misapprehension: 'unto the pure all things are pure,' and she never suspects even the serpent. Possibly a trace of blameless infirmity transpires in the wording of her answer, 'lest ye die,' for God had said to the man '...in the day that thou eatest thereof thou *shalt surely* die:' but such tenderness of spirit seems even lovely in the great first mother of mankind; or it may be that Adam had modified the form, if it devolved on him to declare the tremendous fact to his second self. Adam and Eve reached their goal, the Fall, by different routes. With Eve, the serpent discussed a question of conduct, and talked her over to his own side: with Adam, so far as appears, he might have argued the point forever and gained no vantage...' (LS, p. 17-8)

Either Eve misunderstood the command from God (which may even be Adam's fault), or else the language of the serpent deceived her, since she did not know that anyone might try to mislead her. Both interpretations rely on the slipperiness of language; and both also at least partially exonerate Eve. This is comparable to Milton's treatment of the fall of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, where Eve tells the serpent that '...God hath said, Ye shall not eate | Thereof, nor shall ye touch it, lest ye die' (Book IX 662-3). Milton's Eve's greatest sin, it seems, is to be 'credulous' rather than intrinsically wicked, though Rossetti's version goes further in

vindication of Eve. Leaving the theology of this aside, Rossetti's disquisition highlights the interpretative nature of her beliefs and the significance of language for her religion as well as her poetry.

It thus seems possible that the dual and oppositional figures of the fallen/unfallen woman, in their personified guises in Revelation, in the Gothic novel, and in Rossetti's own poetry, are resolved through the figure of Eve. Rossetti's conscious association of Eve with the figure of the 'woman clothed with the sun' is not necessary to the text on which she is commenting, yet she chooses to draw our attention to Eve at this point, forcing the reader into a consideration of woman's supposedly dual nature, and also emphasizing the redeemability of any fall. No longer an outcast figure, Eve has overcome her liminality, through the grace of God, and stands in the New Jerusalem along with the rest of her sex. Having passed over the threshold of Eden after the Fall, she may be permitted to return after the Apocalypse. It is this sense of returning home which allows Rossetti to develop a sense of closure to the Gothic tropes of exile and boundaries. Milbank describes the movement of women as an important trope which tracks their progress, in Gothic and sensation fiction, physically rather than mentally, where the:

portrayal of the heroine charts her progress across a spatial field of forces as she crosses domestic boundaries, rather than the development of her mental processes over time. To cross boundaries, to plot, is the only way in which the woman can register on the narrative of events. The 'fallen woman' is a favourite character in sensation fiction for this reason, but the interest is not in her existence as a social problem, [...] but as a transgressor, in the literal image of the word. She 'errs' in moving between domestic house and market-place; her dissimulation as a plotter hides her private motive behind her public 'face'. In moving back into the private

sphere for her own advancement, the errant woman creates a false mediation by revealing the private house as itself a market-place.³⁵

To read Eve as a fallen women thus makes sense; for Rossetti to maintain complete confidence in her ultimate redemption and salvation is to be expected. Milbank's critique of the patriarchal society enacted in the novels of Radcliffe, for example, demonstrates that the crossing of boundaries requires the heroine to transgress, yet Rossetti reverses this in the final, triumphant scenes of *Revelation*.

In chapter 21 of *Revelation*, where 'a new heaven and a new earth' (21. 1) are revealed to John, the city of the New Jerusalem, apostrophized as the Bride of Christ, is described in resplendent detail. In particular, its appearance from the outside is seen, set with gemstones and blazing with 'the glory of God' (21. 11). Its walls and gates – presumably as the parts which John can see in his vision – are depicted, and Rossetti's commentary discusses these walls and gates:

Wherefore 'a wall' and wherefore 'gates'? 'Thou shalt call thy walls Salvation and thy gates Praise.' Isaiah writes *walls*, St. John *a wall*. New Jerusalem standing foursquare possesses under one aspect four walls; yet these being continuous and all four corner-stoned into unity seem to be one at least as indisputably as to be four. And (if so I may take the sense) Isaiah's *walls* reappearing as St. John's *wall*, sets forth the universal salvation as being from the alone Will, Might, Love of God: whilst the *gates* are twelve, because multitudinous mankind offering praise for so great a gift uplifts an innumerable voice. (*FD*, p. 497)

³⁵ Alison Milbank, *Daughters of the House: Modes of Gothic in Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 17.

The wall is therefore constructed as inclusive, no longer the unpassable boundary but one which has many gates through which the Church can pass. False divisions are dissolved and thresholds unnecessary as all can enter. Moreover, 'those gates are of ingress not of egress, for none who enter thereby shall go out any more' (*FD*, p. 497). This city provides 'a genuine home' from which there is no need to leave; all wants will be supplied within, and no-one can be ejected (*FD*, p. 498). To trivialize the drama of Revelation, Rossetti's commentary provides, structurally speaking, a Gothic 'marriage plot', in which, despite travels, trials and a Fall, the Bride is reunited with her Beloved, and together they form a domestic centre from which there is no further transgressing of boundaries and no separation. The mysteries of the plot by this stage have been discovered – Rossetti states that knowledge that was once forbidden will now be available; a family is reunited, and the future is secure, headed by the 'Great Householder Whose house is the universe'. The happy ending is reinforced by the fulfilment of desires: 'All holy desires shall be fulfilled, — nor shall even mere blameless desires be nothing accounted of' (*FD*, p. 498).

The commentary takes pains to describe and discuss the gates of the holy city, which are beautiful objects in themselves, inlaid with pearls and other precious jewels. However, 'a gate is to be passed through, not resided in' (*FD*, p. 511). There is, therefore, no need to hesitate on the threshold, though 'The open gates bear permanent witness to human free will, still free even when made indefectible' (*FD*, p. 516). The exercise of free will, which caused the fall, is in Rossetti's version of the New Jerusalem enshrined in the very walls. Moreover, unlike the gates of Eden, these gates will never shut. Though much of this material is in the Book of Revelation, much is also Rossetti's exegetical and descriptive discourse; there is no doubt that she adds considerably to the biblical account of the walls and gates of heaven in Revelation 21. 10-21.

In Rossetti's poetry and prose, it is the world we know which figures as Gothic. Images of enclosure, such as in 'The Convent Threshold' and 'An Immurata Sister', feature as atmospheres which stifle growth and belief, while in nature, humanity is at its freest and closest to God. Rossetti configures the world in which we live as Gothic, because of the very nature of its fallenness. Many Gothic novels deal with what the characters perceive to be the end of their world – their own death or attack, death of a loved one, or the discontinuation of lineage; *The Face of the Deep* enacts for the reader the genuine apocalypse, of which Gothic plots are a faint shadow. This seems quite probable if one accepts Kristeva's argument that 'all literature is probably a version of the apocalypse' (p. 207). Rossetti is renowned for her poems of patience and suffering, which enact this life as a waiting period for the next, in poems such as:

Long and dark the nights, dim and short the days,
 Mounting weary heights on our weary ways,
 Thee our God we praise.
 Scaling heavenly heights by unearthly ways,
 Thee our God we praise all our nights and days,
 Thee our God we praise. (*FD*, p. 17)

The ultimate goal for Rossetti and her readers is finally to cross the threshold and enter the heavenly world which awaits; Death is not to be feared since 'Death is the gate to that City'.³⁶ Critics have written of the significance of Gothic 'atmosphere', in which fear prevails, suffering is great and, moreover, the world seems dark, lit by only occasional glimpses of the

³⁶ Arthur Quiller-Couch, *The Poet as Citizen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), p. 22.

sublime.³⁷ This atmosphere is frequently populated by symbols that are a reminder of the grave, such as insects, which are an often-used trope in Rossetti's work, and her work reflects 1 Corinthians 13. 12: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known'. Life on earth is thus a Gothic, grotesque, fallen reflection of life in heaven, and of the world as God intended, and this is reflected in Rossetti's fractured and fragmented work, particularly in the prose works which are collections of scripture, commentary, personal thoughts and poems. This fractured life is therefore a natural state of the human condition, from which we can escape only through Christ. Furthermore, Rossetti implies that the fractured way of seeing is the only way that is possible:

Doubtless a thread of perfect sequence runs throughout Divine Revelation, binding it into one sacred and flawless whole. But not so do feeble eyes discern it. I can but study it piece by piece, word by word, unworthy even to behold the little I seem to observe. Much of this awful Apocalypse opens to my apprehension rather a series of aspects than any one defined and certified object. It summons me to watch and pray and give thanks; it urges me to climb heavenward. Its thread doubtless consists unbroken: but my clue is at the best woven of broken lights and shadows, here a little and there a little. (*FD*, p. 174)

David Punter in his essay on poetry and the uncanny, suggests that in 'The Ancient Mariner', the tension of the poem is in waiting to cross a threshold which we know cannot be crossed. This is because:

³⁷ For example, Isidora's moments of transcendence in prison in *Melmoth the Wanderer*, or Julia's brief exhilaration after the ball in Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance*.

according to myth, [...] within each threshold lives a small god; and such a god is capable of changing us, as we cross from the outside to the inside or vice versa, into something completely different, such that our very memory will be burned away, erased, will become the substance of erasure.³⁸

Though Punter's comments relate specifically to Coleridge's poem, they are strangely applicable for the Rossettian Gothic in *The Face of the Deep*. We 'know', with human understanding, that we cannot cross the threshold between earth and heaven, and yet it is finally proved, in Revelation, that through the grace of God we can. Moreover, that transformation to which Punter refers takes place in the Apocalypse. Theological beliefs about the exact nature of the resurrected in heaven vary, but Punter's description gives a reasonable (if unintentional) view of it. This final threshold can be crossed, permanently, and the shadows and fears of the Gothic world dismissed.

Shadows to-day, while shadows show God's Will,
 Light were not good except he sent us light.
 Shadows to-day, because this day is night
 Whose marvels and whose mysteries fulfil
 Their course and deep in darkness serve him still.
 Thou dim aurora, on the extremest height
 Of airy summits wax not over bright;
 Refrain thy rose, refrain thy daffodil.

³⁸ David Punter, 'Shape and Shadow: On Poetry and the Uncanny', in *A Companion to the Gothic*, ed. by David Punter (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 193-205 (p. 196).

Until God's Word go forth to kindle thee

And garland thee and bid thee stoop to us,

Blush in the heavenly choirs and glance not down:

To-day we race in darkness for a crown,

In darkness for beatitude to be,

In darkness for the city luminous. (*FD*, p. 166)

Conclusion

Christina Rossetti's poems have an intricate relationship with Gothic conventions and practice. From her earliest poems, which demonstrate a direct interaction with the novels of Maturin, to her mature prose works, which engage with some of the tropes of Gothic and draw particularly on the Book of Revelation, her work offers a range of complex possibilities for a study of Gothic. Rather than suggesting that Rossetti's work is the result of the direct influence of Gothic, this thesis has aimed to provide a framework for exploring the numerous ways in which Rossetti produced a unique mode of Gothic. Moreover, my argument has been predicated upon the concept that Gothic is a multi-stranded and sprawling collection of tropes, aesthetics, ideas and styles which cannot be easily contained by the word 'Gothic'. The 'Gothic' which I have traced in Rossetti's work originates only partly in her reading of Gothic literature; it is similarly indebted to Dante, to Pre-Raphaelitism, and most of all to her Christian faith and the Bible.

The introduction proposed that this thesis would approach Rossetti's work from an unusual angle. Since the reputation of Rossetti's poetry has in many ways suffered from being read as devotional, or has been neglected in favour of a multitude of readings of 'Goblin Market', the approach of this thesis has been to examine her work by considering her use of Gothic. This does not imply that she is not a deeply religious poet; it is impossible to understand her writing fully without considering Tractarianism, as several recent studies have shown. Yet, as McGann has suggested, much of her work is still marginalized or neglected, possibly due to its reputation as primarily religious.¹ Such a focus on her faith may imply that

¹ McGann argues in 'The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti' that this a problem for most Christian poetry, which suffers from its apparent 'thematic uniformity' in which theological differences and the poetics and approach of different poets 'tend to disappear into a basically congruent economy of Christian thought' (p. 127).

Rossetti was not engaged with contemporary culture, or with literature other than the Bible. This thesis, therefore, has argued that this is not the case. Other critics already discussed have examined the relationship between Rossetti's work and Dante, or Pre-Raphaelitism, for example. Gothic, frequently read into Victorian novels such as those of the Brontës and Wilkie Collins, provides a means to remove Rossetti from her familiar context of Victorian women poets and examine her poetry and prose against a wider backdrop of emerging nineteenth-century Gothic. A study of Gothic in Rossetti's texts also permits a reading of some of the elements which make up a fractured Gothic which appear in Rossetti's work, which are not usually discussed in studies of her work.

The exploration of these elements has included an examination of the possibilities which spectrality, a theoretically-inflected approach for examining work in the field of nineteenth-century literature, can offer. Theories of spectrality are further-reaching than phantoms. This theoretical framework offers the space to consider work on the writer as spectral, linked to the interaction between writer and reader which is significant for both Gothic and Tractarianism. Most significant, though, is the portrayal of death and the afterlife which Rossetti's ghost-poems offer. The use of spectres is often controversial in Gothic, whether they prove to be genuine phantoms or can be explained rationally, and it is true that there are many spectres in Rossetti's work, although they do not always conform to the ghosts of Gothic novels. Rossetti's spectres are always genuine, and offer a voice from beyond the grave and inside the mind, which is complicated by Rossetti's theological position. In this chapter a persistent situation emerges, that of the threshold to be crossed. A feature of Gothic novels, with the implication of imprisonment on one side and freedom on the other, the threshold between death and life proves to be crucial for Rossettian Gothic.

Though Rossetti read a range of Gothic novelists, there is no doubt that her deepest literary engagement related to the works of Maturin. Her early monologues have been little

studied and are now rarely re-published other than in complete collections of her poems, but a close examination suggests that they are indicative of a wide field of engagement with Gothic. The poems take moments of drama and conflict in the novels and offer a perspective, usually that of a heroine, which provides an interiority rarely seen in Maturin's novels, though more common in the work of Radcliffe. These poems have Gothic roots of which traces remain, fractured in their removal from their context of Maturin's narrative, but retaining what D'Amico refers to as 'motifs' of Gothic which persist throughout Rossetti's writing life. Some of the tropes which are explored in this chapter are not commonly considered to be an element of Gothic, such as a preoccupation with knowledge, related to the Fall in Eden; the use of language to deceive; and the self-sacrificing heroine. Rossetti is rewriting Gothic in these poems, transforming manipulated heroines into emblems of integrity, answerable to God rather than to mankind. Once again, Rossettian Gothic returns to matters of Christianity.

The grotesque, though rarely considered as an aspect of Gothic, offers a perspective on Rossetti's work which is akin to Ruskin's approach to the grotesque, as a moral dynamic in art and literature. Rossetti's poems demonstrate the effects of immorality and vice in the grotesques of 'The Dead City', a poem strongly reminiscent of Ruskin's Venice, for example. Though Rossetti is known as a poet of restraint, her grotesques demonstrate her unique use of disfigurement and distortion as a technique of contrast. My inference is that the post-lapsarian world is peopled with grotesques in Rossetti's eyes. Many of her poems use this distorted excess to demonstrate a contrast between the ideal perfection of heaven and the gross irreverence and blasphemy of earth. Taking Christ as an example of perfected humanity, all other figures appear grotesque in contrast. From the hideous goblins and their evil fruit in 'Goblin Market', to the master of the dancing bear in 'Brother Bruin', and encompassing the wickedness of human nature in her devotional poems, Rossetti's grotesques pervade her

work. Moreover, they complicate the relationship between the internal mind and external body, emphasizing the untrustworthiness of appearances and the disjunction that can occur between outward beauty and inward ugliness, though in some poems the physical appearance begins to reveal the horror of the immoral soul. Fear, in Gothic, is often essentially a fear for one's soul, and it is this fear which the Rossettian grotesque manifests.

Rossetti's book of poems for children offers a range of moral lessons, transposing the message of her adult poems into ones more suitable for the child reader. These are, overall, kindly taught, and, despite their preoccupation with the death of the child, offer a positive perspective on the world. In seriously considering the poems in *Sing-Song*, I have examined how features of her adult poems, such as the threshold to cross and the typological significance of nature, reappear in a different form. The conclusion reached is that *Sing-Song* is, in many ways, less Gothic than previous works for children; certainly it is less terrifying, and milder in its lessons. Yet it offers the child an opportunity to free itself from the terrors of the world, explaining death and sin in allegories, and providing the child with the prospect of leaving the nursery world without fear. Though these poems are not, on the whole, religious, they offer a Christian perspective without excessive moralizing, and create an idealized space in which the child can explore the world without the terrors of Gothic, which remains at the margins of the text.

Sing-Song provides an example of Rossetti's moral instruction to children; the final chapter of this thesis explores her devotional and exegetical texts which offer Christian edification to adults. My discussion of these texts, particularly *The Face of the Deep*, provides some potential answers to the questions raised by Rossetti's Gothic, of origin and purpose. Its roots lie deeper than the Gothic novels which she read as a child, reaching back to her absorption in biblical texts, especially the Book of Revelation. All her prose works appear preoccupied with the boundaries between life and death, between earth and heaven,

and between the fallen and grotesque earth and the perfection of heaven. This becomes increasingly apparent in a close reading of *The Face of the Deep*, which contrasts the terrors that the Apocalypse will visit upon humanity with the unsurpassed splendour of heaven. In her discussion of the women depicted in the Book of Revelation, Rossetti offers a perspective on the doubled figure of femininity which haunts Victorian culture, and provides a potential solution not only to the horrors of the Gothic world but also to the ‘problem’ of women, brought about by Eve’s disobedience. Eventually, death offers humanity the opportunity to escape the Gothic world and move into a place free from terror. The final chapter of this thesis, exploring this relationship between Gothic and the Bible manifested in Rossetti’s prose works, provides a conclusion in itself to the roots of Rossettian Gothic.

Gothic, I conclude, fractured and incoherent from its earliest manifestations in Walpole, is closely related to Christian belief, drawing upon its traditions and biblical texts. One of the many threads constituting the fabric of Gothic is Christianity; early Gothic novels are undoubtedly produced within a framework of Christian belief, and Rossetti’s poems extend this, setting her poetic narratives in a fallen world that she expresses as Gothic. The two terms, ‘religious’ and ‘Gothic’, seem to collide, but they demonstrably fit together in Rossetti’s work, from the Maturin poems through to her prose works. Rossetti combines her faith with darker elements drawn from Gothic, producing poetry and prose which refigures the world around her as dark and full of terrors, and apparently irreconcilable to its maker, a problem which will be resolved at the Apocalypse. For Rossetti, then, Gothic is absorbed into her work, sometimes so deeply that it is barely apparent, but its attributes serve as a vehicle for her beliefs; she expresses the world and her anxieties in terms of Gothic tropes. To read Rossetti purely as a religious poet, then, is to miss the implications of her mode of expressing her faith; her work is caught up in a web of intertextuality, subtle influences and overtly expressed theology which constitute an original mode of Gothic.

Appendix 1: 'Look on this picture and on this'

(12 July 1856)¹

I wish we once were wedded, – then I must be true;

You should hold my will in yours to do or to undo:

But now I hate myself Eva when I look at you.²

You have seen her hazel eyes, her warm dark skin,

Dark hair – but oh those hazel eyes a devil is dancing in: –

You my saint lead up to heaven she lures down to sin.

[Listen Eva I repent, indeed I do my love:

How should I choose a peacock and leave and grieve a dove? –

If I could turn my back on her and follow you above.]

[No it's not her beauty bloomed like an autumn peach,

Not her pomp of beauty too high for me to reach;

It's her eyes, her witching manner – ah the lore they teach.]

[You are winning, well I know it, who should know but I?

You constrain me, I must yield or else must hasten by: –

But she, she fascinates me, I can neither fight nor fly.]

¹ Deleted stanzas appear in square brackets.

² W. M. Rossetti's MS alteration.

She's so redundant, stately; – in truth now have you seen
 Ever anywhere such beauty, such a stature, such a mien?
 She may be queen of devils but she's every inch a queen.

If you sing to me, I hear her subtler sweeter still
 Whispering each tender cadence strangely sweet to fill
 All that lacks in music all my soul and sense and will.

[If you dance, tho' mine eyes follow where my hand I gave
 I only see her presence like a sunny wave
 I only feel her presence like a wind too strong to rave!]

[If we talk: I love you, do you love me again? –
 Tho' your lips speak it's her voice I flush to hear so plain
 Say: Love you? yes I love you, love can neither change nor wane.]

But, you ask, 'why struggle? I have given you up:
 Take again your pledges, snap the cord and break the cup:
 Feast you with your temptation for I in heaven will sup.' –

Can I bear to think upon you strong to break not bend,
 Pale with inner intense passion silent to the end,
 Bear to leave you, bear to grieve you, I my dove my friend? –

[One short pang and you would rise a light in heaven

While we grovelled in the darkness mean and unforgiven
 Tho' our cup of love brimmed sevenfold crowns of love were seven.]

[What shall I choose, what can I choose for you and her and me;
 With you the haven of rest, with her the tossing miry sea;
 Time's love with her, or choose with you love's all eternity. –]

[No,³ you answer coldly yet with a quivering voice:
 That is over, doubt and struggle, we have sealed our choice;
 Leave me to my contentment vivid with fresh hopes and joys.]

Listening so, I hide mine eyes and fancy years to come:
 You cherished in another home with no cares burdensome;
 You straitened in a windingsheet pulseless at peace and dumb.

[So I fancy – The new love has driven the old away;
 She has found a dearer shelter or dearer stronger stay;
 Perhaps now she would thank me for the freedom of that day.]

Open house and heart barred to me alone the door;
 Children bound to meet her, babies crow before: –
 Blessed wife and blessed mother whom I may see no more.

³ D'Amico's 'Maturin Poems' includes this poem in its complete format, but opens this stanza with 'Nay', as does the 1904 edition of her poems, while the MS has 'No'.

Or I fancy – In the grave her comely body lies:

She is `tiring for the Bridegroom till the morning star shall rise,

Then to shine a glory in the nuptials of the skies.

No more yearning tenderness, no more pale regret,

She will not look for me when the marriage guests are set.

She joys with joy eternal as we had never met.

I would that one of us were dead, were gone no more to meet,

Or she and I were dead together stretched here at your feet,

That she and I were strained together in one windingsheet.

[Hidden away from all the world upon this bitter morn;

Hidden from all the scornful world, from all your keener scorn;

Secure and secret in the dark as blessed babe unborn.]

[A pitiless fiend is in your eyes to tempt me and to taunt:

If you were dead I verily believe that you would haunt

The home you loved, the man you loved, you said you loved – avaunt.]

[Why do you face me with those eyes so calm they drive me mad,

Too proud to droop before me and own that you are sad?

Why have you a lofty angel made me mean and cursed and bad?]

How have you the heart to face me with that passion in your stare

Deathly silent? weep before me, rave at me in your despair –
 If you keep patience wings will spring and a halo from your hair.

[Yet what matters – yea what matters? your frenzy can but mock:
 You do not hold my heart's life key to lock and to unlock,
 The door will not uncloseto you tho' long you wait and knock.]

[Have I wronged you? no not I nor she in deed or will:
 You it is alone that mingle the venomous cup and fill;
 Why are you so little lovely that I cannot love you still? –]

[One pulse, one tone, one ringlet of hers outweighs the whole
 Of you, your puny grace puny body puny soul:
 You but a taste of sweetness, she an overrunning bowl.]

[Did I make you, that you blame because you are not best?
 Not so, be wise, take patience, turn away and be at rest:
 Shall I not know her lovelier who is far loveliest?]

See now how proud you are, like us after all, no saint;
 Not so upright but that you are bowed with the old bent;
 White at whiteheat, tainted with the devil's special taint:

[Sit you still and wring the cup drop after loathsome drop:
 You have let loose a torrent it is not you can stop;

You have sowed a noisome fieldful, now reap the stinging crop.]

[Did you think to sit in safety, to watch me torn and tost

Struggling like a mad dog, watching her tempting doubly lost?

Howl you, you wretched woman, for your flimsy hopes are crost.]

[Be still, tho' you may writhe you shall hear the branding truth:

You who thought to sit in judgment on our souls forsooth,

To sit in frigid judgment on our ripe luxuriant youth.]

Did I love you? never from the first cold day to this;

You are not sufficient for my aim of life, my bliss;

You are not sufficient, but I found the one that is.

[The wine of love that warms me from this life's mortal chill:

Drink with love I drink again, athirst I drink my fill;

Lapped in love I care not doth it make alive or kill.]

Then did I never love you? – ah the sting struck home at last;

You are drooping, fainting, dying – the worst of death is past;

A light is on your face from the nearing heaven forecast.

Never? – yes I loved you then; I loved: the word still charms: –

For the first time last time lie in my heart my arms,

For the first last time as if I shielded you from harms.

[I trampled you, poor dove, to death, you clung to me, I spurned;
 I taunted you, I tortured you, while you sat still and yearned: –
 Oh lesson taught in anguish but in double anguish learned.

For after all I loved you, loved you then, I love you yet.
 Listen love I love you: see, the seal of truth is set
 On my face in tears – you cannot see? then feel them wet.

Pause at heaven's dear gate, look back, one moment back to grieve;
 You go home thro' death to life; but I, I still must live:
 On the threshold of heaven's love, O love can you forgive? –

Fully freely fondly, with heart truth above an oath,
 With eager utter pardon given unasked and nothing loth;
 Heaping coals of fire upon our heads forgiving both.

One word more – not one; one look more – too late too late: –
 Lapped in love she sleeps who was slashed with scorn and hate;
 Nestling in the lap of love the dove has found a mate.

Night has come, the night of rest; day will come, that day:
 To her glad dawn of glory kindled from the deathless ray:
 To us a searching fire and strict balances to weigh.

The tearless tender eyes are closed; the tender lips are dumb:

I shall not see or hear them more until that day shall come:

Then they must speak, what will they say – what then will be the sum? –

Shall we stand upon the left and she upon the right –

We smirched with endless death and shame, she glorified in white:

Will she sound our accusation in intolerable light?

[Be open-armed to us in love – type of another Love –

As she forgave us ones below will she forgive above,

Enthroned to all eternity our sister-friend and dove? –

Appendix 2: Excerpt from *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70) by William Morris

O dwellers on the lovely earth,
Why will ye break your rest and mirth
To weary us with fruitless prayer;
Why will ye toil and take such care
For children's children yet unborn,
And garner store of strife and scorn
To gain a scarce-remembered name,
Cumbered with lies and soiled with shame?

And if the gods care not for you,
What is this folly ye must do
To win some mortal's feeble heart?
O fools! when each man plays his part,
And heeds his fellow little more
Than these blue waves that kiss the shore
Take heed of how the daisies grow.
O fools! and if ye could but know
How fair a world to you is given.

O brooder on the hills of heaven,
When for my sin thou drav'st me forth
Hadst thou forgot what this was worth,
Thine own hand had made? The tears of men

The death of threescore years and ten,
The trembling of the timorous race –
Had these things so bedimmed the place
Thine own hand had made, thou could not know
To what a heaven the earth might grow
If fear beneath the earth were laid
If hope failed not, nor love decayed.¹

¹ Morris, William, *The Earthly Paradise*, 3 vols (Boston: Roberts, 1869), pp. 463-4.

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