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Pre-Raphaelite Visuality in Christina Rossetti's "When I am Dead, My Dearest"

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It is difficult to discuss Christina Rossetti and her work without acknowledging her connection, and indeed her intimate relationship with the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. Rossetti's life and work is fundamentally intertwined with the brotherhood as she was a frequent sitter for the likes of Millais or her brother Dante Gabriel. She was also engaged to James Collinson, which had a significant effect on her life after the engagement's annulment, and impacted the themes of her work, notably those of engagement and lost love in poems such as 'Three Nuns' (Leighton 373). Further influences can be found in relation to her complex relationship with her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, which crossed the boundaries of the artistic, familial and even romantic, alluded to in "The Convent Threshold" with lines such as "There's blood between us, love, my love" ("Threshold," line 1) and "My lily feet are soiled with mud, / With scarlet mud which tells a tale" ("Threshold," lines 7-8), their relationship having a major influence on her as an artist as well as many prevalent themes of her works.

Rossetti shared a particular affinity with her brother Dante Gabriel; the two of them were affectionately known as "the storms" (Macneal vi) and shared a reverence for Dante Alighieri (Curran 294), most clearly exemplified by what Walter Pater refers to as "particularisation" or "the poetic way of seeing and presenting things" (319). Indeed, the delicacy and precision of her language (Macneal vii), the deceptive simplicity of her diction (Curran 291) coupled with the unconventional, even musical, rhyming schemes (Macneal vii) are the hallmarks of her style. Stuart Curran wrote, "[h]er most consistently remarkable poetic attribute is her facility in rhyming and fitting thought into form

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without a trace of awkwardness" (293). Rossetti was a natural and possessed a fluidity in style; hers was "a poetry guided by ear rather than static scheme or form" (Macneal vii).

While her style and aesthetics shared some resemblance with the poetry written by her brother, as well as their mutual literary influences Keats and Tennyson (Curran 292), her visuality was formulated precisely through these personal relationships and experiences with the brotherhood. Though the concept of brotherhood by definition excludes sisterhood, another strong theme for Rossetti, it is not a stretch to say that her life in proximity to, and entanglement with the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood has given her poetry a kind of pre-Raphaelite visuality that demonstrates many of the elements one might find in the paintings of Millais, Hunt or Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Pre-Raphaelite visuality in this context means a connection, or rather a metonymic relationship of proximity between the image and the spoken word, typical of pre-Raphaelite philosophy and artistic endeavours, both painterly and poetic. Many of the pre-Raphaelites engaged in artistic portrayals of literary works, with Shakespeare in particular being a proving ground for the young pre-Raphaelites – double asterisked in their list of immortals (Hunt 51). They connected their work by proximity to the literary canon with none more prolific than John Everett Millais, in the words of Tatjana Jukić, "it is impossible not to notice Millais's obsession with the literary canon, and his need to insert his own paintings as a pictorial commentary on the powerful, important impact of the written Word" (*Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 40[1]). Dante Gabriel Rossetti went

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as far as writing poetry to accompany his paintings, such is the case with his painting *Proserpine*. In short, pre-Raphaelite visuality is series of metonymic relationship connecting the visual and literary elements, both painted and spoken, included and omitted, inferred and implied. Christina Rossetti, who is very much a part of the pre-Raphaelite circle, borrows these visual practices and applies them to her literary work.

It must be noted that, even though Rossetti was very involved with the brotherhood, she was not and could not be a member. As Jukić points out "[t]he very notion of brotherhood, that is, was allowed symbolic grafts and a space of redefinition only at the expense of reinforcing the exclusion that produced it in the first place – only at the expense of defining itself against sisterhood" ("Dangers of Gendering" 25). Though the two Rossetti brothers, Dante Gabriel and William Michael, were full members of the brotherhood, the two sisters, Christina and Maria, were barred membership. Jukić goes on to say that

> [t]he exclusion of the sisters has in turn structured the paradox fundamental for any analysis of the poetry of Christina Rossetti: her poetry cannot be analytically approached without taking into account the logic of this and other subsequent exclusions, because it was produced within yet outside Pre-Raphaelitism – within yet outside a male regime of representation, or else within yet outside a social practice of structuring maleness. ("Dangers of Gendering" 25)

This puts Christina in her own metonymic relationship with the brotherhood itself and goes a long way to explain her use of pre-Raphaelite imagery but also the very strong themes of denial permeating her work.

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Having established the context behind Rossetti and her work, it is the further aim of this essay to analyse one of her poems precisely in these visual, and personal, terms. The poem analysed was chosen for the prevalence of themes favoured by Rossetti: dead or dying love and engagement, likely referring to her then fiancé James Collinson, as well as the theme of death which occupied much of her work, partly due to her belief that she was going to die young (Leighton 375), all of which engage a pre-Raphaelite visuality in the form of foregrounding, metonymy, attention to detail and panopticism. The poem in question is one of her most famous, "When I am Dead, My Dearest."

"When I am Dead" is divided equally into two halves, each comprising 8 lines. The first half of the poem, much like the poetry of Dante Gabriel, addresses the beloved, a silent interlocutor, as can be seen in the very title and opening line of the poem ("When I am Dead," line 1). Rossetti is giving instructions on how she should be mourned, saying "Sing no sad songs for me; / Plant thou no roses at my head, / Nor shady cypress tree" ("When I am Dead," lines 2-4). The language employed is that of denial, the denial of conventional mourning mechanisms: no mourning songs, no roses, symbolic either of faith or love, no cypress trees, or rather the conventional mourning mechanisms are invoked but only to be rejected by the lyrical subject.

The rejection, and therefore absence, of such symbolically charged elements is as powerful as their presence in painted works - the attention to absence in the poem achieves the same effect as explicit representation in a painting. The employment of pre-Raphaelite tools of detail and metonymy in detailing the natural world within which

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she is decomposing only to deny the presence of said elements exemplifies the painterly and poetic technique of detailing employed by the pre-Raphaelites as well as provides a window into her life on the outskirts of the brotherhood. Decomposition itself being a very natural ugly process, the idea of veining beauty being another prominent theme for Rossetti in poems such as "Passing and Glassing".

By the end of the first stanza, the lyrical subject instructs her beloved that to mourn her he must disintegrate into the preexisting natural elements that sprout out of her grave, to be the green grass above her, coated "With showers and dewdrops wet" ("When I am Dead," lines 5-6). It is precisely in this visual element that we are presented with the truest example of metonymy, meaning an intimate relationship between objects, subjects and themes that allows for the creation of close associations between the various elements in the form of intense attention to natural life that lies around the subject, described with such simplistic, yet picturesque precision. The line "With showers and dewdrops wet" ("When I am Dead," line 6) expresses a meaningful relationship to the world around the subject that sacrifices the innate narcissism of the human perspective. The mourning is forgone; it is forbidden by the language of denial it insists on the disintegration of the body as well as the mind, expressed in the final lines "And if thou wilt, remember, / And if thou wilt, forget" ("When I am Dead," lines 7-8). The first half of the poem establishes the visuality of the poem; it sets a scene, paints a picture of the elements and the world outside the grave – the green grass, the showers,

the dewdrops, the songs, the roses the shade and trees and the implied soil in which she rests.

The second half of the poem deals with the internal matters of the lyrical subject referring to the subject itself and not a silent "you." Once again, it begins with the language of denial:

> I shall not see the shadows,
> I shall not feel the rain;
> I shall not hear the nightingale;
> Sing on, as if in pain. ("When I am Dead," lines 9-12)

While the first instance of denial is the denial of mourning, here we have a denial of the senses. The lyrical subject is suspended in a dream-like state, a state between life and death, "And dreaming through the twilight; / That doth not rise nor set" ("When I am Dead," lines 13-14). This is characteristic of Rossetti's approach to death, as Leighton writes, "it is not heaven, but entombment, which fascinates Rossetti; it is not 'Soul Sleep' which characterizes the state of death for her, but a disturbing sleeplessness of the mind and an accompanying corruption of the body" (375). The body was disintegrated in the first half of the poem; this second half deals with the deconstruction of the self, of the senses and of the conscious. Leighton goes on to write, "[t]he time of being dead, for

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Rossetti, is very often the in-between-time of twilight – a time of ambiguity, dream, delay. Such a time is liberated from both life and afterlife, from both regret and expectation" (380). This liberation of regret and of expectation is seen most clearly in the final lines, echoing the final lines of the first stanza: "Haply I may remember, / And haply may forget" ("When I am Dead," lines 15-16).

The theme of twilight enables us to further the pre-Raphaelite reading of the poem. The fascination with twilight for Rossetti is precisely in its balance, a lingering state between the acts, in allegorical terms between life and death, between light and dark, a suspension between the call of the heart and the call of heaven (Leighton 380). For the purpose of this paper, however, it is precisely this motif of twilight that helps frame the lyrical subject as a panoptic subject. Nearly all pre-Raphaelite subjects are in fact panoptic subjects, but to properly explain the panoptic subject we must first explain panopticism. The Panopticon was a 1791 study "in which [Jeremy] Bentham attempted to revolutionize the institutions of surveillance by introducing light as an agent of control. The effect of such control is panopticism: one who sees but is not seen watches over all figures in a given field of vision" (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 212[2]). However, "[t]he Panopticon is not a prison. It is a general principle of construction, the polyvalent apparatus of surveillance" (Miller and Miller 3). Architecturally, Foucault, whose seminal work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* laid the groundwork for the theory of panopticism, describes it as such:

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> [A]t the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the periphery building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. They are like so many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible. (5)

The result is a subject that is seen but cannot see (Foucault 5) as well as an observer that sees but cannot be seen (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 212), inducing in the inmate "a state of conscious and permanent visibility" (Foucault 5), as well as blindness, that "assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault 5) and the development of remarkable forms of self-discipline (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 212). Therefore, the panoptic subject is a subject flattened between two sources of light and petrified by the gaze of the beholder. The subject is laid bare, it is a person trapped under the oppressive gaze of its observer. This is reinforced in lines 9 through 11, with the denial of the senses "I shall not see… I shall not feel… I shall not hear"**.**

The subject is buried with no light in sight. However, it is the decomposition of the subject and its "dreaming through the twilight" ("When I am Dead," line 13) that frames it against two light sources. One interpretation is earthly – between yesterday's

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sun and tomorrow's – but the allegorical reading is the earthly light and a heavenly one, the subject being suspended in an in-between space. The elements of obsessive control are evident in the obsession with detail, the roses, the shady cypress tree, the wet dewdrops on the green grass, etc., as well as the commanding, yet delicate language all of which is employed in the first 8 lines.

In the final 8 lines of the poem, the lyrical subject is trapped in between two light sources, suspended in the in between state of life and death, under the unrelenting gaze and scrutiny of the reader with the only way out being the death of the poet and letting go, reflected in the final lines "Haply I may remember, / And haply may forget" ("When I am Dead," lines 15-16), implying that the end of things is the only happy outcome. The final lines of the poem invoke a connection with another tragic lover figure, that of Ophelia from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or better yet the pre-Raphaelite figure *Ophelia* – John Everett Millais' famous 1851-52 painting. Millais' Ophelia and Rossetti's lyrical subject share a connection through the employment of the same pre-Raphaelite imagery, namely through the use of metonymy and detail, particularly in describing nature ("When I am Dead," lines 3-6). Ophelia decomposes in nature, is swallowed up by it, decomposing in the abundance of natural detail – just like lyrical subject in the poem. The subject is in a petrified state, not quite dead and not quite alive, like the lyrical subject in the final 8 lines of the poem. One could attach Rossetti's poem to the painting, and it could reflect the visual and emotional elements of one of the finest examples of pre-Raphaelite principles. The symbolic connection is even more interesting

when taking into consideration that Millais' sitter for the painting was Christina Rossetti's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, the former wife of her brother Dante Gabriel (Jukić, *Zazor, nadzor, sviđanje* 41) demonstrating just how interconnected the pre-Raphaelite circle was.

A final matter of pre-Raphaelite visuality this paper addresses, and a further similarity between the poem and Millais' Ophelia, is that of foregrounding. The elements in the poem layer on top of each other in the vertical field. The visual elements in the first half start from the grave and build up: the grave, the grass, the dewdrops, the roses and trees –invoked through apophasis. The second half consists of three elements: the heart symbolized by the world left behind, the suspended twilight zone in which the subject resides, and the promise of heaven. In short, the visual elements stack on top of each other and translate from the material in the first half to the spiritual in the second. The elements of visuality, meaning and motif layer on top of each other, but ultimately flatten together by their conformity to the central theme of death, or rather a dream-like state.

The theme of death in the poem is both literal and allegorical. The way out for Christina Rossetti, much like Ophelia, is through that final veil of death which captured her fascination so much. Christina's escape from the gaze of the observer, the remarkable levels of self-discipline imposed upon herself and most importantly her complicated existence as a part of and apart from the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood is through the death of the poet. This is alluded to in her semi-autobiographical novella

"Maude" where the moral of the story is "that the Maude in Christina Rossetti-the ambitious, competitive, self-absorbed and self-assertive poet-must die, and be replaced by either the wife, the nun, or, most likely, the kindly useful spinster" (Gilbert and Gubar 552). She must abandon her life in the shadow of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood in order to reassert a grasp on her own life, free of the influences of the people that have shaped her as an artist, or rather she "…should not loiter in the glen of imagination, which is the haunt of goblin men like Keats and Tennyson-or like Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his compatriots of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood" (Gilbert and Gubar 573).

In conclusion, "When I am Dead, My Dearest" presents two clear worlds, the visualised world painted in the first half of the poem, before narrowing into internal matters of the lyrical subject and its deconstruction. The poem's themes, visuality and artistic apparatus give glimpses into Rossetti's complicated existence on the periphery of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. The first 8 lines establish a kind of pre-Raphaelite visuality through the use of detail, nature and a fundamental expression of metonymy that is translated and internalised in the final 8 lines, establishing a panoptic subject that is, by the end of the poem, deconstructed and disintegrated body and soul.

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Notes

[1] Author's translation

[2] Author's translation

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