

**Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Language of Flowers**

Two Volumes

Volume One

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PhD Dissertation  
University of York  
Department of History of Art

December 2019

## Abstract

This thesis examines the role of flowers within the oil paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. It proposes that previous analyses based on the supposed 'Victorian language of flowers' are prejudicial and unduly constrictive. Instead, it makes a case for a more inclusive mode of interpretation structured according to Dante's four levels of interpretation: the literal (in this case, botanical); the allegorical (or symbolic); the moral; and the mystical (here forming an analogy for responses to scent). The final chapter brings all four themes together and offers a different inflexion of the mystical through a careful study of the spectral quality of *Beata Beatrix*. By re-evaluating Victorian critiques by John Ruskin, Walter Pater, William Michael Rossetti, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and William Tirebuck, this thesis seeks to develop a new methodology for examining Rossetti's flowers, thus revealing that Rossetti's language of flowers was more contradictory, elusive, and multi-layered than is currently appreciated.

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## Preface

*– When all that's left of me is love, give me away –*

This dissertation is the culmination of a floral experience that began in St James's Park one rain-drenched afternoon, when I sat down on a sodden bench to peruse a book of short stories. It results from numerous weekly classes at Oxford's Continuing Education Department, and two years studying for a Foundation Certificate in English Literature. It emerges from three years reading for a second degree in the Humanities with the Open University, and motorbike tours with my husband to Sansepolcro in search of Piero della Francesca, Florence to meet the Renaissance Masters, Milan to walk in Leonardo's footsteps, Rome to lunch with Bernini, and Ravenna to commune with Dante Alighieri's ghost. It comes from two years of intensive personal development studying for a Master of Studies in Art and Literature at the University of Oxford, when Professor Barrie Bullen agreed to make an exception, allowing me to join a class that was already oversubscribed. It was here that I was introduced to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and here where my academic journey to grapple with this poet-painter's flowers began in earnest.

The last three years working with Professors Elizabeth Prettejohn and Amanda Lillie at the University of York's History of Art Department have been joyous. I am also profoundly grateful to my external examiner, Professor John Holmes, whose energy and constructive criticism made the Viva such a positive and enjoyable experience.

I trust that by revisiting the meaning behind Rossetti's flowers, I am able to make a useful contribution to our evolving understanding of Rossetti as an artist, and to his place within the floral community of Victorian visionaries.

I also hope that along the way my original way of looking at the subject and the tone of my delivery may inspire others who stumble upon their own tortuous road towards self-discovery.

## Acknowledgements

### ***For My Mum.***

With special thanks to:

Professors Elizabeth Prettejohn, Amanda Lillie, and John Holmes for their encouragement and guidance; Steve Whyman for his sense of adventure; Carole Whyman for her electricity; and Charlotte Perkins Gilman for “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

## Declaration

The Prologue to this thesis was previously published by the Pre-Raphaelite Society in its *PRS Review XXV*, no. 1: (Spring 2017), and was selected as the John Pickard Essay 2016. I have since revised some of the content.

I include this essay to demonstrate where my journey began: assessing Dante Gabriel Rossetti's flowers through the prism of the Victorian language of flowers.

Except where stated, all other work contained within this thesis represents the original contribution of the author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as references.



## Prologue

### Four Flowers and A Funeral

36 Kensington Square, 14 April 1882

Dear Mr Scott – I think you will like to hear how your dear friend Gabriel Rossetti was buried, so I will tell you – for, thanks to your kind telegram, I was there: I had hoped to see you there, and was grieved to hear that you were prevented by illness.

The church at Birchington ... is of gray country flint, built in the twelfth or thirteenth century and restored a few years ago, I thought simply; it is nicely kept, and to-day was full of Easter flowers. It has an old gray tower, and gray shingle spire, which went up, as I noticed during the ceremony, into a pure blue sky. The churchyard is nicely kept too; it was bright with irises and wallflowers in bloom, and close to Gabriel's grave there was a laurestinus [*sic*] and a lilac.<sup>1</sup>

VERNON LUSHINGTON

When 53-year-old Dante Gabriel Rossetti passed away on Easter Sunday, 9 April 1882, it was reasonable to assume that his body was destined for the family tomb in Highgate Cemetery. Instead, a modest ceremony was arranged away from London, within a few miles of his deathbed on the Kent coast. Understandably, his family would have been sensitive to Gabriel's anguish following his wife's exhumation 13 years earlier,<sup>2</sup> and his instruction that he was "on no account to be buried at Highgate,"<sup>3</sup> but also there may have been anxiety to conceal what his brother William calls an even more "sordid subject matter."<sup>4</sup> The languishing Gabriel had hurriedly written his will and given a cheque for £300 (ca. £18,000) on Good Friday to William.<sup>5</sup> Having supported Gabriel

financially during the greater part of his life, William was now increasingly fearful about the unknown claims that could be made against the estate if Gabriel remained incapacitated or worse.<sup>6</sup> This issue perturbs him in his memoirs, where he consciously attempts to limit speculation post mortem by emphasising that after paying his brother's debts there was indeed "a substantial sum" remaining.<sup>7</sup> Family friend William Bell Scott concedes that "for more reasons than one" the family chose Birchington for the funeral organising a low-key service in Kent and mitigating "serious embarrassment."<sup>8</sup> Rossetti's remains were subsequently interred "quietly and without ceremony" according to the local newspaper and "although it had initially been intended to have a public funeral at Highgate, for family reasons the idea was abandoned."<sup>9</sup>

Pragmatism aside, a more poetically satisfying interpretation emerges when considering correspondence sent immediately after the funeral by one of the handful of mourners attending. It provides further support for Thomas Hall Caine's assertion that "though we had little dreamed that we should lay Rossetti in his last sleep here, no other place could be quite so fit. It was, indeed, the resting-place for a poet."<sup>10</sup> In this letter Rossetti's "excellent old friend" and Pre-Raphaelite patron, Judge Vernon Lushington (1832-1912)<sup>11</sup> who attended the funeral "spontaneously,"<sup>12</sup> provides a poignantly simple description of the scene. He emphasises the contrast between the natural blossoming of flowers and shrubs close to Rossetti's grave and the repetitive greyness and towering tradition of the church's old steeple and shingle spire; it is Lushington's precision in naming the flowers he sees during such an emotional occasion that underlines their particular significance. The use of *flora symbolica* in

Pre-Raphaelite circles was, of course, commonplace and Rossetti himself utilised flowers and their associated tropes extensively in much of his work.

This prologue details how an appreciation of Nature's contextual metaphor creates a final Rossettian collage of allusion: a fitting farewell to the master of floral manipulation. It will seek illumination from a variety of interdisciplinary sources including Rossetti's art and literary interests and the vagaries of his own life experience together with floral texts including John Gerard's *Herball* (1636), a copy of which Rossetti owned, John Henry Ingram's *Flora Symbolica* (1869), the most complete work on floral symbolism published in England,<sup>13</sup> and botanist Hilderic Friend's two-volume work, *Flowers and Flower Lore* (1886), regarded as one of the most scholarly flower folklore texts of the period.<sup>14</sup>

The first flower Lushington highlights, the iris, takes its name from the Greek rainbow goddess. According to floriography the iris often denotes "a message," and in context, "a message from beyond the grave."<sup>15</sup> This holy flower, idealised in Rossetti's *Sancta Liliis* (*fig.1*), recalls how Rossetti drew 'Lizzie' "with iris stuck in her dear hair" "during one of the happiest times of his life."<sup>16</sup> It alludes also to the medieval legend of a devout knight, who, despite his best efforts, failed in his attempt to worship as a true penitent. On his death, the iris miraculously sprang from his grave, displaying on every flower the golden words of the *Ave Maria*. Astounded, monks were said to have rushed to open his grave only to discover the root of the iris resting on the cavalier's mouth.<sup>17</sup> The parallels to Rossetti are, of course, striking: his own struggles with theology being a life-long labour. Now ironically interred just metres from the

sacred portal of All Saints' Church on the isolated Kent coast, the sense of alienation he may have felt in rejecting his family's theology in life appears to be absolved by a higher authority.

Rossetti, having translated Dante Alighieri's *La Vita Nuova*, "the single most important work behind his spiritual and aesthetic endeavours," was well acquainted with the metaphorical context of the flame.<sup>18</sup> Beatrice, Dante's beloved, consumes his burning heart and departed souls appear from flames in Dante's other seminal work *Divina Comédia*. Possessing a rainbow of colours, "when the wind waves its beautiful flowers, and the sun gilds their petals tinged with gold, purple, and azure,"<sup>19</sup> irises are thought to resemble dancing flames.

The flame is personified in Rossetti's *A Vision of Fiammetta* (fig. 2), painted just four years before his death as his personal homage to Dante's successor, poet Giovanni Boccaccio. In Rossetti's sonnet accompanying the painting, the rainbow of the flame and the rainbow of the eternal soul are intrinsically linked:

All stirs with change. Her garments beat the air:  
The angel circling round her aureole  
Shimmers in flight against the tree's gray bole:  
While she, with reassuring eyes most fair,  
A presage and a promise stands; as 'twere  
On Death's dark storm the rainbow of the Soul.<sup>20</sup>

Rossetti contrasts the storm's depression with the kaleidoscopic attributes of the soul for, despite the apparent finality of death, nature promises new life:

Fiammetta illuminates the darkness, surrounded by emblems of the departing soul, being a vision of the transience of life and death and a motif for the transition from oblivion to eternity.

While the iris relates to the enduring flame, perennial wallflowers “seemed in Summer, and yet revive in Winter,” merely hibernating when they appear withered.<sup>21</sup> As the wallflower “enlivens the ruins which would otherwise be melancholy” the bloom denotes fidelity in misfortune.<sup>22</sup> Highly appropriate for an artist and poet who embraced medievalism, the wallflower was a great favourite in the Middle Ages. Troubadours wore the flower to promote the steadfast quality of their affection,<sup>23</sup> and the wallflower earned a reputation for adorning decaying battlements, abandoned towers and monastic ruins.<sup>24</sup> Romantically it was the symbol of a true heart and surely symbolic of Rossetti’s wistful blessed damozel, waiting patiently in Paradise for her lover to arrive, for:

“There will I ask of Christ the Lord  
Thus much for him and me:—  
Only to live as once on earth  
With Love, – only to be,  
As then awhile, for ever now  
Together, I and he.”<sup>25</sup>

The single-syllable rhyming scheme of Rossetti’s poem echoes the ease with which the damozel embraces the notion of her beloved eventually joining her in eternity. The first line of each couplet (*ab, cb, db*) alters each time, mimicking the mutable nature of one’s physical existence while the second line’s naïve rhyme remains true, only beating faster to focus attention on the moment of

reunification at the three-syllable “Together,” before once more returning to the rhythm that makes the wait worthwhile: the “I” and the “he.” The corporeal is ever changing; the spiritual pulse of “me,” “be,” and “he” is undiminished.

The resonance of the flaming iris and the allusion to the ever-faithful medieval wallflower, though complex in their subtlety, are relatively easily interpreted, but what of the laurustinus (*Viburnum tinus*)? Closely affiliated by etymology and genus to the laurel or bay (*Viburnum nobilis*), these plants, although botanically quite different, are interchangeable in flower lore. The laurel, indicative of glory and fame,<sup>26</sup> is often seen adorning Rossetti’s muse, Dante,<sup>27</sup> being “the meed of mightie conquerors/And poets sage.”<sup>28</sup> Symbolic associations owe much to John Gerard’s *Herball*: the *Laurus tinus* grows “plentiful in every field of Italy” and is in actual fact “the wilde Bay tree ... set full of leaves,” “like bay leaves, but smaller and more crumpled.”<sup>29</sup> Rossetti, son of an Italian émigré poet and scholar, was similarly deemed to be ‘wild’ in his bohemian unconventionality, similar in genius to Dante Alighieri, but arguably more psychologically dishevelled. It is not without irony that laurustinus could not thrive in London, when Rossetti himself suffered so chronically in the capital.

In an attempt to scare away Death, ancient physicians would fix a branch of laurel over their doorway,<sup>30</sup> and in funeral processions sprigs were carried with other evergreens to mark the immortality of the soul.<sup>31</sup> It was also not unusual for lovers to burn laurel,<sup>32</sup> paying deference to Apollo’s penchant for the plant as a symbol of his enduring love for the transformed nymph, Daphne.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Rossetti in his *House of Life* sonnet sequence highlights that

“only this laurel dreads no winter days,”<sup>34</sup> and he toyed with these evergreen associations in a pencil drawing, *The Laurel (fig. 3)*, executed just two years after his wife’s tragic death.

Here, the laurel is held in the right hand, while a taut chain encircles the shrub’s cut stem. According to the pencil drawing’s owner, the Maas Gallery, the laurel symbolises triumph or protection and the chain, the model’s enduring powers of enslavement,<sup>35</sup> and here, perhaps, a mutual enslavement, highlighting the timeless connection between lovers. This is further exemplified by the chain being twice bound around the left hand in the foreground as conjoined wedding bands. This is the unrequited desire of Apollo for Daphne reimagined; Petrarch’s love for the unattainable Laura reworked; and Rossetti’s passion for his recently departed wife, memorialised.

Like the laurustinus, the lilac is a May flower, one of many originally devoted to Flora, the goddess of flowering plants and then syncretised with the Virgin Mary. According to John Ingram it represents love’s first emotions, or a first romance.<sup>36</sup> The appellation for common lilac – *Syringa vulgaris* – is derived from the Greek *syrix* meaning ‘a pipe’.<sup>37</sup> According to Greek mythology, just as the laurel-nymph Daphne fled from Apollo, so too did Syrix flee from Pan before metamorphosing into a bed of reeds. Fashioning one of the stems into sylvan pipes so that they could “always talk together,” “fleshly” half-human, half-goat Pan was never to be separated from the spirit of his beloved, although physically she would always remain tantalisingly out of reach.<sup>38</sup> Rossetti, branded for his apparent obsession with ‘the sins of the flesh’, shockingly writing about street-walker liaisons in “Jenny” and unashamedly

celebrating the female nude in *Venus Verticordia* (fig. 4), was notoriously unsuccessful in maintaining relationships with the women who mattered most in his life. The presence of lilac, the colour most associated with the end of mourning in Victorian England, proclaims, in true Ovidian style, that he need grieve for his lost love no longer.<sup>39</sup>

Rossetti may have been buried in Kent to avoid familial humiliation and/or the interment may have been prompted by his horror of the family plot in Highgate: a funeral conducted just a few miles from his deathbed was considered the most compassionate and practical solution. However, an appreciation of floral symbolism and flower lore, so prevalent in the nineteenth century, now provides a more painterly alternative. Like the lilies, marigolds, roses and honeysuckles Rossetti painted in life, the flowers naturally in bloom at his death are not insignificant details but indispensable to the unfolding narrative.<sup>40</sup> The churchyard flowers form a four-fold signification. Firstly, as natural hieroglyphs, they may emphasise the intrinsic relationship between *flora symbolica* and the re-imaginings of Rossetti's own life experience. Secondly, as supernatural intermediaries, they provide transient fragrances that evoke Rossetti's artistic and poetic preoccupations. Thirdly, within the essence of both there appears a message from a place where time stands still, delivered to a poet by a lover who has gone before. Most cathartic of all, according to floriography, nature's blooming iris, wallflower, laurustinus and lilac may provide a very real sense that Dante Gabriel's tormented quest for unification with his blessed damozel is eternally realised: Rossetti has finally come home.



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- <sup>1</sup> William Bell Scott, *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott and Notices of his Artistic and Poetic Circle of Friends 1830 to 1882*, ed. W. Minto, 2 vols. (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1892) 317-318.
- <sup>2</sup> William Michael Rossetti to William Bell Scott, 10 April 1882. In *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Peattie (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 415.
- <sup>3</sup> Jan Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* (London, Quartet Books, 2010), 16.
- <sup>4</sup> W. M. Rossetti to Francis Hueffer, 10 April 1882. In Peattie, *Selected Letters*, 414.
- <sup>5</sup> W. M. Rossetti to Lucy Rossetti, 8 April 1882. In Peattie, *Selected Letters*, 411.
- <sup>6</sup> After Rossetti's death, one of the artist's former patrons, Clarence Fry, claimed he was owed substantial sums and William had to settle with him for a sum of £350 – See Jan Marsh and Frank C. Sharp eds., *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), 83, n.1.
- <sup>7</sup> This is after selling his household belongings, decorative effects, and works of art. See William M. Rossetti ed., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters, with a Memoir*, 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1895), vol. 1, 400.
- <sup>8</sup> Scott, *Autobiographical Notes*, 316.
- <sup>9</sup> *Keble's Gazette*, 22 April 1882.
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas Henry Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 296.
- <sup>11</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Sarah Smetham, 26 February 1878. In William E. Fredeman ed., *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 10 vols. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-2015), vol. 8, 43-44 (letter 78.46).
- <sup>12</sup> William M. Rossetti, *Family Letters with a Memoir*, vol. 1, 401.
- <sup>13</sup> Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 30-32. In the preface, Ingram claims to have produced “the most complete work on the subject ever published – at least, in this country.” It summarises cultural history of traditions and rituals with separate entries for individual flowers along with a double lexicon of flowers and their meanings.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Seaton points out that this text is certainly one of the most often reprinted texts and “probably the best.” Friend's work is scholarly, produced after years of research collecting flower lore in rural England and further afield.
- <sup>15</sup> John Henry Ingram, *Flora Symbolica: Or The Language and Sentiment of Flowers* (London; New York: Frederick Warne, 1887), 254.
- <sup>16</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 23 May 1854. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 353 (letter 54.49).
- <sup>17</sup> Hilderic Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore, 2 vols.* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1883), vol. 1, 104-105.
- <sup>18</sup> Jerome McGann ed., *Rossetti Archive*, accessed 23 January 2016, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/9d-1861.raw.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 255.
- <sup>20</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Fiammetta (For a Picture),” in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 363, lines 9-14.
- <sup>21</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 247.

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- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, 462.
- <sup>23</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 284.
- <sup>24</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 462-63.
- <sup>25</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "The Blessed Damozel," in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 232, lines 127-132.
- <sup>26</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 324.
- <sup>27</sup> For example, Luca Signorelli, *Dante Alighieri* (detail) 1499-1502, Orvieto cathedral, San Brizio chapel.
- <sup>28</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 594.
- <sup>29</sup> John Gerard, *Herball or Generale Historie of Plantes* (London: Adam Islip, Joice Norton, and Richard Whitakers, 1636), 1409.
- <sup>30</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 325.
- <sup>31</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 564.
- <sup>32</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 325.
- <sup>33</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (London: Penguin, 2004), 1, 33, lines 564-565.
- <sup>34</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Love's Last Gift" (Sonnet LIX), in *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William M. Rossetti, 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886), vol. 1, 206, line 13.
- <sup>35</sup> *Pre-Raphaelitism* (London: Maas Gallery, 2013), no.16, accessed 3 August 2016, <http://www.victorianweb.org/painting/Gabriel/drawings/24.html>.
- <sup>36</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 114.
- <sup>37</sup> According to Ingram, *Syringa* is a member of the myrtle family while lilac more correctly belongs to the jasmines, 306.
- <sup>38</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1, 40, lines 705-712.
- <sup>39</sup> Alison Petch, "Funeral and Mourning Clothing: Analysing the English Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum," accessed 10 November 2015, <http://england.prm.ox.ac.uk/englishness-funeral-clothing.html>.
- <sup>40</sup> See Debra Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (Munich, Berlin, New York and London: Prestel, 2003).

“To liberate ourselves, let’s liberate the flower.  
Let’s change our minds about it.”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

[The] house had to me the appearance of a plain Queen Anne erection, much mutilated by the introduction of unsightly bay-windows; the brickwork seemed to be falling into decay, the paint to be in serious need of renewal; the windows to be dull with the accumulation of the dust of years; the sills to bear the suspicion of cobwebs; the angles of the steps and the untrodden flags of the courtyard to be here and there overgrown with moss and weeds; and round the walls and up the reveals of the doors and windows were creeping the tangled branches of the wildest ivy that ever grew untouched by shears.<sup>2</sup>

We could be forgiven for assuming that this evocation of nineteenth-century London originated in the pages of a Dickensian novel, with the building's decrepitude mirroring the atrophy of its spectral occupant. We might also, therefore, be perplexed to discover that this is, instead, a description of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Cheyne Walk home towards the end of his fifty-second year. In this summary, written by friend, poet, and critic, Thomas Hall Caine, Rossetti is engulfed by the unrelenting encroachment of the natural world as it envelopes the ailing painter-poet. The mass of moss and weeds, the tangled tendrils of wild ivy, the cobwebs, and the untrodden flags all convey an overwhelming sense of neglect and uncontrolled, unchecked growth.

This extended metaphor proves surprisingly helpful in approaching a discussion around Rossetti's flowers. The subject seems to suffer from a palpable disconnection between the real and the imaginary from which fictional characters inevitably emerge. Such has been Rossetti's popular appeal that spectres of half-fictionalised tales, gossip, and unsubstantiated anecdotes continuously merge with known facts of his life, his works and intimate

relationships, creating any number of disjointed realities. Equally, in the case of flowers, illusory signposts are sought and affixed to their appearance in a seemingly arbitrary fashion, which, over time, have threatened to asphyxiate the artistry at the core of their creation. My challenge is:

What if we could liberate Rossetti by liberating his flowers?

What if we could change our minds about them?

It is well-understood that flowers played an indispensable role in the work of many Victorian artists including John Everett Millais, Edward Coley Burne-Jones, Lawrence Alma-Tadema, James McNeill Whistler, Ford Madox Brown, George Frederic Watts, John William Waterhouse and, of course, Dante Gabriel Rossetti himself. In literature, too, novelists including Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Charles Dickens and George Eliot all used flowers and associated metaphors regularly in their works. These were consumed by a public revelling in vigorous literary debate, with more novels published in the 1860s, for instance, than at any other time in literary history.<sup>3</sup> Charles Dickens, when writing *Hard Times* at the height of his popularity in 1854, for example, contrasted hard facts with the world of imagination, adopting flowers as symbols of simple, natural beauty, an expression of authenticity and the freedom to express one's own point of view:

“Girl number twenty,” said the gentleman, smiling in the calm strength of knowledge. Sissy blushed, and stood up.

“So you would carpet your room – or your husband’s room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband – with representations of flowers, would you,” said the gentleman. “Why would you?”

“If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers,” returned the girl.  
“And is that why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?”  
“It wouldn’t hurt them, sir. They wouldn’t crush and wither if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy –”  
“Ay, ay, ay! You mustn’t fancy,” cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. “That’s it! You are never to fancy.”<sup>4</sup>

We know Rossetti read Dickens, even referring to himself in 1858 as a character from another of the prolific author’s popular novels, *David Copperfield*, when the impoverished artist admitted that he had to “trust, like Mr Micawber, for something to turn up.”<sup>5</sup> It is highly likely, therefore, that Rossetti would have been familiar with these floral associations.

Flowers were not only the subject of popular consumption through contemporary art and literature. Emblem books, containing illustrations of plants and flowers along with an exposition of each flower’s allegorical significance, had long been an indispensable tool for artists, craftsmen and writers:<sup>6</sup>

When the Florentine Benozzo paints the rose and the lily side by side below the Virgin’s throne, he is not merely filling in an empty foreground with charming naturalistic detail – he is also offering her the timeless flowers of love and beauty. And when Filippino’s Christ Child chooses the eglantine from among the heaped-up blossoms on the angel’s tray to make a bouquet for his mother... the painter is reminding those who pray before the picture of the bonds of life that tie the holy pair together, and of the succour for mankind that springs from it.<sup>7</sup>

Even before the Christian Church had licensed certain flowers to bear symbolic messages for the illiterate, as Ruth Wedgwood Kennedy explicates above, flowers had been widely adopted in Western culture as poetic conceits. One only has to think back to Ovid's major work, *Metamorphoses*, for an example. In this epic poem Ovid transforms many of his central figures into flowers, plants, and trees. Centuries later, anthropomorphic attributes were commonplace in medieval and early modern art and literature, a fact that Rossetti and his contemporaries would have assimilated.

However, something quite peculiar happened to flowers during the mid-nineteenth century: the culture of flowers assumed another inflection. Flowers were no longer emblematic, but rather systematic of an arbitrary code believed to have originated in the Orient as an aid to courtship.<sup>8</sup> This new unspoken communication became known as the Victorian language of flowers. Mme Louise Cortambert, writing under the pseudonym of Mme Charlotte de Latour, is credited with being one of the first to incorporate floral idiom into this spurious form of communication with her *Le Langage des Fleurs* (1820). Here she outlines the main principles “*de notre mystérieux langage, l'amour et l'amitié*” (of our mysterious language, love and friendship).<sup>9</sup> Not only did she assign specific meaning to particular flowers, but she also sought to manipulate meaning according to whether the flower was in bud, had thorns, possessed leaves, or was placed on a particular body part. For example, according to de Latour, a rosebud with its thorns and leaves means “I fear, but I am in hope.” Stripped of its thorns, it means “there is everything to hope for,” while stripped of its leaves it denotes “there is everything to fear.” She claims it is also possible to vary the expressions of most flowers by merely varying their position.

She gives the example of marigold, which if placed upon the head signifies *peine d'esprit* (spiritual malady), on the heart *peine d'amour* (love sickness), and on the chest *ennui* (boredom). Whereas, if held on the right side of the body, the flower indicates the bearer; on the left, the object of one's affection.<sup>10</sup> The novelty of this frivolity spurred a whole tranche of small books, some as tiny as just a few inches square to fit into a neat pocket.

According to some commentators, these texts and the “language” contained within were hugely influential, bestowing on educated Victorians the aspiration to exchange silent messages without explicit commitment. What is more, it is claimed that floral competence could accentuate a woman's femininity and underscore a man's virtue,<sup>11</sup> while this apparent ability to speak with flowers purported to counterbalance “the ugliness of urban life and the tedium of humdrum social routine.”<sup>12</sup> Ostensibly, this new floral symbolism served as an antidote to the dissection of the flower by botanists, who were intent on revealing the hidden secrets of the flower. Where scientists revelled in the flower's rationality, *flora symbolica* (as it became known) celebrated its irrationality. Similarly, where botanists sought empirical evidence, floral code elevated poetry; where Linnaeus's advocates tore the flower apart, floriography somehow made it whole again. To give this language respectability, flower dials foretelling the precise time a flower blooms were created, and many texts began to include excerpts from the Linnaean sexual classification system to help readers to identify the flowers by counting their reproductive parts.<sup>13</sup> According to Reverend Hilderic Friend, who lists more than one hundred and forty Victorian *flora symbolica* texts in his two volume *Flowers and Flower Lore* (1883), lessons contained within the natural world transformed the mundane



into a sacred space beyond human existence.<sup>14</sup> Now Victorian readers were encouraged “to dwell upon the eternal verities of flowers as intermediary messengers,”<sup>15</sup> no better expressed than by Dante Gabriel’s sister, Christina, who recognised that flowers could speak volumes.<sup>16</sup> Over time this flirtatious art assumed significant social, cultural, and political attributes – so much so that today, attend any conference exploring nineteenth-century art or literature where flowers make an appearance and it is inevitable that the Victorian language of flowers will be consulted to ascribe meaning to a variety of floral incarnations.

The bowl of sprightly, yet tight-lipped crocus (Cheerfulness) in John Everett Millais’s *Trust Me* (fig. 5) must reflect the duplicitous behaviour of the mistress of the house. The pink azaleas (Temperance) in James Whistler’s *Symphony in White, No 2: The Little White Girl* (fig. 6) commend moral fortitude in the face of orientalist temptation. The forget-me-nots in the street hawker’s basket issue a salutary warning to heed the rural poor in Ford Madox Brown’s *Work* (fig. 7). Indeed, given the possibility that an appearance of a particular flower in a Victorian painting means something, the quest to determine definitive meaning seems relentless, and this has serious implications – to our understanding of Rossetti’s work most assuredly, but beyond Rossetti, to Victorian art more generally.

### The Crux of the Problem

Let us consider one specific example: Stephen Wildman and John Christian in *Edward Burne-Jones: Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (1998) describe Burne-Jones’s portrait of his wife, Georgiana (fig. 8) thus:

In her hands she holds an herbal, open at an illustration of a pansy or heartsease, an actual specimen of which rests on the page. The flower symbolizes undying love, and Georgie was to invoke this meaning again when she placed a small bunch of it in Burne-Jones's grave when his ashes were interred at Rottingdean in 1898.<sup>17</sup>

It is clear that Georgiana is indeed holding an herbal. If it is *Gerard's Herball*, as Sotheby's auction catalogue (2010) suggests,<sup>18</sup> then it must be an abridged version, for the principal text is considerably larger with four woodblock illustrations for the pansy on one page, not just the one we see in the portrait. The illustration is identical to one of the four (*fig. 9*), but it was not uncommon for woodblock images to be plagiarised by other herbalists. The pansy highlighted in the portrait relates specifically to the wild pansy.<sup>19</sup> An actual specimen of the flower lies between the pages of the herbal. All this is indisputable. What is frustrating, however, is that the assumption is too readily made that the flower has to symbolise something and that something can be pinpointed by referring to the Victorian language of flowers. Indeed, Burne-Jones was known for not just illustrating flowers, but rather wringing their secrets from them,<sup>20</sup> but why do we not begin by considering the relevance of the herbal? Wildman and Christian state unequivocally that the flower symbolises "undying love," but how do we know that? Sotheby's auction catalogue tells us that "according to the traditional language of flowers, the heartsease (pansy) is regarded as symbolical of loving thoughts and memories, and notably of undying affection, even if with associations of sadness and loss."<sup>21</sup> However, according to the most quoted floral symbolist of the age, John Henry Ingram, the pansy's meaning is "remembrance"<sup>22</sup> or "thoughts."<sup>23</sup> The pansy's "thinking of you" epithet from the French *pensées* (thoughts) has

become embellished over time to become *undying love*, fitting seamlessly into the grieving widow's offering of purple pansies at her husband's final farewell service.<sup>24</sup> A subjective narrative is born and taken as fact.

Instead of commencing with the assumption that the flower must symbolise something and that this something relates to the Victorian language of flowers, it makes much more sense to commence with the herbal itself. In the recent catalogue to accompany the Tate exhibition of Edward Burne-Jones's work, Charlotte Gere points out that "Gerard's definition of the pansy is strictly medical." She further suggests that the herbal's presence may have personal significance to the family.<sup>25</sup>

These are interesting claims. According to Gerard's *Herball*, the wild pansy differs from the garden pansy in leaf, root and branch and the flowers are of a bleak and pale colour: far inferior to the beautiful garden pansy.<sup>26</sup> Jan Marsh attributes the solemnity of Georgiana's expression "and the unflinching gaze with which she returns the artist's inspection of her," to be displaying "something of the unhappiness of being the artist's long-suffering wife, which he perhaps did not see when he was painting it."<sup>27</sup> Could the less than ostentatious pansy allude to Georgiana's demeanour perhaps, or could the flower have been chosen to reflect the simplicity of Georgiana's faith (the flower also known as *Herba Trinitatis* (the Trinity Herb) in many old herbals)? Or, given that two of her three surviving children also occupy her portrait, could the relationship between the herbal, the flower, the mother and the children be particularly pertinent?

It is widely reported that there was a marked rise in scarlet fever mortality in England and Wales in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Philip (on the left of the tableau in the background) contracted the disease in the summer of 1864, shortly before his mother fell ill with the same condition. Her illness led her to give birth prematurely to a second ill-fated son, Christopher, who died soon afterwards. Margaret (on the right) was born in the summer of 1866, mother and oldest son having survived the ordeal. Herbalism was commonly used in the mid-nineteenth century. Indeed, an herbal's primary function was to help readers to identify specimens and their specific role in alleviating symptoms of any number of ailments and diseases. According to Gerard's *Herball*, the pansy flower is especially good for children - curing convulsions and "the falling sickness," and it is commended against inflammation of the lungs and chest, and against scabs and itching of the whole body, and it heals ulcers.<sup>29</sup> Is Georgiana being immortalised as a doting mother who used her knowledge to ease the symptoms of this potentially fatal disease, delivering her two children from childhood? Or conversely, is this a picture of a grieving mother, thinking about how her absent child would have been part of the happy gathering if the natural medicine had worked? The flower is also associated anecdotally with growing older and the wisdom that comes from negotiating life's challenges. Is Burne-Jones reflecting on the binary opposition of his progeny, full of hope and promise, and his wife in the foreground, who has experienced both the joys and disappointments of life? We do not know, but similarly, it would be erroneous to rely upon the bloom's Victorian language of flowers' idiom to give a specific meaning for this or any other Pre-Raphaelite painting.

Equally, just because Rossetti was “surrounded by uses of flower symbolism in the works of his intimate friends and like-minded contemporaries,”<sup>30</sup> why should it necessarily follow that he was using flowers in a similar way for a similar purpose? According to Molly Engelhardt in her recent essay “The Language of Flowers” (2013), and to Beverly Seaton in her more recent book *The Language of Flowers: A History* (2015), our current fixation with the Victorian language of flowers’ premise may be fundamentally flawed.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as Seaton emphasises, floral symbolism in these floral texts may have only tenuous ties to nineteenth-century life, for although these texts were undoubtedly circulating in popular culture, there appears to be little evidence that they were used with any frequency. What is more, these dictionaries were so variable, with sentiments based on whim, country of origin or personal preference, that actual transmission of information would have been near impossible.<sup>32</sup>

### Alternative Perspectives

I do not claim to be the only art historian interested in the Pre-Raphaelites’ natural world to be posing challenging questions at this time. Most recently, John Holmes in *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (2018) challenges our preconceptions by examining the Pre-Raphaelite artist’s compulsion to acquire truth, ensure accuracy, and deliver precision while paying due deference to psychological process.<sup>33</sup> He discusses the artist’s sworn duty to paint what was before his eyes, not unlike the Renaissance painter, for whom seeing was synonymous with meticulous study, similar to that of a scientist, as Frederic

George Stephens articulates in *The Germ*.<sup>34</sup> However, one should be aware that science itself was a mutable term, some might even claim it was singularly bi-polar. While science was interpreted as being in the sight of God without the necessity for anything to come to pass,<sup>35</sup> human endeavour was claiming its own form of omniscience. Respect for science was, therefore, although at the heart of the Pre-Raphaelite agenda, itself subject to interpretation between the two extremes of divinely inspired and man-made.

A further example of established beliefs being challenged in the current climate, is also exemplified in Elizabeth Prettejohn's *Modern Painters, Old Masters* (2018). Prettejohn demonstrates a significant shift away from an environment where the possible interpretation of Rossetti's flowers as timebound 'pictorial tickets' is dismissed in favour of more resonant, timeless, and allusive qualities. Rather than relying on the Victorian language of flowers, Nic Peeters, too, speaking in response to the National Gallery's exhibition *Reflections: Van Eyck and the Pre-Raphaelites* in October 2017, constructed his entire lecture around Rossetti's masterful ability to "originally imitate" his predecessors, rather than his contemporaries. The lily, Peeters reminded us, is the symbol of the Virgin's purity, the damask rose the symbol of Christ's passion: both referenced in Victorian anthologies, but, as he was swift to point out, also used much earlier as significant emblems by Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling and other Flemish Primitives: artists Rossetti knew well.

Peeters's talk attracted a full house of enthusiastic participants. From conversations held it became apparent that some attendees had more than a passing knowledge of one or both of Debra Mancoff's popular books *Flora*

*Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (2003) and the virtually unchanged reprinted version *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers* (2012), both of which attempt to provide a condensed appraisal of the meaning of flowers appearing in the most popular Pre-Raphaelite paintings.<sup>36</sup> These two texts reiterate the quest to assign meaning to Rossetti's artwork, and extend a similar approach to other Victorian artists, including Franz Xaver Winterhalter (1805-73), Charles Allston Collins (1828-73), William Dyce (1806-64), Philip Hermogenes Calderon (1833-98), John Everett Millais (1829-96), John William Waterhouse (1849-1917), Arthur Hughes (1832-1915), and Edward Robert Hughes (1851-1914). All are apparently joining Rossetti in his "desire to inscribe his imagery with iconic expression."<sup>37</sup> According to Mancoff, the practice of "rendering meaning into every object on his canvas – from an elaborate garden observed from nature to the humblest flower plucked to paint in the studio – could be traced to his youthful ambitions in art that led to the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood."<sup>38</sup> As I aim to show, this explanation is inchoate, relying far too heavily on supposition and inference.

### Meaning as Clear as a Sonnet on the Frame?

Mancoff shares many of her ideas with Sarah Hamilton Phelps Smith, who wrote the first (and until now only) Pre-Raphaelite floral PhD thesis: "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery and the Meaning of Flowers in His Painting" (University of Pittsburgh, 1978). According to Phelps Smith, her interest in Rossetti's flowers commenced when challenged by Alan Bowness of the Courtauld Institute of Art's suggestion that "there might be some meaning in Rossetti's flowers."<sup>39</sup> Her exploration followed on from Ellen Schwartz's

persuasive MA thesis, “Flower Symbolism in the Painting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti” (University of California, 1969), in which Schwartz recognises that the intrinsic connection between Woman and Flower was primarily a tool to “communicate the uncommunicable,” and served as “an effective form of expression ... compatible with his distinctive imagery.”<sup>40</sup> Phelps Smith’s interrogation, however, sets out to discover the meaning of the artist’s flowers according to three criteria: traditional Classical and Christian iconography; meanings only intelligible to the artist himself or someone closely associated with him; and, principally, the nature of flowers according to the Victorian language of flowers.<sup>41</sup>

Although Phelps Smith claims in a subsequent essay that “the meaning hidden in flowers often gives a literary aspect which can be read as clearly as a sonnet on the frame,”<sup>42</sup> my study of Rossetti has given me no cause to assert that Rossetti was fluent in this esoteric Victorian language of flowers game-playing, although he would have been aware of some of the more common floral relationships emanating from long-standing emblematic associations. As for the second use of symbolism assigned to Rossetti by Phelps Smith – that of being only intelligible to himself or to some other third party – the provision of such a “catch all” clearly merits further and more rigorous investigation.

Phelps Smith accepts that, although her hypothesis seeks to prove that Rossetti was planting floral clues to veiled meaning throughout his work, in his writings, Rossetti “said almost nothing about the meanings hidden in his flowers.”<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, she is able to dispense with this fact, basing the foundation of her argument, instead, on an evaluation proffered by a



contemporary critic, much revered by Victorian and contemporary scholars alike: Walter Pater. Buoyed by the kudos and reputation associated with this eminent commentator, both Phelps Smith and subsequently Mancoff embark on their studies of meaning. Indeed, Phelps Smith commences her dissertation ostensibly quoting Pater from William Sharp's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study* (1882): "A flower (or rather the phantom of a flower, for even this bit of nature with Rossetti is dreamy) is sometimes introduced on his canvas or even on the frame of his picture. To the initiated this flower speaks parables; to the ignorant (the many) it is an obtrusive enigma."<sup>44</sup> She explains that when "Walter Pater wrote this comment about Dante Gabriel Rossetti, he was fully aware of Rossetti's practice of including flowers in his paintings as carriers of meaning." She goes on to claim that Pater was implying that "few of Rossetti's contemporary viewers could have understood their full significance," and "that is even more true of Rossetti's twentieth century audience."<sup>45</sup>

Debra Mancoff agrees with Phelps Smith:

The influential art critic, Walter Pater, believed that the appreciation of Pre-Raphaelite art depended upon the viewer's fluency in an esoteric language of symbols. As an example, he noted that Dante Gabriel Rossetti often ornamented his canvases with flowers. Pater lamented that many ("the ignorant") saw the flowers as nothing more than "an intrusive enigma." But, he countered: "to the initiated this flower speaks parables."<sup>46</sup>

Leaving aside the discrepancy between the first use of 'obtrusive' in Phelps Smith's work and its apparent loose transformation to 'intrusive' in Mancoff's,

there is a much more fundamental problem with their joint premise, only recognised on examining the original text. On failing to find the quotation in Walter Pater's seminal works *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1889) or *The Renaissance* (1873), I returned to William Sharp's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study*<sup>47</sup> to discover that the much-quoted art critic and Fellow of Brasenose College, Oxford, Walter Horatio Pater, was not responsible for this quotation. Instead, as Sharp originally points out, these words were penned by William Edwards Tirebuck, a relatively obscure provincial journalist and freelance art writer. A fuller version of the text from Tirebuck's own hand reads:

Rossetti's subjects and their treatment then, it must be admitted, are foreign to common sympathies, his type of beauty is rather eccentric, and his manner undeniably mannered. His is not so much the beauty of Nature, or of Art in the abstract, as the beauty of an art – a craft Dante Gabriel Rossetti self-specialised by his conceptions and executions.

This artist always seems to have been conscious of doing this specialised art. We see very little of the man carried away by and in his subject, bring it to a fervent issue by any means within reach, but we see the artist coolly selecting his deliberations, painting them in, painting them out, making one conception the tomb of another, and giving the world what infinite consciousness gave him. So it comes about that the delight in Rossetti's pictures is more delicately (to use a distorted and burlesqued word) than vigorously emotional; more the result of an affectation than an approach to nature and requiring a glossary of almost obsolete culture so as to surround it with comprehension before it can be presented with any entirety to the heart.

The artistic or emotional appeal is thus not direct, but through avenues of what the majority of people regard as so much superfluous training, and

that appeal to the extent of the indifference or ignorance of these people is therefore impeded. To persons whose lives are more practical than symbolical his symbolism would be oppressive. A flower (or rather the phantom of a flower, for even this bit of nature with Rossetti is dreamy), is sometimes introduced on his canvas or even on the frame of his picture. To the initiated his flower speaks parables; to the ignorant (the many) it is an obtrusive enigma perpetually saying "Guess!"

With him a shell is not a shell only, or a bird a bird; they are hieroglyphics, which even some of his admirers cannot interpret. They accept the signs in faith, and worship accordingly. His pictures not only require titles but footnotes and recognising this fact the artist has more than once called upon himself as the poet for an explanatory sonnet, which too, in its turn requires certain mental annotation before it can be understood, and even then, with a distant grey indefiniteness. Is not this old-time symbolism a weakness in a speech of the artist?<sup>48</sup>

Tirebuck seems fixated by Rossetti's apparent cathexis: that of assigning meaning to everyday objects according to an almost forgotten cultural rubric. Crucially, he assumes without any reservation that Rossetti was a symbolist, and, from a floral perspective, that he used flowers to convey meaning from a vague time in the past, utilising floral hieroglyphics which only he and a select few could possibly comprehend. At no time does he refer to the Victorian language of flowers, preferring to focus on his inference that Rossetti was elitist, and that the artist was intent on playing with recondite meaning to demonstrate his superiority. If Tirebuck's postulations are accurate then the flower acts as little more than a signpost for initiates to interpret, thereby perpetuating a sense of alienation from art historical discourse for the majority, who, by definition, apparently lack such erudite insight. Tirebuck does not, at any time, consider the proposition that perhaps Rossetti's floral language is incomprehensible

because the dictionary being used to interpret it is inappropriate or even inadequate.

Admittedly, although he was predominantly a regional editor, Liverpudlian Tirebuck was a regular and enthusiastic contributor to influential art journals including *The Graphic*, *The Art Journal*, *Magazine of Art* and *The Academy: A Weekly Review of Literature, Science, and Art*. He had become interested in art as early as twelve years old, when “amid the varied commercialism of the city, subtle art was (already) making its impressions,” and he seized “every opportunity to cultivate and develop” his artistic interests.<sup>49</sup> He had clearly been researching his biography on Rossetti well in advance of the artist’s untimely demise for his work went to press with unseemly haste, even ahead of both Thomas Hall Caine and William Sharp. Tirebuck may well have gained some satisfaction from usurping his former congenial school companion, Caine, whose *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* were slower to reach the printing presses.<sup>50</sup> However, when asked by a local journalist to name his first publication of significance, Tirebuck’s response was not *Dante Gabriel Rossetti. His Work & Influence* (1882) nor his earlier offering of *William Daniels, Artist* (1879), but rather a later work, *Great Minds in Art* (1888), from which, lamentably, Rossetti is excluded.<sup>51</sup>

How far could this biography of Dante Gabriel Rossetti have been, therefore, a precipitous foray by an opportunist journalist rather than a genuine and considered art critique? By 21 July 1882, William Michael Rossetti has already read Tirebuck’s offering, pronouncing his attempts to show “a sincere and up to a certain point, an intelligent admiration of Gabriel’s powers.”

However, he considered them to be “decidedly bad,” and “overloaded in literary style.”<sup>52</sup> It is, therefore, disconcerting that this unauthorised biography, an early commercial publication, later overlooked even by the aspiring author and eventual novelist himself, not listed by the *Rossetti Archive*, and misattributed to Walter Pater by the leading authority on Rossetti’s floral language, should still be cited as the pivotal statement on floral enquiry. What is more, it is surely incumbent upon any enquiring mind to recognise that this obsessive drive for fixed meaning severely stunts the investigative process, thereby confining these exemplary works of art within the cottage garden wall of the Victorian language of flowers, painstakingly constructed, but severely limited in scope. It is time to open the gate.

### A New Methodology

If Rossetti’s flower is to be liberated, we need to find a new way of thinking about it. I considered the merits of several different approaches, including the relationship between model and flower, and patron and flower, before the most sympathetic method to Rossetti’s work eventually became clear. Strongly influenced by his father’s mystical interpretations of Dante, Rossetti was always in the shadow of his namesake’s genius: the medieval Florentine poet and exile was a spirit fit to torment the aspirational Anglo-Italian family, and he was not exactly uninvited. After all, Gabriele’s specialist knowledge of Dante had opened many doors on his arrival in England. The ghost was also a spiritual godfather, after Gabriele’s oldest son was christened Gabriel Charles *Dante* Rossetti in his honour.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, nothing that Dante wrote “was allowed to be capable of simple and natural interpretation; every passage and every word was an elaborate vehicle for the concealment of some mystical speculation or political idea, and the highest praise for a book, in Gabriele Rossetti’s mouth, was that it was a “*libro sommamente mistico.*”<sup>54</sup> What better way to interpret Rossetti’s flowers than through the eyes of his lifetime muse?

Dante Alighieri’s approach to understanding is explicated in both his letter to Can Grande <sup>55</sup> and, more explicitly in *Il Convivio (The Banquet)*. The latter, a fragment of four books of the fifteen originally designed, aimed “no less than the lifting of men’s minds by the knowledge of the world without them and within them.”<sup>56</sup> As Dante explains, the first approach “is termed Literal, and this is that which does not extend beyond the text itself.”<sup>57</sup> This interpretation is the primary or immediate comprehension of the work, so in the case of art, the clues afforded by the colour, the form, the lines, the brushwork, the subject, the composition and so on. Dante insists that this literal sense “must always go first, as that in whose sense the others are included, and without which it would be impossible and irrational to understand the others.”<sup>58</sup>

The second response, the Allegorical:

it is that which is concealed under the veil of fables, and is a Truth concealed under a beautiful Untruth; as when Ovid says that Orpheus with his lute made the wild beasts tame, and made the trees and the stones to follow him, which signifies that the wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts gentle and humble, and makes those follow his will who have not the living force of knowledge and of art; who, having not the reasoning life of any knowledge whatever, are as the stones. And in

order that this hidden thing should be discovered by the wise, it will be demonstrated in the last Treatise. Verily the theologians take this meaning otherwise than do the poets: but, because my intention here is to follow the way of the poets, I shall take the Allegorical sense according as it is used by the poets.<sup>59</sup>

The third sense, the Moral, is, for Dante, the sacred allusion: “that which the readers ought intently to search for in books, for their own advantage and for that of their descendants; as one can espy in the Gospel, when Christ ascended the Mount for the Transfiguration, that, of the twelve Apostles, He took with Him only three. From which one can understand in the Moral sense that in the most secret things we ought to have but little company.” For Rossetti, whose belief system was not as fixed as his fourteenth-century master, the moral sense pertaining to the devout theological interpretation proved to be infinitely more malleable.

Finally, comes the Anagogical or Mystical, by which Dante meant, that which is beyond the senses, the spiritual, the supernatural, the eternal truth, especially when referring to scriptural exegesis of an afterlife. In his words:

The fourth sense is termed Mystical, that is, above sense, supernatural; and this it is, when spiritually one expounds a writing which even in the Literal sense by the things signified bears express reference to the Divine things of Eternal Glory; as one can see in that Song of the Prophet which says that by the exodus of the people of Israel from Egypt Judæa is made holy and free. That this happens to be true according to the letter is evident. Not less true is that which it means spiritually, that in the Soul's liberation from Sin (or in the exodus of the Soul from Sin) it is made holy and free in its powers.<sup>60</sup>

Reminding us of E. H. Gombrich's description of an image pointing to an unseen world of feeling and imagination,<sup>61</sup> the anagogical or mystical sense is also reflected in William Butler Yeats' view that:

All Art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic ... A person or a landscape that is a part of a story or a portrait, evokes but so much emotion as the story or the portrait can permit without loosening the bonds that make it a story or a portrait; but if you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and their effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence.<sup>62</sup>

This notion of the Divine Essence is critical to Rossetti's manipulation of flora, and, as influential as Dante certainly proved, it seems that early in Rossetti's career, he had already grasped the nature of his artistic gift with acuity, formulating his own interpretation. In Rossetti's early story, "Hand and Soul", Chiaro dell' Erma, the personification of the artist's soul, advises him to:

Seek thine own conscience (not thy mind's conscience, but thine heart's), and all shall approve and suffice. For Fame, in noble soils, is a fruit of the Spring: but not therefore should it be said: 'Lo! My garden that I planted is barren: the crocus is here, but the lily is dead in the dry ground, and shall not lift the earth that covers it.

Focusing on the conscience of the heart rather than the conscience of the mind is a telling distinction. Fame, as represented by the small crocus peeping through the soil in spring, is short-lived, and the lily, the symbol of summer's blossoming, is compromised if the mind rules the heart.<sup>63</sup> This narrative reveals Rossetti's love of the dramatic symbol, the symbol that makes sense in terms of



the bigger picture, the symbol that claws at pretence to reveal the innermost, raw taste of authenticity. I contend that it is this idea of being confronted by harsh but cathartic reality in a mystical and beautiful way that drives him to create visions of a world where lilies can push through the earth and rejoice in their exquisite, intense expression of life in all of its complexity. It is telling that I cannot find one single crocus painted by Rossetti,<sup>64</sup> but lilies appear from his earliest oil paintings to his last, from *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 10) to *The Blessed Damozel* (fig. 11).

Having concluded that this four-tier approach - the Literal, Allegorical, Moral and Mystical – always sensitive to Rossetti’s own conscience of the heart – would form the backbone of the methodology adopted throughout this thesis, how best to approach each chapter? When originally planning this dissertation it was my assumption that I would follow Phelps Smith’s lead by considering Rossetti’s flowers according to broad chronological demarcations. Phelps Smith makes clear distinctions between the 1850s and early 1860s, the “decorative paintings of the 1860s,” the later paintings excluding Jane Morris, and the paintings featuring Jane Morris as muse. I was also cognisant of the chronological divisions set by the omnivorous collector and Pre-Raphaelite scholar, William E. Fredeman.<sup>65</sup> However, adopting these delineations immediately became too limiting and presupposed, albeit subconsciously, differences in approach to flowers during different periods of Rossetti’s career, of which I had no definitive first-hand proof. Instead, my embarkation point focused on three critical thoughts:

First, if we accept that Rossetti “said almost nothing about the meanings hidden in his flowers,”<sup>66</sup> what, if anything, did he “say” about them, and what could this knowledge contribute to a new understanding of the role, function and presence of flowers in his paintings?

Second, is the current compulsion to decipher the meaning of flowers in itself useful or even relevant? If not, could a repudiation invoke a new approach that could prove to be more incisive or transformative, and what would be its implications?

Third, if the current hypothesis concerning flowers is undermined by a misreading of a primary text, are there other floral assumptions currently made about other key quotations which should be re-examined in more depth?

What did Rossetti (and Others) “Say” About his Flowers?

When evaluating what Rossetti himself has to “say” about flowers, the principal challenge is how best to negotiate the plethora of material available to us.

Helpfully, all his paintings and drawings are painstakingly listed in the two volumes of Virginia Surtees’s *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882): A Catalogue Raisonné* (1971). Surtees, though, shows scant interest in floral detail, and her identification of specimens in Rossetti’s paintings always merits closer investigation. For example, Surtees fails to recognise the significance of some flowers (as in *Girl at a Lattice* (fig. 12)),<sup>67</sup> she may mention some, but omit others (as the lily and the rose respectively in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 10)),<sup>68</sup> she may not attribute relevance to flowers

(as in *Bocca Baciata* (fig. 13) described as “a faithful likeness of Fanny Cornforth, against a background of marigolds)”<sup>69</sup> and she may refer to others only in quoted material (as the poppy in *Beata Beatrix* (fig. 14)).<sup>70</sup> Surtees followed this exhaustive work with a catalogue for the *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* exhibition at the Royal Academy and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (13 January – 6 May 1973). Introduced by John Gere, Rossetti is positioned as a genius for adding “something wholly original to the common stock of ideas,” but flowers again, when they are mentioned at all, are purely for identification purposes,<sup>71</sup> and there are several omissions here too; for example, the rose is not mentioned in the entry for *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, the lily is not present in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (fig. 15),<sup>72</sup> and the rose is absent from *Found* (fig. 16).<sup>73</sup> Similarly, flowers are rarely examined in any detail in other publications for museum and art gallery exhibitions, nor in more general Pre-Raphaelite art catalogues.<sup>74</sup> One of the interesting exceptions appears in the 2003 exhibition catalogue, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, compiled by Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn and Edwin Becker. Flowers are “accessories” in *Bocca Baciata* (fig. 13) and these, it is suggested “may be interpreted symbolically: the rose is a standard symbol of love, the marigolds may denote grief.”<sup>75</sup> However, Elizabeth Prettejohn notes that Phelps Smith’s interpretation (linking these symbols together to propose that the painting presents the figure of a temptress)<sup>76</sup> “is inconsistent with the *Decameron* tale, the painting’s inspiration, which presents sexual love as unequivocally happy.”<sup>77</sup>

Of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Rossetti is unique in that he is the only artist to be both a painter and a poet. While closely analysing his visual creations, therefore, I also paid due diligence to his written

work, especially *Poems* (1870 and 1881), “The House of Life” (1870 and 1881), *Ballads and Lyrics* (1881), *The Early Italian Poets* (1861 and 1874), and his prose work “Hand and Soul”. Rossetti was also apt to inscribe sonnets on frames, which clearly have a bearing. An analysis of his use of flowers in poetry is revelatory, as I discuss in the body of this thesis. In this regard, I was originally inspired by Jerome McGann’s *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost* (2000) to think about flowers as “significant details,” not unlike a mirror, a candlestick or perfume bottle. Certainly, I agree with McGann that Rossetti’s approach highlights the radical nature of his multi-media approach, demonstrating how he inspired a revision of the cultural norms commonly used for evaluating artistic success and failure, but, according to my study, flowers are both more pervasive and infinitely more significant than any inanimate object Rossetti incorporated into his work. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Brian Donnelly for his *Reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Painter as Poet* (2015). Even though Donnelly pays little attention to the floral aspects of Rossetti’s work, he does explore him as a revolutionary figure who demands to be viewed through a revolutionary lens. This view influenced my decision to approach Rossetti’s flowers more radically, dispensing with traditional chronological boundaries and exploring their relevance in a more holistic manner.

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*The Germ*, reprinted several times since its first publication between January-April 1850, provides a fascinating window into the early aspirations of the Brotherhood, but it must be remembered that this literary magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites was not only short-lived, falling almost “stillborn upon an ungrateful world,” but devised by a group of young aspirants who swiftly took

off in their own distinctive directions.<sup>78</sup> However, Rossetti's correspondence is pivotal to understanding his floral approach. Closely studying many of his letters provides innumerable multi-directional and transformative opportunities to challenge existing critiques. We are fortunate that many hundreds of his letters have been catalogued by a team of scholars led by William E. Fredeman. Presented in a total of ten comprehensive volumes, Fredeman provides us with a meticulous "accurate, clear, uncluttered, and readable text that is totally faithful to the verbal but not necessarily to every minute calligraphic symbol on the manuscripts."<sup>79</sup> This copious material, from Rossetti's own hand, provides documented, albeit one-sided conversations, with his intimate circle of family, friends, patrons, and advisors, occasionally highlighting Rossetti's floral priorities. The recent addition of the tenth volume, with its biographical and analytical index, undated letters and bibliography, published in 2015, assists in the navigation of correspondence spanning *The Formative Years* (1835-1862), *The Chelsea Years* (1863-1872), and *The Last Decade* (1873-1882).

Rossetti's correspondence actually reveals a great deal about his relationship with flowers. Despite Tim Barringer's assertion that "Rossetti showed little concern or aptitude for working directly from nature,"<sup>80</sup> time and time again Rossetti writes about his desire to paint the natural world in its natural state (letters 48.9, 50.19, 50.217, 63.37, 63.68, 63.70, 63.78, 66.139, 73.257, 78.94, 78.121), but ridicules those who take the process too seriously (71.129) and is not afraid to have fun at the flowers' expense (59.35). He relates the flower to the person holding it (48.12, 59.35, 73.293, 75.93), and writes about the importance of specific choices of flowers (65.172, 78.57, 78.69,

78.169). Rossetti demonstrates that finding just the right flower was critical (64.110, 64.113, 64.118, 66.8, 74.117) and highlights the lengths he is prepared to go to in order to find it (64.116, 66.8, 80.65), although he is not averse to plagiarising other artists' references (66.179), and uses Gerard's *Herball* illustrations, where necessary (80.57, 80.59). He is content to engage his friends and associates in finding flowers and even choosing flowers for him, although their final inclusion is most definitely his decision (65.95, 66.139, 66.142, 66.146, 68.111, 68.112, 78.153, 80.49, 80.94, 80.267), and he is apt to replace his original choice if it is not visually pleasing (67.134, 80.57, 80.59, 80.64, 80.237). It is especially important for all natural references to be able to exist together in real time (for example, the spring-flowering sycamore and summer-flowering convolvulus cannot appear together in the same painting (79.165)).

Rossetti further demonstrates that correctly identifying flowers in the public arena was of little consequence to him (75.92), and he liked to create an air of mystery around the meaning of his flowers, rather than assigning definitive meaning (71.43). Objects turn into flowers (68.12 - 69.54); the importance of colour over symbolism is emphasised (62.7, 73.257); Rossetti writes about the sheer opulence and the fullness of his flowers (73.257) and about how he adds floral detail as the finale to his composition (65.172), along with writing about his enduring love of wildflowers (71.136, 78.169). There is certainly not a shortage of primary material.

Rossetti's commercial and personal relationship with his most prolific patron, the shipping impresario, Frederick Richards Leyland, is laid bare in

Francis Fennell's *The Rossetti-Leyland Letters. The Correspondence of an Artist and His Patron* (1978), highlighting the motivations of both men when commissioning and creating some of Rossetti's most evocative floral paintings, including *Veronica Veronese* (fig. 17), *The Bower Meadow* (fig. 18), *Dis Manibus* (fig. 19), and *A Sea-Spell* (fig. 20). There is a total of 137 letters sent between the two men from 1866 to 1882. Within these, there are seven specific mentions of flowers – roses (6, 55, 78, 80, 82), magnolia (112), spring marybuds (72), and one mentioning the generic term flowers (92). In addition, there are five usages of the phrase 'from nature' (15, 33, 55, 57, and 90), indicating that flowers and nature held some significance in the relationship. So too, with Rossetti's exchanges with Murray Marks, the Dutch art dealer who recalls purchasing the tulips and the iris for Rossetti's *La Bello Mano* (fig. 25) in Covent Garden. Marks remembers purchasing several handfuls of richly coloured tulips at different times (at considerable cost, and not without a great deal of bother) before Rossetti was satisfied with the exact tint of the two flowers.<sup>81</sup> In addition, letters written by Jane Morris known to survive, compiled by Frank C. Sharp and Jan Marsh in *The Collected Letters of Jane Morris* (2012), are compelling reading. *The Owl and the Rossettis* edited by C. L. Cline (1978) offers a selection of letters between Charles A. Howell (or his wife) principally from (rather than to) Dante Gabriel, Christina and William Michael Rossetti. In reading through this fascinating collection, I alighted upon one letter I had not read previously. Written from Kelmscott Manor on 1 November 1872, Dante Gabriel writes about a drawing he had made of "little May Morris who is the most lovely girl in the world. It is a drawing to the waist holding an heartsease & might be called Heart's Ease."<sup>82</sup> Here, Rossetti clearly associates the pansy with a small child, but he also chose to use the flower in

*Regina Cordium* (fig. 21) when painting his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, and a replica painting of Ellen Morley Heaton (fig. 22), and again in a chalk study of Jane Morris for *Water Willow* (fig. 23) (later replacing the pansy), and finally in *Mnemosyne* (fig. 24). The emphasis he places on his preferred title to accompany the Morris drawing is telling for it demonstrates that he is not favouring “thoughts” or “remembrance” as advocates of the Victorian language of flowers might argue, but rather he is making a pun on the flower’s name: May Morris’s innocent simplicity may ease the heart of any onlooker.

Other commentators are many and varied, ranging from the sensationalist and superficial to the dull and dreary, and every degree in between. Unsurprisingly, the popular imagination is awash with interpretations of Rossetti’s bohemian lifestyle, embroidered as it is with the tragic early death of his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, her exhumation, his addictions, and his relentless quest to make sense of his loss through forays into the supernatural. However, floral references are conspicuously absent from the majority of these texts.<sup>83</sup>

One notable exception is Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock’s essay “Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall” originally published in *Art History* (1984) and subsequently revised by Pollock in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (1988). This was among the first serious attempt to evaluate the complex issues raised by the life and works of Siddal. Pollock’s review epitomises “the contradictions of woman as muse for, and object of, art celebrated by art historians and woman as ignored producer.”<sup>84</sup> In a subsequent essay in the same text, “Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings”, Pollock makes a specific



reference to floral symbolism while discussing the fetish-like dismembering of female body parts in the “production of a signified woman as beautiful face, a newly defined order of sexual difference.”<sup>85</sup> She explains that “Rossetti and his circle made much use of the particular meanings associated with specific flowers. But their profusion ... exceeds that managed meaning and signifies by virtue of its excess.”<sup>86</sup> Pollock acknowledges that “flowers have often been used as a metaphor for women’s sexuality, or rather their genitals,” and with Rossetti she claims that “flowers draw attention both to what is absent and to the anxiety presence/absence generates in a masculine producer/viewer,” and proceeds to ask one of the questions I pose, albeit through a feminist lens: “are Rossetti’s paintings meaningless?”<sup>87</sup> Bolstered by Lacanian theories of desire and the imaginary, Pollock’s “meaningless” is largely attributed to fantasy, fiction, and the Other: something that is not fixed, not constant, but oscillating between signification of love/loss, and desire/death. Her position provokes a paradoxical question: if Rossetti could be regarded as a symbolist painter, how is it that he could utilise the power of the symbol and simultaneously embrace the concept of lack of meaning?

Where does Connotation Begin and Denotation End?

When floral meaning is so much part of our cultural make-up, it is often difficult to identify where denotation – the literal meaning of a word – ends, and connotation – or the idea or feeling the word invokes – begins. Given that symbolic codes are woven into any potential narrative, can we suppress its voice long enough to see other alternatives?<sup>88</sup> Is it conceivable that we can accept that the lily does not mean ‘purity and innocence’, the rose does not mean ‘passion

or love’, the pansy does not mean ‘think of me’? Can we override our natural inclination towards definition, and embrace the concept of flowers being no more than wisps of allusion? Could we derive satisfaction from engaging with the idea of meaning being “little more than an accident of nature, which one exploits according to wit, often discovering significance where none was originally intended?”<sup>89</sup> Can we embrace the notion that the flower sprouting in marshland may suggest the power of the regenerative process, but it does not mean anything; the dehydrated flower in a vase on a hot summer’s day may indicate neglect or thoughtlessness, but it does not mean anything; the trampled flower in the middle of a busy thoroughfare may conjure reflection on the fragility of the human experience, or the transience of beauty, or the disregard of nature, but does it *mean* anything at all?

In Jacques Derrida’s essay, “Parergon”, he promotes words written by essayist and poet, Francis Ponge, for the challenge they pose when suggesting that the flower and the person are intrinsically related. If we want to free ourselves, we have first to liberate the flower, for:

The flower is one of the typical passions of the human spirit. One of the wheels of its contrivance. One of its routine metaphors.

One of the involutions, the characteristic obsessions of that spirit.

To liberate ourselves, let’s liberate the flower.

Let’s change our minds about it.<sup>90</sup>

If we are truly to liberate Rossetti’s flower, we must set ourselves free from the compulsion to attribute fixed meaning. However, how far is it possible, even if it is desirable, to untangle the interwoven mass of floral significance to reveal

distinct stems of possibility, especially given the fact that the flower occupies a space somewhere between frivolous confusions of irrelevant and unrelated notions, and mysteriously planted signposts? <sup>91</sup>

Paradoxically, if we accept Ernst Gombrich's hypothesis that images "occupy a curious position somewhere between the statements of language, which are intended to convey a meaning, and the things of nature, to which we only can give a meaning," there can be no certainty that prescribed meaning has any meaning at all. <sup>92</sup> Yet, although this is a pivotal problem, the seemingly compulsive drive to decipher hidden meaning continues to inform our viewing experience of all Victorian paintings where flowers appear, and subsequently, this trend influences contemporary progeny in a not dissimilar manner.

My thesis aims to move beyond an examination of meaning towards an exploration of Derridean potential. 'Meaningless' here denotes no preconceptions of thought, no quest, however well-intentioned, to unravel surreptitious meaning and no confinement to a particular agenda. Acknowledging that at least six senses are at work when viewing any artistic expression, I add layers of potential as I progress through the chapters, accepting that when we "look at a picture, even for a second, many more things happen than we may consciously realise or care to think about."<sup>93</sup>

### Re-evaluation of Key Assumptions

It is reasonable to assume that if the existing hypothesis is undermined by a misappropriation of a primary text, it is possible that there may be other

assumptions which merit reconsideration. I will test this possibility in each of five chapters, *Specimen*, *Symbol*, *Synonym*, *Scent*, and *Spectre*. My primary aim is to re-examine and re-evaluate seemingly fixed assumptions, while, for the first time, interrogating the flower as the subject of the canvas. I am not seeking definitive outcomes. I am not attempting to replace one erroneous meaning with another fixed interpretation, rather I proffer numerous examples of possibility, even probability, intent on demonstrating that the quest for definitive meaning is irrelevant and unhelpful. I am not interested in deciphering symbols from abstract ideas, as scholars who have come before me, but rather the antithesis – discovering new potential interpretations from what have, until now, been regarded as ordinarily distinct symbols.

The first chapter looks at Dante's Literal interpretation through the lens of *Specimen*. It reconsiders the common assumption that as a Pre-Raphaelite founder, Rossetti would have adhered faithfully to John Ruskin's now infamous adjuration "to go to Nature in all singleness of heart and walk with her laboriously and trustingly."<sup>94</sup> I argue that the debate around how far Rossetti accepted and abided by Ruskin's advice is currently skewed because we have no accurate knowledge around the nature, scope, frequency or type of flowers Rossetti employed. How can we evaluate whether Rossetti "went to nature" if we cannot be sure how exactly he interacted with nature? To address this fundamental issue, I conduct an empirical review of the specimens Rossetti used in his oil paintings. Throughout this chapter I refer to the text illustrated in Edward Burne-Jones's portrait of his wife, Georgiana: John Gerard's *The Herball or General History of Plantes (1636)*, for, as we have already noted, Rossetti not only owned a copy, but also used it on numerous occasions. I am

extremely grateful to Nicola Frear, botanist at the University of York, for her assistance in identifying some of the less obvious species in Rossetti's work.

I then think about the Allegorical in a chapter entitled *Symbol*. I challenge what we think we know about Rossetti's mastery of the symbolic. Alongside the texts already discussed, of the hundreds of *flora symbolica* texts available, I refer in particular to two floral symbolism anthologies. The first is John H. Ingram's *Flora Symbolica: Or the Language and Sentiment of Flowers* (1869), considered to be "the most complete work on the subject ever published," according to its author.<sup>95</sup> Articulating "the science of sweet things," it is often the first, and sometimes the only text quoted by contemporary floriography scholars.<sup>96</sup> The second text is a work by the naturalist, Reverend Hilderic Friend: *Flowers and Flower Lore* (1883). Written completely independently of Ingram's *Flora Symbolica*, this is a compendium of oral legend as recounted by the rustic population of England. Its freshness and originality is tempered by considered verification and authentication via Mons A. de Gibernatis's *Mythologie des Plantes* (1878). It possesses more academic rigour, given its dedication, too, to the professor of comparative philology at Oxford University, F. Max Muller M.A.

In chapter three, I look to supplement the idea of symbolic resonance with the notion of Dante's Moral level of interpretation in the guise of *Synonym*. I reassess William Michael Rossetti's well-quoted assertion that Rossetti "painted beautiful women with floral adjuncts," focusing on the potential misinterpretation of the term "adjunct."<sup>97</sup> I seek to show how Rossetti's flowers are not just like his beautiful women; they *become* his female protagonists.

Contrary to prevailing opinion, they are not accessories, decorative trifles nor even easily defined symbolic tropes, but rather they provide Rossetti with a means to embody the female experience. Rossetti's flowers also reflect a real and demonstrable proactive moral and social conscience: a possibility largely overlooked or dismissed. Alongside the primary texts of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Claudian's *Proserpine*, Leonard Barkan's *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (1986) is central to this chapter. Barkan's destabilising of what we might regard as normal constructions challenges our conception of reality through the potency of the metamorphic image, in a not dissimilar way, I would argue, to Rossetti's humanly divine and divinely human women.

Dante's Mystical designation is explored in the final two chapters: *Scent* and *Spectre*. To date, very little has been written about Rossetti's flowers as scent-carriers. In 2012, Tim Barringer recognised that Rossetti's *The Blue Bower* appealed simultaneously to all four senses – vision, hearing, touch and smell – but stopped short of exploring scent in detail.<sup>98</sup> In *Scent*, I think specifically about how perfume could be significant in Rossetti's aesthetic. I explore if, how and why Rossetti created a sense of fragrance in his paintings, and continue to assess the extent to which each painting could possess a dominant perfume. I was assisted by two compendia: Donald McDonald's contemporary *Sweet-scented Flowers and Fragrant Leaves* (1895) and Roy Genders's more recent *Scented Flora of the World* (1994), alongside Catherine Maxwell's *Scents & Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (2017). In this most recent volume, Maxwell is the first to explore Victorian literature through scent and perfume and she offers new ways to

rethink literature's long-standing relationship with the senses. One of her principal themes, which I adopt, is the idea of the 'olfactive' – the cultured individual with a refined sense of smell, of which Algernon Charles Swinburne and Walter Pater were two prime examples.

Finally, in *Spectre*, I return to the quotation that has dominated floral enquiry to date, and specifically look again at the misappropriated William Tirebuck premise that a “flower (or rather the phantom of a flower, for even this bit of nature with Rossetti is dreamy) is sometimes introduced on his canvas or even on the frame of his picture.”<sup>99</sup> I closely analyse what could be arguably Rossetti's most spectral painting: *Beata Beatrix* (ca. 1864-79), examining it through the lens of the new methodology developed by this thesis. Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* (1994) and “The Ghost Dance: An interview with Jacques Derrida” (1989) contributed to my approach, while Julian Wolfreys's *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2002) challenged me repeatedly to re-evaluate my response to what it means to be haunted, how to interact with ghostly resonance, and its effect upon memory and creation.

By approaching Rossetti's flowers through the prism of his great muse, Dante, and by reassessing the words of Victorian critics afresh, I seek to reveal petals of previously veiled signification, which grow beyond the raised borders of Victorian floriography and away from traditional interpretations of flower as symbol. In doing so, I offer a variety of new ways to think about Rossetti's complex, and at times frustratingly contradictory, language of flowers.

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- <sup>1</sup> Francis Ponge, "Changed Opinion as to Flowers," in *Renaissance Paratexts*, eds. H. Smith and L. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 48-64, 48.
- <sup>2</sup> Thomas Henry Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 210-11.
- <sup>3</sup> David Skilton in Introduction to Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), vii.
- <sup>4</sup> Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Penguin, 1999), 13-14.
- <sup>5</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 5 April 1858. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 10 vols., ed. William. E. Fredeman and others (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-2015), vol. 2, 209 (letter 58.2).
- <sup>6</sup> Rosemary Verey, *The Scented Garden* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981), 168.
- <sup>7</sup> Ruth Wedgwood Kennedy, *The Renaissance Painter's Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 17-18.
- <sup>8</sup> Popular accounts of the history of the language of flowers credit Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Seigneur Aubry de la Mottraye with the introduction of the language of flowers into Europe through their explanation of the Turkish *sélam* or love letter. See Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers. A History* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 61-79.
- <sup>9</sup> All references attributable to Charlotte de Latour, *Le Langage des Fleurs* (Paris, 1820), xvi.
- <sup>10</sup> Latour, *Le Langage des Fleurs*, xv-xvi.
- <sup>11</sup> Michael Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1988), 118.
- <sup>12</sup> Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature*, 119.
- <sup>13</sup> Molly Engelhardt, "The Language of Flowers in the Victorian Age," *Victoriographies* 3, no. 2 (2013): 136-160, 138.
- <sup>14</sup> Reverend Hilderic Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1883), 139.
- <sup>15</sup> Waters, *The Garden in Victorian Literature*, 109.
- <sup>16</sup> See Christina Rossetti, "Consider the Lilies of the Field," in *Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 247.
- <sup>17</sup> Stephen Wildman, John Christian et al, *Edward Burne-Jones, Victorian Artist-Dreamer* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 260.
- <sup>18</sup> *Victorian and Edwardian Masterpieces*, Sotheby's online auction cat. (2010), accessed 30 July 2019, <https://www.sothebys.com/auctions/ecatalogue/2010/victorian-edwardian-art-masterpieces-/10133/lot.8.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> John Gerard, *Herball or Generale Historie of Plantes* (London: Adam Islip, Joice Norton, and Richard Whitakers, 1636), 854.
- <sup>20</sup> Georgiana Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 120.
- <sup>21</sup> Sotheby's (2010).
- <sup>22</sup> John H. Ingram, *Flora Symbolica: Or the Language and Sentiment of Flowers* (London: Frederick Warne, 1869), 164.
- <sup>23</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 358.



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- <sup>24</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (London: Faber, 2011), 506.
- <sup>25</sup> Charlotte Gere, "Portraits," in *Edward Burne-Jones*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate, 2018): 147-168, 154. Gere highlights that William Morris owned a copy of Gerard's *Herball* and the woodcut illustrations inspired his pattern designing. She suggests that this herball may have been borrowed from Morris as a tacit acknowledgment of his close friendship with Georgiana. It is, according to Gere, also a reminder of the hours spent in the studio reading aloud to her husband while he worked, a task shared by the children as soon as they were old enough.
- <sup>26</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 853.
- <sup>27</sup> Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (London: Quartet Books, 1985), 334.
- <sup>28</sup> C. J. Duncan, S. R. Duncan, and S. Scott, "The Dynamics of Scarlet Fever Epidemics in England and Wales in the Nineteenth Century," *Epidemiol. Infect* 117, no. 3 (December 1996): 493-499, 493, accessed 28 July 2019, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2271647/>.
- <sup>29</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 853.
- <sup>30</sup> Sarah Hamilton Phelps Smith, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery and the Meaning of his Painting," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1978, 11.
- <sup>31</sup> Beverly Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2015) and Molly Engelhardt, "The Language of Flowers in the Victorian Age," *Victoriographies* 3:2 (2013): 136-160.
- <sup>32</sup> Seaton, *The Language of Flowers*, 138.
- <sup>33</sup> John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
- <sup>34</sup> Frederic George Stephens in *The Germ: The Literary Magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1992), 61.
- <sup>35</sup> See Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 6<sup>th</sup>. edn., 2 vols. (London: Rivington, Davis, Payne et al, 1785), vol. 2, 563.
- <sup>36</sup> Debra N. Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (Munich, Berlin, New York, and London: Prestel, 2003) and *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers* (Munich, New York, and London: Prestel, 2012).
- <sup>37</sup> Mancoff, *Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers*, 6.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 6.
- <sup>39</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., Foreword.
- <sup>40</sup> Ellen Louise Schwartz, "Flower Symbolism in the Painting of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," MA diss., University of California, 1969, 2.
- <sup>41</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 1-2.
- <sup>42</sup> Sarah Phelps Smith, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Lady Lilith and the Language of Flowers," *Arts Magazine* 53 (February 1979): 142-145, 145.
- <sup>43</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 2.
- <sup>44</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 1.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>46</sup> Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers*, 6 and *Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art*, 6.

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- <sup>47</sup> William Sharp, *A Record and a Study* (London: Macmillan, 1882) 116-118.
- <sup>48</sup> William Tirebuck, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Work and Influence* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 23-26.
- <sup>49</sup> "A Chat with Mr William Edwards Tirebuck," *Rhyl Record & Advertiser* (10 October 1896), accessed 10 August 2017, <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/3727281/3727289/103/A%20Chat%20with%20Mr%20William%20Edwards%20Tirebuck>.
- <sup>50</sup> Both attended Liverpool Hope Street British Schools according to *Bernard Shaw's Book Reviews*, 2 vols, ed. Brian Tyson, (Pennsylvania State University Press: Pennsylvania, 1996), vol. 2, 1884-1950, 63.
- <sup>51</sup> Tirebuck focuses on eight artists: Gustave Doré, Albrecht Dürer, Raphael, Rembrandt, Velazquez, Richard Wilson, Sir Edwin Landseer and Sir David Wilkie.
- <sup>52</sup> William Michael Rossetti to Frances Rossetti, 21 July 1882. In *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Peattie (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 431.
- <sup>53</sup> Dinah Roe, *The Rossettis in Wonderland: A Victorian Family History* (London: Haus, 2011), 43.
- <sup>54</sup> Arthur C. Benson, *English Men of Letters: Rossetti* (London: Macmillan, 1904), 8.
- <sup>55</sup> Letter to Can Grande della Scala in *Epistolae in The Letters of Dante*, trans. Paget Toynbee, accessed 18 August 2019, [https://archive.org/stream/epistolaeletters00dantuoft/epistolaeletters00dantuoft\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/epistolaeletters00dantuoft/epistolaeletters00dantuoft_djvu.txt)
- <sup>56</sup> Henry Morely in Introduction to Dante, *Il Convivio (Il Convito – The Banquet)* trans. Elizabeth Price Sayer, accessed 15 August 2019, [www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12867/pg12867-images.html](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/12867/pg12867-images.html).
- <sup>57</sup> Dante, *Il Convivio*, 2: i.
- <sup>58</sup> Dante, *Il Convivio*, 2: i.
- <sup>59</sup> Dante, *Il Convivio*, 2: i.
- <sup>60</sup> Dante, *Il Convivio*, 2: i.
- <sup>61</sup> Ernst H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1985), viii.
- <sup>62</sup> William B. Yeats, "Symbolism in Painting," in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London: A. H. Bullen, 1903), 180-7, 183.
- <sup>63</sup> Recounting how the incarnation of the Soul instructed the artist Chiaro (Light) to paint her "so shall thy soul stand before thee always," Rossetti, as the narrator, steps out of the page and addresses the reader directly. He describes how he had stumbled inadvertently upon a painting while in Florence in the Spring of 1847, which he believed to be Chiaro's soul painting. He wrote that "as soon as I saw the figure, it drew an awe upon me, like water in shadow," and he refers to it as "my picture." Rossetti never visited Italy.
- <sup>64</sup> Although there is a reference to the flower in Rossetti's sonnet "Barren Spring" (LXXXIII): "Behold, this crocus is a withering flame" (line 9)
- <sup>65</sup> William E. Fredeman and others compiled Rossetti's correspondence in 9 of 10 volumes according to the following years: 1835-54 (vol. 1); 1855-1862 (vol. 2); 1863-67 (vol. 3); 1868-70 (vol. 4); 1871-72 (vol. 5); 1873-74 (vol. 6); 1875-77 (vol. 7); 1878-79

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(vol. 8); 1880-82 (vol. 9). The final volume contains an Index, undated letters and a bibliography.

<sup>66</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 2.

<sup>67</sup> Virginia Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1828-1882: The Paintings and Drawings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), vol. 1, 88.

<sup>68</sup> Surtees, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 10.

<sup>69</sup> Surtees, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 68.

<sup>70</sup> Surtees, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 94.

<sup>71</sup> John Gere, Introduction to *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Royal Academy of Arts and Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery, 1973), 15.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 24-25.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 30-31.

<sup>74</sup> See the 2003 exhibition catalogue compiled by Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn, and Edwin Becker: *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* for the Liverpool Walker Art Gallery and Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum/Zwolle; Mary Bennett's *Artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Circle: The First Generation Catalogue of Works in the Walker Art Gallery, Lady Lever Art Gallery and Sudley Art Gallery* (1988); John Gere's *Pre-Raphaelite Drawings in the British Museum* (1994); Julian Treuherz's *Pre-Raphaelite Paintings from Manchester City Art Galleries* (1980); and Stephen Wildman's *Visions of Love and Life: Pre-Raphaelite Art from the Birmingham Collection* (1995) along with his collaborative work, *Waking Dreams: The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites from the Delaware Art Museum* (2004).

<sup>75</sup> Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn, Edwin Becker, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 185.

<sup>76</sup> Phelps Smith, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery," diss, 96-97.

<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn in Treuherz, Prettejohn and Becker, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 185.

<sup>78</sup> H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of his Art and Life*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1904), 23.

<sup>79</sup> William E. Fredeman, "Editorial Statement, Editorial Principles, Description of Letter Entries and Stylistic Conventions," in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, vol. 8 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), xii-xiii.

<sup>80</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2012), 148.

<sup>81</sup> G. C. Williamson, *Murray Marks and His Friends: A Tribute of Regard* (London: John Lane, 1919), 75-83.

<sup>82</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 1 November 1872. In C. L. Cline, *The Owl and the Rossettis* (letter 150). As Fredeman points out, (*Correspondence*, note 4, vol. 5, 313) Rossetti designed a watercolour named *Heartsease* in 1866, but it was never executed. The only portrait of May Morris done in 1872 that may relate to this picture is S.362, but this is described as an oil or watercolour and now unknown according to Surtees, DGRDW, 282).

<sup>83</sup> See Dinah Roe, *The Rossettis in Wonderland: A Victorian Family History* (2011); Jan Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal* (2010); Lucinda Hawksley, *Lizzie Siddal: The*

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*Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel* (2004); Kirsty Stonell Walker, *Stunner: The Fall and Rise of Fanny Cornforth* (2006); Brian and Judy Dobbs, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* (1977); David Clifford and Laurence Roussillon eds., *Outsiders Looking In: The Rossettis Then and Now* (2004); William Gaunt, *The Pre-Raphaelite Tragedy* (1942); Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Rossetti and His Circle* (1997); Tim Barringer, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Reading the Image* (1998); Alicia Craig Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (1989); and J. B. Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (2011).

<sup>84</sup> Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall," in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 91-119.

<sup>85</sup> Pollock, "Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings," in *Vision and Difference*, 120-154, 123.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>88</sup> See Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991) for discussion on post-structuralist symbolic code, and the voice of the symbol.

<sup>89</sup> E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images. Studies in the Art of the Renaissance II*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>90</sup> Francis Ponge in Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 103.

<sup>91</sup> For examples see G. Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London: Methuen, 1961), 77 and P. Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters. Their Associates and Successors*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (London: Bell and Sons, 1910), 43.

<sup>92</sup> Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 2.

<sup>93</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Little-Known Birds of the Inner Eye* (Rutland and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1978), 17.

<sup>94</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London and New York: George Allen and Longmans Green and Co., 1903), vol. 3, 624.

<sup>95</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, Preface.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Rossetti, *Family Letters with a Memoir*, vol. I, 203.

<sup>98</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2012), 162.

<sup>99</sup> Tirebuck, *His Work and Influence*, 26.

## 1. Specimen

“Ah sweet, are ye a worldly creature  
Or heavenly thing in form of nature?”<sup>1</sup>

## Specimen

... young artists ... should go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth.<sup>2</sup>

No review of Rossetti's flowers would be complete without consideration of how Rossetti's approach to all things floral compared to the directive highlighted by John Ruskin, "the most distinctive and penetrating art critic of the Victorian period."<sup>3</sup> This is, therefore, an appropriate place to start. Ruskin's often-quoted adjuration to submit to Nature "in all singleness of heart," was first published in 1843 in the first of five volumes of *Modern Painters*, six years before Rossetti's first oil painting appeared. In all of Ruskin's "diffuse, entertaining, eloquent, exasperating, and intensely personal thoughts," this has proved to be the one statement that has been used repeatedly to summarise Pre-Raphaelite theory.<sup>4</sup> It is also the one quotation that, more than any other, has often "been made the foundation of many erroneous criticisms."<sup>5</sup>

The debate around how far Rossetti took Ruskin's advice to heart is open to misinterpretation, if for no other reason than we are unable currently to comment accurately upon the nature of Rossetti's floral language. Much has been conjectured about why Rossetti may have used flowers, but to date we have no tangible insight into the range of specimens he chose, nor their colour, nor where they were in their life cycle when he painted them. We have scant idea about whether he used representations of flowers rather than

actual flowers as references. We cannot be sure whether he preferred single flowers to swathes of flowers, nor if his relationship with flowers changed over time. Furthermore, we do not know if Rossetti followed the mid-nineteenth century gardening trend to celebrate the influx of new specimens into the country from exotic foreign climes, and whether he was “more solicitous about rarity and variety than well-disposed colours.”<sup>6</sup> Neither can we have any certainty about whether he subscribed to the view that the “common mania” for “novelty specimens” was overrated and preferred, instead, to celebrate the English country garden in all of its glory.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I seek to unite some of these seemingly disparate streams of thought by considering the types of flowers Rossetti chose, their origins and condition. I will address the compositional, spatial and chromatic roles played by flowers, while reflecting on how far Rossetti appears to follow Ruskin’s advice to go to Nature. Then, by looking closely at the painting so often cited as being at the heart of their rift in 1865, *Venus Verticordia* (fig. 4), I aim to demonstrate that Rossetti’s interpretation of nature was not “initiated by common aims ... and dissolved by developing ideological differences,” but that it was always taking a divergent path.<sup>8</sup>

One of the first questions to be considered is how instrumental was Ruskin in influencing the direction taken by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood? According to John Ruskin’s preface to his pamphlet “Pre-Raphaelitism” (1851), the Brotherhood had executed his theory “to the very letter,”<sup>9</sup> and yet he candidly acknowledges in the same pamphlet that two of the three (identified by their ages – and presumed to be Millais and



Hunt) had “conceived for themselves a totally independent and sincere method of study.”<sup>10</sup> However, despite this revelation, fifty years later, in 1901, Rossetti’s brother, William Michael, still feels the need to challenge Ruskin’s apparent claim to have been responsible for the Pre-Raphaelite walk with nature. He asserts that Ruskin had been “mixed up in the matter,” even though when the Brotherhood was founded, Ruskin “was wholly unknown to them personally,” and his writings were “probably known only to Holman-Hunt.”<sup>11</sup> William Michael reiterated this assessment in the *Manchester Guardian* three years later when he wrote that “it was not until 1853 that Ruskin came across some work by Rossetti in private hands,” by which time, of course, the Pre-Raphaelite brothers had gone their separate ways. Apparently, it was “Ruskin’s dictatorial attitude coupled with Rossetti’s headstrong nature” that caused conflict between the two men. Equally, Ruskin’s timid sexuality is blamed for having set the two on a collision course.<sup>12</sup> All of these conjectures potentially alter our appreciation of Rossetti’s language of flowers, even though they are not necessarily just, for having weighed up all the available evidence most recently, John Holmes suggests that “Ruskin is best seen not as the Pre-Raphaelites’ guru but rather as an enthusiastic fellow traveller who understood, shared and latterly helped to articulate many of their aims.”<sup>13</sup>

Nature – What is it?

Nature may have provided “inspiration and guidance for spiritual pursuits and contemplation of the divine” for centuries, with this love of, and deep

interest in, the relationship between the divine and the natural world being central to religious devotion in Renaissance Europe, but what exactly do we understand by the term? <sup>14</sup> Nature had a long history of ambivalent and non-exclusive meanings. One Victorian commentator, Alfred Austin, summarised the term's ambiguity when he wrote:

I find that Nature is gentle, that Nature is cruel; that she sympathizes with man; that she is utterly indifferent to him; that he is in harmony with her, and that he is in hopeless discord with her. One poet tells me that Fate, blind, immoral, inexorable, rules all things. Another assures me that there is a beneficent Creator of the Universe; that He upholds the mountains and ruffles the sea, and that by Him, the heavens are kept pure from wrong. A third sings with exquisite modulations of many and multiform gods that cannot die; while a fourth mournfully predicts that man's gods shall go down to him dead, and that the waves shall be upon even our deities at last. By one melodious interpreter I am carried through hell, purgatory, and heaven; by another I am warned that these are the hideous inventions of tyrants and hypocrites, or the distempered dreams of servile natures.<sup>15</sup>

Confusingly, Nature personified was simultaneously male and female; both nurturing and destructive; both a force for good and a force for evil. According to *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary*, the lexicon in common use in the nineteenth century:

*Nature* sometimes means the Author of Nature, or *natura naturans*; as nature hath made man partly corporeal, and partly immaterial. For nature in this sense may be used the word creator.

*Nature* sometimes means that on whose account a thing is what it is and is called as when we define the nature of an angle. For nature in this sense, may be used *essence* or quality.

*Nature* sometimes means what belongs to a living creature, as its nativity, or accrues to it by its birth, as when we say, a man is noble by *nature*, or a child is *naturally* forward.

*Nature* sometimes means an internal principle of local motion, as we say, the stone falls, or the flame rises by *nature*.

*Nature* sometimes means the established course of things corporeal, as *nature* makes the night succeed the day.

Nature means sometimes the aggregate of the powers belonging to a body, especially a living one; as when physicians say, that *nature* is strong, or *nature* left to herself will do the cure.

*Nature* is put likewise for the system of the corporeal works of God, as there is not phoenix or chimera in *nature*. For *nature* thus applied, we may use, the world, or the universe.

*Nature* is sometimes indeed commonly taken for a kind of semi-deity. In this sense it is best not to use it at all.<sup>16</sup>

Within all these apparent contradictions, P. M. Harman in *The Culture of Nature in Britain 1680-1860* points to two primary distinctions emanating from classical antiquity: the two senses of nature identified by Cicero in *De Natura Deorum (On the Nature of the Gods)* and expounded in the works of Aristotle and Lucretius.<sup>17</sup> The first idea of nature related to the untamed “products of the earth,” the building blocks of reality, the cause of the physical world and the essential nature of things; while the second appeared in stark contradiction to human civilisation and contrivance – it was the wild, the primordial, the untamed.<sup>18</sup>

Ruskin supplements these ideas with his conception of “truth to Nature/nature,” which combines the manifestation of the natural as it appears unaided by human hand with its primeval life force as provided by a Christian deity. Harman traces Ruskin’s notion of “truth transcending mimetic representation” to the second volume of *Modern Painters*, published in 1846. He notes that “in a draft discarded from publication, Ruskin recalls a formative experience leading him to grasp the spiritual efficacy of nature, an epiphany he experienced one stormy evening in July 1842 when, lying on the Brévent, he saw the Aiguilles of Chamonix break through the clouds:

Spire of ice – dome of snow – edge of rock – *all* fire in the light of the sunset, sank into the hollows of the crags – and pierced through the prisms of the glaciers, and dwelt within them – as it does in clouds ... the mighty pyramids stood calmly – in the very heart of the high heaven – a celestial city with walls of amethyst and gates of gold – filled with the light and clothed with the Peace of God. And then I learned – what till then I had not known – the real meaning of the word Beautiful ... how thought itself may become ignoble and energy itself become base – when compared with the absorption of all power – and the cessation of all will – before, and in the Presence of, the manifested Deity.<sup>19</sup>

The majesty of nature conflated with the omnipresent creative force of Nature to manifest the Peace of God. However, Ruskin had already made the critical distinction between ‘Nature’ and ‘nature’ in the first volume of *Modern Painters* (1843):

From young artists nothing ought to be tolerated but simple *bona fide imitation* of nature. They have no business to ape the execution of

masters; to utter weak and disjointed repetitions of other men's words, and mimic the gestures of the preacher, without understanding his meaning or sharing in his emotions. We do not want their crude ideas of composition, their uniformed conceptions of the Beautiful, their unsystemized experiments upon the Sublime. We scorn their velocity; for it is without direction: we reject their decision; for it is without grounds: we condemn their composition; for it is without materials: we reprobate their choice; for it is without comparison. Their duty is neither to choose, nor compose, nor imagine, nor experimentalize; but to be humble and earnest in following the steps of nature, and tracing the finger of God. Nothing is so bad a symptom, in the work of young artists, as too much dexterity of handling; for it is a sign that they are satisfied with their work, and have tried to do nothing more than they were able to do. Their work should be full of failures; for these are the signs of efforts. They should keep to quiet colours, greys and browns; and, making the early works of Turner their example, as his latest are to be their object of emulation, should go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts but how best to penetrate her meaning, and remember her instruction; rejecting nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth. Then, when their memories are stored, and their imaginations fed, and their hands firm, let them take up the scarlet and the gold, give the reins to their fancy, and show us what their heads are made of. We will follow them wherever they choose to lead; we will check at nothing; they are then our masters, and are fit to be so. They have placed themselves above our criticism, and we will listen to their words in all faith and humility; but not unless they themselves have before bowed, in the same submission, to a higher Authority and Master.<sup>20</sup>

Critically, Ruskin is not referring to one nature, but to two: the first nature occurs when referring to the *bona fide* imitation of nature and the second, capitalised, Nature is introduced when talking about going to Nature in all

singleness of heart. Recognising the difference is crucial to understanding Ruskin's point of view. Young artists are to ignore the demands of composition; there should be no contrivance, no sleight of hand, and no deliberate positioning. They should keep to a muted colour palette, embracing the greys and the browns of Nature so that they can concentrate on what they see before them, and they should not choose one natural manifestation over another for all have equal value. The crux of his argument is that no one can improve what God has designed to be perfect. Like Nature, artists, too, should walk rather than being too precipitous, because everything has a time to manifest. They should not be too clever, luxuriating in a misplaced sense of self-worth. If artists dare to attempt to act as a substitute for the Creator, they will necessarily fail in their endeavour. Ruskin suggests that it is only by artists subjugating themselves to the superiority of the Divine that they can walk successively with Nature to communicate something of its essential truth: to present a celebration of "simple nature in luminous detail."<sup>21</sup>

#### Which Flowers did Rossetti Paint?

Taking into account Rossetti's objection to being regarded as a watercolour artist,<sup>22</sup> and given the vast number of works listed in Virginia Surtees's *Catalogue Raisonné*, for the purposes of this chapter, I choose to focus on Rossetti's major works – his original and completed oil paintings as they appear in the Catalogue. I consider these chronologically by final date of first

completion, ever mindful that Rossetti sometimes changed his mind about which flower to include during the painting process.<sup>23</sup>

Unfortunately, as highlighted in the introduction, not every flower is identified by Surtees and some are simply not identifiable (for example, the carpet of flowers in *Love's Greeting* (fig. 25), while some have been previously misidentified, even by Rossetti's closest associates, and these misidentifications remain unchallenged. For example, the crown in *A Sea-Spell* (fig. 20) has long been thought to be composed of roses, signifying "pleasure and pain," according to Phelps Smith.<sup>24</sup> However, we know that Rossetti chose the anemone (*Anemone nemorosa*) from correspondence with Thomas Gordon Hake in September 1875. Rossetti tells him: "The picture has only advanced this week by a wreath of anemones which took as long to do as all the drapery."<sup>25</sup> Admittedly, the two flowers are visually quite similar (fig. 26). However, by the time Frederic George Stephens, describes the painting in "Mr Rossetti's New Pictures" appearing in the *Athenaeum* in the April of 1877, the anemones have assumed their new identity. Stephens has transformed them into a garland of "blush roses," no doubt to complement the Siren's skin which is described as "brilliant and rosy." One has to concede that Stephens's description of "a rosy witchery" illuminating the painting, is poetically more satisfying than "an anemone witchery," which may explain his lack of pedantry.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Stephens proceeds to conflate the snapdragon with the Venus Fly Trap, again sacrificing botanical accuracy for poetic licence. The two, although botanically unrelated, share an allusion to the mouth – the antirrhinum or snapdragon (*Antirrhinum majus*) flower appears to have a mouth that opens

and closes and the carnivorous Venus Fly Trap (*Dionaea muscipula*) eats its prey. Stephens goes on to claim that the third flower is a carnation, whereas it is much more likely to be a rose, according to the shape of the flower bud in the painting.<sup>27</sup>

Rossetti's own observational skills, too, were not always honed to perfection, according to his brother, William Michael, who believed that Dante Gabriel had mistaken the aconite (*Aconitum*) for larkspur (*Delphinium*) in *La Ghirlandata* (fig. 27). According to Sarah Phelps Smith, William Michael Rossetti was aware of his brother's intentional flower symbolism when he wrote:

... It must be intended to have a fateful or deadly purport, as indicated by the prominence given to the blue flowers of the poisonous monkshood. Monkshood this plant was in Rossetti's intention; but I am informed that he made a mistake (being assuredly for the reverse of a botanist), and figured the innocuous larkspur instead – – and was not minded to make an alteration when friendly admonitions had apprised him of his error.<sup>28</sup>

Dante Gabriel certainly thought that the blue flower was aconite, as shown in his notes to Stephens below, and aconite is clearly identified as toxic in one of the herbals Rossetti owned.<sup>29</sup> However, there is no sense that Rossetti is focusing on the blue plant's toxicity in his description of the painting:

The green clad "Lady of the Garland" sits among the golden greens of thorn tree & myrtle copse; her hands drawing the music from the harp beside her, & her face absorbed in the sound. On either side, over her shoulders an angel looks through the glowing upper leaves, as if Heaven



itself waited on her song. Round the summit of the harp is slung a garland of roses and honeysuckles, sweetest of earthly blooms, & the sky above, where the day of earth is dying, seems to speak of a sweetness still beyond. The evening breeze has just risen, & begins to lift the light drapery about her shoulders as she plays. In colour, the picture is a study of greens chiefly, interspersed with blues of various shades –the deep blue aconite which fills the base of the picture, the bright bird looking through the leaves, the wing-pattern painted on the instrument, & the blue fading from the sky. These hues are balanced by the golden browns of the hair, & dusky-hued harp – an instrument solid and strung on both sides.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than the implied botanical carelessness being “due to the fact that the flower was more important as a symbol than as a botanical specimen,” as Phelps Smith claims, <sup>31</sup> Rossetti may well be seeking to establish the chromatic contrast and a sense of musicality and movement in the painting. It is always of paramount importance, therefore, to pay close attention to each flower, and where possible, to refer to Rossetti’s correspondence and related material before committing to any floral identification. In this regard, I am indebted once more to horticulturalist and senior technician, Nicola Frear from the University of York’s biology department, for her generous support:

#### Original Oil Paintings and Their Flowers

	Title	Lily	Rose	Other
1849	<i>The Girlhood of Mary Virgin</i>	Lily	Rose	
1850	<i>Ecce Ancilla Domini!</i>	Lily		
1857	<i>St Catherine</i>		Rose	
1859	<i>Bocca Baciata</i>		Rose	Marigold
	<i>The Salutation of Beatrice</i>	Lily	Rose	Wildflowers
1860	<i>Regina Cordium</i>			Pansy
1861	<i>Love’s Greeting</i>		Rose	Sunflower and a carpet of unidentified flowers
	<i>Fair Rosamund</i>		Rose	

1862	<i>Girl at a Lattice</i>			Wallflower
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>		Rose	
1863	<i>Bethlehem Gate</i>			
	<i>Fazio's Mistress</i>			
	<i>Belcolore</i>		Rose	
	<i>My Lady Greensleeves</i>			Apple Blossom
	<i>Joan of Arc</i>	Lily		
	<i>Helen of Troy</i>			
	<i>La Castagnetta</i>		Rose	
1865	<i>The Blue Bower</i>			Convolvulus, Passionflower, Cornflower
	<i>Bellebuona</i>			No Flowers. Acorn
1866	<i>The Beloved</i>	Lily	Rose	Unidentified red flower top left
	<i>Regina Cordium</i>		Rose	Cherry Blossom, Iris
	<i>Monna Vanna</i>		Rose	
1867	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>		Rose	
	<i>Joli Coeur</i>			No Flowers
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>		Rose	
	<i>The Loving Cup</i>			Ivy, but no flowers
1868	<i>Venus Verticordia</i>		Rose	Honeysuckle
	<i>Jane Morris (The Blue Silk Dress)</i>		Rose	Carnation
	<i>Lady Lilith</i>		Rose	Poppy, Foxglove, Silver Daisy
1870	<i>Beata Beatrix</i>			Poppy
	<i>Mariana</i>		Rose	or Carnation
	<i>Sibylla Palmifera</i>		Rose	Poppy
1871	<i>Pandora</i>			No Flowers
	<i>Water Willow</i>			Tree and foliage but no flowers
1872	<i>Veronica Veronese</i>			Primrose, Daffodil
	<i>The Bower Meadow</i>		Rose	
1873	<i>Blanzifiore</i>			Primrose, Snowdrop
	<i>La Ghirlandata</i>		Rose	Larkspur, Honeysuckle
	<i>The Bower Maiden (Marigolds)</i>			Marsh Marigold
1874	<i>Dis Manibus</i>		Rose	
1875	<i>La Bello Mano</i>			Tulip, Iris
1877	<i>A Sea-Spell</i>		Rose	Antirrhinum, Anemone
	<i>Proserpine</i>			No flowers. Pomegranate
	<i>Astarte Syriaca</i>			No flowers. Ivy
	<i>Mary Magdalene</i>			Hellebore
1878	<i>The Blessed Damozel</i>	Lily	Rose	
	<i>A Vision of Fiammetta</i>			Apple Blossom
1879	<i>La Donna della Finestra</i>		Rose	
	<i>Beatrice</i>			No flowers
1880	<i>The Day Dream</i>			Honeysuckle
	<i>La Pia de'Tolomei</i>			No flowers. Foliage
1881	<i>Mnemosyne</i>			Pansy

We are now able to make some useful observations. Rossetti employed flowers throughout his life, from his first oil painting to his last. Very few paintings have no flowers whatsoever, but where they are absent, there may be good reason for this omission. For example, the model in the flowerless *Joli Coeur* (fig. 28) resembles the figure of the left-hand bridesmaid in *The Beloved* (fig. 29), and may be an early study completed before the original or indeed a partial replica completed afterwards.<sup>32</sup> It is

known that Rossetti was prone to paint flowers in the final stages of the painting process and this may, therefore, explain their absence. The same is true of *Beatrice* (fig. 30). This unusually simple work was sold in the Rossetti Sale (lot 104) as *Head of a Lady*, but Surtees notes that it is, in fact, a replica of the head of *Mariana* (fig. 31) Certainly they are alike. Conversely, flowers were superfluous in the case of Helen of Troy (fig 32):

... The picture of Helen, with Parian face and mouth of ardent blossom, a keen red flower-bud of fire, framed in broad gold of wide-spread locks, the sweet sharp smile of power set fast on her clear curved lips, and far behind her the dull flame of burning and light from reddened heaven on dark sails of lurid ships.<sup>33</sup>

According to Swinburne, Helen's presence fills the canvas, allowing only enough space to view the burning cityscape behind her, her golden hair fanning the flames as civilisation crumbles away in the night sky: Helen, "destroyer of men, destroyer of cities" is the flower of lust and annihilation, and it is reasonable to assume that few flowers could compete with the beauty of this iconic figure.<sup>34</sup>

Rossetti painted at least twenty-six different species in oils, the most popular being the rose (twenty-five paintings), lily (six), poppy (three), and honeysuckle (three). The iris, (marsh) marigold, pansy, apple blossom, and primrose all appear twice (along with the carnation which may appear on two occasions depending on whether the flower in *Mariana* is a rose or a carnation). All the others – the sunflower, wallflower, passionflower, convolvulus, cornflower, cherry blossom, foxglove, daisy, daffodil, snowdrop,

larkspur, tulip, antirrhinum, anemone and hellebore – appear just once. As the following frequency chart proves, Rossetti also uses roses over the longest period, from his first oil painting in 1849 until just three years before Rossetti’s death:

### Summary of Rossetti’s Most Frequently Used Flowers

Flower	1 <sup>st</sup> Used	Last Used	Over How Many Years?
Rose	1849	1879	30
Lily	1849	1878	29
Pansy	1860	1881	22
Apple Blossom	1863	1878	16
Marigold/Marsh Marigold	1859	1874	16
Honeysuckle	1868	1880	13
Iris	1866	1875	10
Carnation	1868	1870	3
Poppy	1868	1870	3
Primrose	1872	1872	1
Sunflower	1861	1861	1
Wallflower	1862	1862	1
Passionflower	1865	1865	1
Convolvulus	1865	1865	1
Cornflower	1865	1865	1
Cherry Blossom	1866	1866	1
Foxglove	1868	1868	1
Daisy	1868	1868	1
Daffodil	1872	1872	1
Snowdrop	1872	1872	1
Larkspur	1873	1873	1
Tulip	1875	1875	1
Antirrhinum	1877	1877	1
Anemone	1877	1877	1
Hellebore	1877	1877	1

It is also evident that Rossetti had a tendency to use just one species of flower in each painting, or to combine a new flower choice with a stalwart rose or a lily. There are only five paintings where he uses three or more species

together: all appear over a decade, commencing in 1865 with *The Blue Bower* (convolvulus, passion flower and cornflower) (fig. 33), then again the following year in *Regina Cordium* (iris, rose, cherry blossom) (fig. 34), in 1868 with *Lady Lilith* (rose, poppy, foxglove, daisy) (fig. 35), 1873 with *La Ghirlandata* (rose, larkspur, honeysuckle) (fig. 27), and for the final occasion in 1875 in *La Bello Mano* (iris, rose, tulip) (fig. 36).

Although Rossetti does not associate his flowers with any particular model, utilising the same flower when painting two or more models – for example, the primrose appears with both Jane Morris (*Blanzifiore*) and Alexa Wilding (*Veronica Veronese*); the poppy appears alongside Elizabeth Siddal (*Beata Beatrix*) and Alexa Wilding (*Lady Lilith*) and (*Sibylla Palmifera*); the lily is found with both Christina Rossetti (*The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*) and Mrs Beyer (*Joan of Arc*) – the majority of flowers appearing just once are associated solely with Alexa Wilding: unsurprisingly, perhaps, given that she sat for more finished paintings than any of Rossetti’s other models:

#### Single Use Flowers According to Model

Only Appearance of the Flower	Model
Sunflower	1 (Elizabeth Siddal/Fanny Cornforth) <i>Love’s Greeting</i>
Wallflower	1 (Ford Madox Brown’s Maidservant) <i>Girl at a Lattice</i>
Passionflower	1 (Fanny Cornforth) <i>The Blue Bower</i>
Convolvulus	1 (Fanny Cornforth) <i>The Blue Bower</i>
Cornflower	1 (Fanny Cornforth) <i>The Blue Bower</i>
Cherry Blossom	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>Regina Cordium</i>
Foxglove	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>Lady Lilith</i>

(Silver) Daisy	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>Lady Lilith</i>
Daffodil	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>Veronica Veronese</i>
Snowdrop	1 (Jane Morris) <i>Blanzifiore</i>
Larkspur	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>La Ghirlandata</i>
Tulip	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>La Bello Mano</i>
Antirrhinum	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>A Sea-Spell</i>
Anemone	1 (Alexa Wilding) <i>A Sea-Spell</i>
Hellebore	1 (possibly Ruth Herbert) <i>Mary Magdalene</i>

It is speculated that:

The group of works in which Alice (Alexa) Wilding figures prominently includes all types of his fantastic visions of femininity – both the idealistic and the nightmare, the positive and the negative. While he required separate models to portray such opposites in the past (as they occupied such disparate spheres in his own life), he was able to use Alexa to add to the depth of his works by using the same face to express such opposing ideas, both virtue and vice. In that way, her presence allowed him greater freedom of expression for his artistic ideas as hers is the face he placed in many of his most original compositions.<sup>35</sup>

Certainly, as his only professional female model, Alexa would have had to display considerable versatility, and it is not inconsequential that her face was the one favoured by Rossetti's most ardent admirer and patron, Frederick Richards Leyland. However, there may be other reasons why a particular flower made a lone appearance. For example, by the nineteenth century, the "old-fashioned" tulip appearing in *La Bello Mano* (fig. 36) was established as the perfect florists' flower, enjoying its greatest success from the mid-1800s until around 1870.<sup>36</sup> Phelps Smith contends that, together with the other natural tokens in the painting, the iris, rose and lemon tree, the scarlet tulip indicated a "declaration of love."<sup>37</sup> However, it seems more likely that its appearance owes more to the nationality of the painting's

patron: Dutch art dealer and collector, Murray Marks (1840-1918), who, with Rossetti, pored over every detail.<sup>38</sup>

Equally, it is possible that the hellebore in *Mary Magdalene* may have been the best possible choice because:

A purgation of Hellebor is good for mad and furious men, for melancholy, dull and heavie persons, for those that are troubled with the falling sickenes, for lepers, for them that are sicke or a quartaine Ague, and briefly for all those that are troubled with blacke cholera and molested with melancholy.<sup>39</sup>

The hellebore, acting as a regenerative elixir, can lift the spirits of the mad, the bad, the angry and the sad, not unlike Mary Magdalene herself, a “devoted and committed follower of Christ who witnessed some of the most significant moments of His life,” keeping vigil at the Crucifixion and the first to see Him after the Resurrection.<sup>40</sup> The hellebore may be seen to be synonymous, therefore, with the benevolent disciple and significant for its propensity to flower at Christmas, the anniversary of the Saviour’s birth.

The daffodils in *Veronica Veronese* (*fig. 17*), may have been used for their contrast with the sumptuous green of Alexa’s velvet dress and brocade curtain, rather than for any particular association with floral symbolism. They also provide contextual and compositional balance as shown in (*fig. 37*), The yellow/golden hues repeated on the tassels of her belt and in the canary perched on the door of the gilded cage form chromatic and contextual relationships, in a similar way to the red/brown hues of the violin,

Alexa's red hair and the crimson of her chair and belt. Indeed, colour is highly significant in Rossetti's choice, with him preferring a limited palette, predominantly of pink/crimson and white, as shown below:

### The Dominant Colours of Rossetti's Flowers

Date	Title	Crimson/Pink	White	Other
1849	<i>The Girlhood of Mary Virgin</i>	X	X	
1850	<i>Ecce Ancilla Domini!</i>		X	
1857	<i>St Catherine</i>	X		
1859	<i>Bocca Baciata</i>		X	Orange/Yellow
	<i>The Salutation of Beatrice</i>	X	X	Various
1860	<i>Regina Cordium</i>			Purple
	<i>Love's Greeting</i>	X		Yellow
	<i>Fair Rosamund</i>	X	X	
1862	<i>Girl at a Lattice</i>	X		Orange/Yellow
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>		X	
1863	<i>Belcolore</i>	X		
	<i>My Lady Greensleeves</i>	X		
	<i>Joan of Arc</i>		X	
	<i>La Castagnetta</i>	X		
1865	<i>The Blue Bower</i>	X	X	Purple, Yellow, Blue
1866	<i>The Beloved</i>	X		Pale Yellow
	<i>Regina Cordium</i>	X	X	
	<i>Monna Vanna</i>	X	X	
1867	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	X		
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>	X		
1868	<i>Venus Verticordia</i>	X		Yellow
	<i>The Blue Silk Dress</i>	X	X	
	<i>Lady Lilith</i>	X	X	Silver
1870	<i>Beata Beatrix</i>		X	
	<i>Mariana</i>	X		
	<i>Sibylla Palmifera</i>	X		
1872	<i>Veronica Veronese</i>			Yellow
	<i>The Bower Meadow</i>	X		
1873	<i>Blanzifiore</i>		X	Yellow
	<i>La Ghirlandata</i>	X	X	Blue
	<i>The Bower Maiden</i>			Orange/Yellow
1874	<i>Dis Manibus</i>	X		
1875	<i>La Bello Mano</i>	X		Purple
1877	<i>A Sea-Spell</i>	X		
	<i>Mary Magdalene</i>		X	
1878	<i>The Blessed Damozel</i>	X	X	
	<i>A Vision of Fiammetta</i>	X		
1879	<i>La Donna della Finestra</i>	X		
1880	<i>The Day Dream</i>	X		Yellow
1881	<i>Mnemosyne</i>			Yellow



It is clear that Rossetti favours shades of crimson/pink: in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 10) Rossetti paints an almost forgotten, relatively insignificant pink rose; in *St Catherine* (fig. 38) pink roses wind themselves around her attribute; in *The Salutation of Beatrice* (fig. 39) a deep pink rose towers above the wild flowers; in *Belcolore* (fig. 40) an emerging pink rose bud sensuously caresses the lips of a golden-haired girl; in *Venus Verticordia* (fig. 4) an abundance of crimson roses form a bank beyond the honeysuckle; in *Regina Cordium* (fig. 34) pink roses grow against the stone parapet; and in the *Blessed Damozel* (fig. 11) pink roses grow abundantly in Paradise. He is adamant that the rose he uses in *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35) must be white with plenty of leaves and red buds,<sup>41</sup> as if to emphasise the paradoxical juxtaposition of the deflowered bud and the pure full bloom.

How did Rossetti Paint Flowers?

Now to reflect on how Rossetti painted flowers, and most significantly, to ask how did he obtain them and where did he place them on the canvas, having acquired them?

Although gardening had become a national pastime by the nineteenth century, Rossetti could not in any way be regarded as a keen horticulturalist: Thomas Hall Caine recollects the appearance of Rossetti's rented Cheyne Walk garden in the autumn of 1880, now devoid of his notorious menagerie of exotic animals:

I strolled through the large garden at the back of the house ... A beautiful avenue of lime-trees opened into a grass plot of nearly an acre in extent. The trees were just as nature made them, and so was the grass, which in places was lying long, dry and withered under the sun, weeds creeping up in damp places, and the gravel of the pathway scattered upon the verges. This neglected condition of the garden was, I afterwards found, humorously charged upon Mr Watts's "reluctance to interfere with nature in her clever scheme of survival of the fittest," but I suspect it was due at least equally to the owner's personal indifference to everything of the kind.<sup>42</sup>

The garden is overgrown and unkempt. There is not one flower in bloom. Not so in the house Rossetti shared with the Morris family, Kelmscott Manor. From here, he wrote to his mother, describing the profusion of lilies:

The white lily in the garden has grown to a perfect decorative cluster now & is most divinely lovely. Another white lily is developing also, but the others which excited your curiosity remain as yet unexplained. Janey planted them & believes them to be tiger-lilies.<sup>43</sup>

Corresponding in July 1873, Rossetti may well have chosen to study the Kelmscott white lily for *The Blessed Damozel*, begun in 1871, and he was not averse to cajoling his other friends into providing specimens to inspire him, for example, when composing *Lady Lilith*, he writes to his agent, Charles Augustus Howell to request assistance:

Is your garden still full of those white roses? If so, I think they would suit me capitally to paint in the *Lady Lilith* – ie branches growing out behind her head as if from a pot.”

“You see I should have branches in the right direction as in sketch, and I want a good cluster of roses right up in the corner above the head. But of course I could combine much, only the direction of the branches is desirable, & plenty of the leaves & red buds. If you have them, Loader will call early tomorrow or Saturday morning for them – quite early. Probably tomorrow.<sup>44</sup>

He is not specifically interested in taxonomy, but rather the flowers’ colour, size and direction of growth. Although he was content to seek out roses for *The Beloved* and *Venus Verticordia* from Covent Garden,<sup>45</sup> when painting *Dis Manibus* he insists on wild roses around the harp,<sup>46</sup> and in *Palmifera*, he is adamant that the flowers should not appear too cultivated:

I painted some poppies into the *Palmifera*, and also some roses just before I left town, but the latter did not please me, being of too highly cultivated a kind – gardener’s roses – and I took them out. If I can get some simpler ones to town from here – for the simple ones are much harder to get at there than the swell ones, I shall paint them in on my return.<sup>47</sup>

As already highlighted, changing his mind was not unusual for Rossetti. Painting *Monna Primavera (The Day Dream)* (fig. 41), Rossetti first considers the snowdrop, believing the flowers had been sent to him by Jane Morris (the snowdrop being a particular favourite of hers<sup>48</sup>), as he explains:

I am so sorry the snowdrops were not yours. I certainly wd not have painted them in a hurry if I had known they came from anyone else. As it is, I have done them, but *may* really have to re-do them, as having nothing but single stalks & no leaves I fancy they don’t look growing rightly. Nevertheless the composition with the hand requires certain

arrangement & I *may* have to adopt another flower – probably primrose as simplest. Cowslips I think have no leaf to speak of. <sup>49</sup>

Dissatisfied with nothing but “single stalks & no leaves,” although he insists that to paint flowers “without nature ... would be impossible,” <sup>50</sup> he consults one of the herbals in his book collection to find an illustration of a perfect specimen:<sup>51</sup>

Would you believe it that *Snowdrop* is not to be found in Gerarde’s Index? This astounded me. I then turned up the Latin Dictionary – where I found not Snowdrop but *Snowdeep* which I suppose must be the real word. This was Latinised as *Viola bulbosa*. This again was not in Gerarde’s Latin Index! But being driven to desperation I sought Bulbed Violet in his Index, found it, and on turning to the page, there was an obvious Snowdrop! ... There is a greater bulbed violet which seems to grow in clusters & might save my bacon as to arrangement; but I am uncertain as yet what to do. I shd be sorry to trouble you to get a pot, as I could get one from here if needed, so you had better put it out of your kind head.<sup>52</sup>

The greater bulbed violet to which Rossetti refers is illustrated alongside the common snowdrop in Gerard’s *Herball* – “The many floured great bulbous violet hath narrow leaves like those of the leeke, but lesser and smoother, not unlike to the leaves of the bastard Daffodil” – and may have been considered more natural.<sup>53</sup>

Although we do not know how Rossetti came to acquire his copy of Gerard’s *Herball*, we do know that it was a text valued by others in his circle. William Morris owned a copy, and “the bold woodcut illustrations inspired

his pattern designing.”<sup>54</sup> Edward Burne-Jones painted his wife holding a copy, too, as previously discussed (*fig. 8*). While residing at Kelmscott Manor amid its beautiful gardens tended so lovingly by Jane, Rossetti appears intent on satisfying Hake’s request for an illustration for his soon-to-be-published *Parables and Tales* (1872) by seeking this trusty aide-memoire from his London home. He tells Hake that it was “too late to get the flowers I want to draw from in the fields of garden, so I have sent to London for Gerard’s *Herball*. As soon as it comes I will make a drawing, and think, the notion will come well enough in its way.”<sup>55</sup> Significantly emphasising that he abominated “small symbolism in such things,” Rossetti subsequently produced what he referred to as a two-dimensional “simple piece of floral decoration.”<sup>56</sup> This was not an exclusive arrangement, for his correspondence proves that he was still using Gerard’s *Herball* as late as 1880.<sup>57</sup>

An extensive encyclopaedia of seventeenth-century plant life, listed in three books, published in one volume, each of Gerard’s chapters has a detailed description of the appearance of a specific specimen, where it grows, the time of year you can expect to see it, its other known names, its ‘temperature’ (or relationship with the four humors of Hippocratic medicine), and virtues (or how to use it to cure a variety of ailments).<sup>58</sup> Gerard’s *Herball* also contains a huge number of black and white woodblock illustrations more akin to a pressed specimen than to a living plant, and often the proportions of the characteristic parts of the plant (the root, the rhizome or bulb, their relative thickness, leaf shape, flowers, seed-heads etc) in relation to each other are not clear. Colour is absent entirely and there is, therefore, no way of determining chromatic shades or tonal values. As

representations of nature, therefore, one could deduce that they are woefully inadequate compared to a living species, and yet, as already highlighted, Rossetti was content to refer to them for guidance.

When he recognised that the balance of the painting would be compromised when using the snowdrop alone, he considered combining the snowdrop with the primrose as he had done in *Blanzifiore* (fig. 42), eight years earlier, but his machinations eventually gives way to alternatives:

I painted the Snowdrops in the picture but I don't think they'll do as I have got them. The design needs a bloom or leaf (leaf in the drawing) as a balancing value beyond the hand, & this the snowdrop cannot manage to give well. I think I shall use a snowdrop and primrose together. The leaves of the Primrose, though not beautiful, may be made to do – particularly young ones. I won't ask you to trouble abt getting flowers unless I find them not easily obtainable (Dunn being still away). I know nursery-gardens abound in your neighbourhood. But as I shall probably begin the drapery tomorrow, I had better write again about this. I suppose primroses are hardly obtainable yet. Of the other flowers I have noted I suppose the Cowslip & Wood Anemone seem most promising, but the latter I judge wd be difficult to obtain, and the former not yet out ...<sup>59</sup>

Eventually forsaking all other suggestions, he settles for the wild honeysuckle, combining “the slight white & yellow” of the snowdrop and primrose, because it “seems to be longer in all the year round than anything else.”<sup>60</sup> He requests a sprig from Jane if she has “anything of the sort.” If not, he thinks he knows “a boy who could be suborned to search for one.”<sup>61</sup>

Although he emphasises that his intention is “to paint from nature,” Rossetti has little desire to paint *en plein air*, rather, even when considering painting from his own garden, he was prone to select the perfect flower and isolate it from its immediate environment. Painting *A Vision of Fiammetta* (fig. 2), when the apple tree in his own garden blossoms a little too quickly, Rossetti is more than prepared to pay anyone more than the going rate to furnish him with replacement apple branches. If he is to capture Boccaccio’s heroine standing “mid Spring-flushed apple-growth” he recognises that he needs copious amounts of blossom.

I am very anxious about the blossom. I do not think I lost any time, but its appearance has been most sudden. On Saturday last, there was not a symptom beyond the merest budding in my garden: and yesterday it was in full bloom. But mine is not good enough to paint, and Dunn has got some of a better kind; but it seems all uncertain as to getting more; and today I painted as much as was paintable of the branch he got. It was very ticklish work now. If you could get the nurseryman you spoke of to bring a good branch daily, I would be only too glad to pay him. The Chelsea people don’t seem to grow apple trees. You would *really befriend* me, if you could get a good branch sent me to-morrow, and each following day; or I may fail in getting the thing done. What I want is a full-coloured red and white blossom, of the tufted, rich kind; and from such I began painting today, only it was not in a good state. I would of course be glad to pay *anything* for a good blossom.<sup>62</sup>

Rossetti is sure that *A Vision of Fiammetta* “will require a smaller class of blossom” than the magnolia suggested by friend and patron Mrs William Cowper Temple.<sup>63</sup> Further correspondence with Frederic Shields reveals that Rossetti will go to extraordinary lengths to secure the right flower:

What you say of apple blossom gives me anxiety. This very day for the first time, I got a spray or two sent me; but anything but fullblown. Also some in my garden – a poorish tree enough – is [*sic*] not fully out. Nevertheless I suppose I had better begin tomorrow trying what I can do with it. If you know any means of sending me good blossoms, I wd pay anyone well to bring me as much as possible daily for some days to come. Dunn searched about Fulham but says there are no apple orchards there – all pear & plum. It would be a service, if you could get me some *good*.<sup>64</sup>

However, when the flowers available prove to be inferior, he is content to consider a composite picture, completing it by copying from a friend's study:

Thanks about the apple stem study. I have been much bothered with the blossom, some of which I have repainted since you saw it & filled in the rest. I hope it is all done now. As to the stem, I have a bad one in my garden, & with the help of your study might manage: indeed shall probably have to do this: but have a yearning for work straight from good nature always. The bark of the bough brought by your nurseryman is as black as London bark, though I believe he brought it from Edgware; so how far to seek for grey & green bark, Heaven knows!<sup>65</sup>

Scheduling his painting around the likelihood of obtaining the specimens he seeks, and always subject to the vagaries of the weather, he would rather delay delivering the painting than paint what he considers to be sub-standard blooms.<sup>66</sup>

If his tribulations with the apple blossom were not enough, he determines to include an additional specimen in *La Fiammetta's* hair, asking



Jane Morris to help him to find some scarlet pimpernels, telling her that “I am terribly in want of some pimpernels (the little red “shepherds’ weatherglass” you know) to paint in the hair of Fiammetta. I have tried vainly everywhere to get them, & it strikes me if you are at Hadham you may find some there.”<sup>67</sup> Although unsuccessful in his appeal (the flowers do not appear on the finished canvas), his requests are precise – they are to be placed “in a little box or envelope of some sort with damp wool round them,” and he would like leaves, too.<sup>68</sup> Relying on specimens in his own garden, the garden of friends, his assistant’s stealth and his friend’s artistic generosity, Rossetti places perfection above realism. It is more critical for him to create a spectacular profusion of stunning apple blossom than it is for him to produce a study of apple blossom in its natural condition.

When painting *La Donna della Finestra* (fig. 43), he is ever mindful of using whatever is at hand if he can, rather than necessarily having a definitive vision as to the perfect species for the painting. Once again, Mrs William Cowper Temple had suggested magnolias from her garden, but these had unfortunately “lost their pristine perfection” while Rossetti was thinking about what to do with them:

It was most kind of you to send the beautiful magnolias. But alas! While I have been thinking where I could paint them, they so lost their pristine perfection that I am induced by your kindness to try and trespass on it further. To-day only I have realized that they really might come in exactly for a picture I was projecting but have not yet begun ... These magnolias wd come in nobly ... if you could only, of your great

goodness, send me a second supply equal to the first ... But if next week wd be too late for them, I will begin on them whenever they arrive, as I have the canvas ready now and the place marked out.

Rossetti does not opt to study floral species in their natural habitat, but rather, like a botanist, he seeks out perfect specimens. Engaged in all areas of botanical production, and especially botanical drawing and engraving, botanists revelled in the minute observation of natural specimens removed from their natural environment.<sup>69</sup> Prime examples of floricultural periodicals include: *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (1787-present); Sydenham Edwards's and John Lindley's *Botanical Register* (1815-1847), Robert Sweet's *British Flower Garden* (1823-1838); and Benjamin Maund's *Botanic Garden* (1825-1851) (see *figs. 44* and *45* for botanical illustration examples). Theirs were not monochromatic approximations as found in Gerard's *Herball*, but microscopically examined bio-diverse flowers, transformed into humanly-crafted, vibrantly-coloured, perfect and enlarged blooms.<sup>70</sup> The notion of specimen was of particular relevance from the middle of the eighteenth century, when a new breed of artist-scientists began isolating, dissecting, observing and replicating specimens. <sup>71</sup> Interestingly, whereas 'species' is derived from the Latin verb *specere* "to look or behold," specimen is closely related to the Latin *speciosus*, meaning beautiful or fair seeming and to the English adjectival derivative of 'specious', referring to something that is "attractive, plausible, but lacking in genuineness."<sup>72</sup>

It was John Ruskin who claimed that "real botany is not so much the description of plants as their biography."<sup>73</sup> If this is so, then the life history of

Rossetti's flowers is of paramount importance. The majority of Rossetti's flowers are either in full bloom or on the brink of bursting into full bloom, with the notable exception of some of the tight red rosebuds in *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35). His is not the sick rose of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, where Blake has "the invisible worm" finding her "bed of crimson joy," but it is in the prime of health, seemingly wallowing in its sensual and sensuous attraction.<sup>74</sup> He may have depicted flowers on one occasion as being forced to grow in a particular way (as in the rose in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 10), or as relatively small in size (as in the case of the pansy in *Mnemosyne* (fig. 24)). Notably, however, they always have a life force coursing through their botanical veins: they are never shrivelled nor exhausted, even when they are cut (as in the foxglove in *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35)), or have turned to fruit (for example the apple in *Venus Verticordia* (fig. 4)), or the pomegranate in *Proserpine* (fig. 46). Gerard tells us that the "Plant of Roses, though it be a shrub, (is) full of prickles," yet Rossetti rarely paints these "prickles."<sup>75</sup> He seems less interested in the thorns, and much more enthralled by the way in which we are able to savour the folds of the rose's delicate petals.

Furthermore, although Rossetti selected single specimens, he would more often combine them in groups, as the following chart demonstrates:

## Number of Flowers

Date	Title	Single Specimen/Single Stalks	Several Specimens of Same Flower	More than One Species
1849	<i>The Girlhood of Mary Virgin</i>	X		2
1850	<i>Ecce Ancilla Domini!</i>	X		
1857	<i>St Catherine</i>		X	
1859	<i>Bocca Baciata</i>	X	X	
	The Salutation of Beatrice		X	3 including various unidentified wildflowers
1860	<i>Regina Cordium</i>	X		
1861	<i>Love's Greeting</i>		X	2
	<i>Fair Rosamund</i>	X		
1862	<i>Girl at a Lattice</i>		X	
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>	X		
1863	<i>Belcolore</i>	X		
	<i>My Lady Greensleeves</i>		X	
	<i>Joan of Arc</i>	X		
	<i>La Castagnetta</i>		X	
1865	<i>The Blue Bower</i>	X	X	3 including single convolvulus
1866	<i>The Beloved</i>	X	X	3 including unidentified flowers top left
	<i>Regina Cordium</i>	X	X	2
	<i>Monna Vanna</i>		X	
1867	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	X		
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>		X	
1868	<i>Venus Verticordia</i>		X	2
	<i>The Blue Silk Dress</i>		X	2
	<i>Lady Lilith</i>	X	X	3
1870	<i>Beata Beatrix</i>	X		
	<i>Mariana</i>		X	
	<i>Sibylla Palmifera</i>		X	2
1872	<i>Veronica Veronese</i>		X	2
	<i>The Bower Meadow</i>		X	
1873	<i>Blanzifiore</i>		X	2
	<i>La Ghirlandata</i>		X	3
	<i>The Bower Maiden</i>		X	
1874	<i>Dis Manibus</i>		X	At least two species of roses
1875	<i>La Bello Mano</i>	X	X	2
1877	<i>A Sea-Spell</i>		X	3
	<i>Mary Magdalene</i>		X	
1878	<i>The Blessed Damozel</i>		X	2
	<i>A Vision of Fiammetta</i>		X	
1879	<i>La Donna della Finestra</i>		X	
1880	<i>The Day Dream</i>	X		
1881	<i>Mnemosyne</i>	X		

Seventeen single specimens appear over the course of his career, while he chooses to paint almost twice as many (twenty-nine) in groups of the same flower. Seventeen paintings feature at least two species. He also chooses to place his flowers almost equally in the foreground, middle ground and background of his paintings:

## Position of Flowers

Date	Title	Fore	Mid	Back
1849	<i>The Girlhood of Mary Virgin</i>		X	X
1850	<i>Ecce Ancilla Domini!</i>		X	
1857	<i>St Catherine</i>	X		
1859	<i>Bocca Baciata</i>	X	X	X
	<i>The Salutation of Beatrice</i>	X	X	X
1860	<i>Regina Cordium</i>	X		
	<i>Love's Greeting</i>	X	X	X
	<i>Fair Rosamund</i>	X	X	
1862	<i>Girl at a Lattice</i>	X		
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>	X		
1863	<i>Belcolore</i>		X	
	<i>My Lady Greensleeves</i>	X		
	<i>Joan of Arc</i>	X		
	<i>La Castagnetta</i>		X	
1865	<i>The Blue Bower</i>	X		X
1866	<i>The Beloved</i>	X	X	X
	<i>Regina Cordium</i>	X	X	
	<i>Monna Vanna</i>			X
1867	<i>A Christmas Carol</i>			X
	<i>Monna Rosa</i>		X	
1868	<i>Venus Verticordia</i>	X		X
	<i>Jane Morris (The Blue Silk Dress)</i>	X	X	X
	<i>Lady Lilith</i>	X	X	X
1870	<i>Beata Beatrix</i>	X		
	<i>Mariana</i>		X	
	<i>Sibylla Palmifera</i>			X
1872	<i>Veronica Veronese</i>	X	X	
	<i>The Bower Meadow</i>	X		
1873	<i>Blanzifiore</i>	X	X	
	<i>La Ghirlandata</i>	X	X	X
	<i>The Bower Maiden</i>		X	
1874	<i>Dis Manibus</i>		X	
1875	<i>La Bello Mano</i>			X
1877	<i>A Sea-Spell</i>	X	X	
	<i>Mary Magdalene</i>			X
1878	<i>The Blessed Damosel</i>		X	
	<i>A Vision of Fiammetta</i>	X		X
1879	<i>La Donna della Finestra</i>	X		X
1880	<i>The Day Dream</i>		X	
1881	<i>Mnemosyne</i>	X		

Like a botanist, Rossetti insists he wants to paint from nature. Like a botanist, he chose a flower for its perfection, isolating it from nature. Like a botanist, he painted it larger than life, with radiant colour and vibrancy, with tenderness and admiration: glorifying and revering each specimen. He seems to be adhering to the Victorian shift away from what might be

regarded as the eighteenth-century rhetoric of nature to a more self-conscious expression of botanical artistry.<sup>76</sup> However, unlike a botanist, Rossetti did not choose a flower for its rarity; he did not disassemble the flower to understand how it was put together, but rather chose a flower for its colour, shape, compositional elegance and contextual relationship to his central character and other significant details. Many of the flowers are painted with a part of the human body in close proximity: most often close to the female arm, or specifically in the model's hand. Examples include: *Bocca Baciata*, *Regina Cordium* (1860), *Belcolore*, *Regina Cordium* (1866), *Blanzifiore*, *The Blessed Damozel*, *Fair Rosamund* (rose stalk), *Monna Rosa* (1867), *The Day Dream*, *St Catherine* (hands on wheel entwined with attribute), *My Lady Greensleeves*, *Venus Verticordia* (arm and breast), *Beata Beatrix*, *La Ghirlandata*, *The Bower Maiden*, *Dis Manibus*, *A Sea-Spell*, *A Vision of Fiammetta*, and *La Donna della Finestra*. Significantly, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* are the only two paintings where flowers are held or touched by someone other than the central figure. In both, Woman's agency is compromised. If hands "give away so much information,"<sup>77</sup> as Alice Schwarz of the Metropolitan Museum in New York contends, then Rossetti has something to say by placing elongated, naked fingertips so close to, or actually on the sign of, Woman's sex at a time when women would provoke disdain for daring to show an ungloved hand in public.<sup>78</sup> The power of this choreographed expression not only presumed intimacy, but placed emphasis on the woman's sensuous and sensual nature. Her gentle caress of the flowerhead not only highlights the presence and significance of the bloom, but also suggests the communion of

Woman and flower, both as a form of self-expression and perhaps, too, her self-exploration.

### Walking with Nature or Doing What Comes Naturally?

Rossetti's understanding of 'walking with nature' was certainly a somewhat fluid term. As we have seen, he liked to emphasise that he was working from nature, and yet he appears content to study potentially inaccurate, two-dimensional botanical drawings from Gerard's *Herball*. On other occasions, he would carefully select the specimens he worked with, demanding fresh specimens daily and going to extraordinary lengths to secure what he considered to be the perfect bloom for his enterprise. He preferred the rose to all other flowers, and yet he experimented with other specimens in 'one-off' paintings, primarily when Alexa Wilding was modelling for him. These singular canvases all included flowers which were commonly available, although again, he would go to great lengths to find just the right specimen, even being happy to produce composite studies. He glamorised perfect flowers, and yet used them to frame his model, rather than having them at the centre of his paintings. He was certainly a man who felt comfortable embracing contradiction.

We should not be too hasty to admonish Rossetti for his seemingly paradoxical relationship with flowers, for he was not alone, as we have already read, in being a little vague about what 'going to nature' actually required. During this period, popular culture was dominated by a growing tension between rational Newtonian science and Charles Darwin's *Origin of*

*Species* (1859), between a belief system constrained by unequivocal Biblical truths and a move towards an understanding of a natural philosophy.

Science was jostling to become the dominant theology, with the nature of nature being “the source of moral and religious values, as a repository of sensibility, as the norm for imagination and aesthetic judgement, and as the object of rational scientific analysis and technological control.”<sup>79</sup>

What we do know is that Ruskin condemned *Venus Verticordia* (fig. 4) in the most vehement of terms, explaining that his criticism was well-considered:

I purposely used the word “wonderfully” painted about those flowers. They were wonderful to me, in their realism; awful – I can use no other word – in their coarseness: showing enormous power, showing certain conditions of non-sentiment which underlie all you are doing – now ...<sup>80</sup>

This now infamous evaluation signalled the end of any meaningful relationship between the two men, but it is dubious that this was the cause of their rift.

It is unlikely that there would ever have been a meeting of minds even on the subject matter of *Venus Verticordia* (1864-68) (fig. 4). Both men, being educated in the Classics to varying degrees, would have been conversant with Venus, “one of the most celebrated deities of the ancients ... the goddess of beauty, the mother of love, the queen of laughter, the mistress of the graces and of pleasure, and the patroness of courtesans.”<sup>81</sup> They would



have been aware, too, that some of the ancients spoke of more than one Venus, with Plato mentioning two and Cicero four.<sup>82</sup> The errant and promiscuous Venus, who was married off to the deformed Vulcan in punishment for rejecting Jupiter, had more than twenty surnames, including that of Verticordia, so named “because she could turn the hearts of women to cultivate chastity.”<sup>83</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine that the sexually modest Ruskin would have imagined this subject matter with more restraint than the hedonistic Rossetti, whose *Venus Verticordia* would be a parody on the original epithet. Rossetti’s *Venus Verticordia* is quite deliberately turning hearts away from chastity, blatantly, and Ruskin might argue coarsely, enticing hearts towards the contemplation of the joys of the flesh. Rossetti’s handling of verticordian chastity may indeed be a misconstruction of Ruskin’s demand to “render as it should be rendered, the simplest of the natural features of the earth,” but for Rossetti there is no better representation of the natural features of the earth than the female form in all its natural nakedness.<sup>84</sup>

*Venus Verticordia*, Rossetti’s only near-naked oil painting (ostensibly to stay true to Grecian tradition), was created in the summer of his halcyon days. A nimbus or halo illuminates her auburn hair because Rossetti believed “the Greeks used to do it,”<sup>85</sup> and the sultry perfume of the honeysuckle symbolically evokes the very soul of the Greeks who believed that the spirit entered the body like a sweet fragrance through the nose.<sup>86</sup> Greek by nature, Roman by name, and oozing with Christian iconography, *Venus Verticordia* simultaneously presents the apple of Paris and the Apple

of Temptation from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. Visually linking the sensuality of the Grecian goddess Aphrodite to the haloed Immaculate Virgin and/or perhaps Mary Magdalene, this juxtaposition reflects a characteristically Rossettian fusion of the sacred and the profane, and also relies most heavily on the educated viewer making the connection.

In the oil version of *Venus Verticordia*, a larger-than-life female figure appears from between two distinct banks of flowers. Originally, Rossetti had another composition in mind, for in his preparatory chalks he had only ever imagined white trellised roses in the background (*figs. 47 and 48*). In oil, however, roses crowd in behind Venus in various hues of pink, from the very pale in the top right-hand corner to deeper crimson shades where they meet the honeysuckle flowers in the bottom left of the canvas. The flowers are massed like a crowd of body parts jostling for position. Almost every flower is at the same stage of its life cycle: open, in full bloom, with the exception of the full fruits of the honeysuckle. Although Rossetti cultivates the pretence of wilderness in their profusion and lack of formal arrangement, yet they are carefully structured in terms of his decision to use just two specimens at a similar time in their life cycle and in choosing a reduced palette. Creating two large swathes of flowers in this manner, an effect rarely achieved in the wild, Rossetti reduces the number of leaves and branches we might expect and instead fills the space available with larger-than-life flowerheads. The flowers appear almost heliotropic, tilting their heads towards the metaphorical sun of Venus. The honeysuckle flowers sway in the gentle breeze, their tactile finger-like structures caressing bare flesh, while the

flower to the right of Venus's breast accentuates it with the close proximity of the crimson flower becoming a substitute engorged nipple.

In contrast, Ruskin's method is quite different, simpler, and, one could argue, less contrived. In *Study of a Wild Rose (fig. 49)*, for example, painted in the more delicate medium of watercolour, he focuses on a single bough of wild roses. There is no agenda other than to capture the rose as it actually appears at that particular moment. He takes pains to reproduce each tiny nuance in tone and colour. Some flowers are in full bloom others are about to blossom, still another bud is emerging. There are some leaves in the bottom right of the page which have been ravaged by an insect, some leaves are beginning to discolour, the bough itself has thorns. This is how nature intended the rose to present itself: blemished, perfect in its imperfection.

Where Ruskin goes to nature, Rossetti waits impatiently for nature to come to him, admitting candidly to fellow artist, Ford Madox Brown, that he had "lost infinite time looking for honeysuckles" for *Venus Verticordia* and that he was worried "almost out of his life," having lost a whole week and "pounds and pounds" on the endeavour.<sup>87</sup> His mother, Frances, was also very aware of his determination to find just the right flower, for in correspondence he told her that he had acquired "three different parcels of honeysuckles from three different friends in three different parts of England, none of which were any use. Then I got some from a nursery at Waltham Cross which were not much use either, and lastly from the Crystal Palace. All with much delay and bother."<sup>88</sup>

This insistence on seeking out just the right flowers might suggest that he is intent on working from nature to capture what John Holmes calls “hyperrealist fidelity,” although as we have seen from the empirical study, Rossetti is fashioning nature to his own ends.<sup>89</sup> Although he writes that *La Ghirlandata* is “quite full of flowers and leaves all most carefully done from nature,”<sup>90</sup> and he was keen to point out that he had cartooned *Dis Manibus* “from nature,”<sup>91</sup> delaying the painting “till roses could be got,” his understanding of “done from nature” is completely at odds with Ruskin’s perception.<sup>92</sup>

Ruskin had already expressed his dislike of “vulgar ornamentation,” and cited “the common Greek honeysuckle and other such formalisms” as an example of how “uneducated eyes” see them as being attractive.<sup>93</sup> They are, in contrast to the magnolia shoot, “trying too hard” to be beautiful. The magnolia, according to Ruskin, exhibits an easy, unconscious beauty. In contrast, the honeysuckle may be compared to “the sing-song of a bad reader of poetry, laying regular emphasis on every foot.”<sup>94</sup> It is as if the honeysuckle, with its formal symmetry, appears man-made and ostentatiously self-absorbed.

Carolus Linnaeus’s mid-eighteenth-century sexual classification of the plant kingdom had transformed the bloom into a highly charged analogue of human sexual courtship and reproduction, and along with the rose, the honeysuckle’s analogy with the female body is unmistakable. Nature’s supreme procreative power is undoubtedly a driving force in *Venus Verticordia* – with Rossetti presenting his own uniquely eroticised version of

nature doing what nature does. His profusion of two banks of flowers, provocatively displaying their overt fruitfulness, is a covert advertisement for sexual copulation. In *La Ghirlandata* (fig. 27), too, the honeysuckle, along with its garden of pleasures, points to floral fecundity, while in *The Day Dream* (fig. 41), the limp sprig needs little explication, painted as it was when the ailing Rossetti was sadly past his sexual prime. Indeed, the honeysuckle's appearance, function, etymology and virtues all point to a distinctly sexual nature. According to Gerard's *Herball*, it has:

long slender woody stalkes, parted into divers branches: about which stand by certaine distances smooth leaves, set together by couples one right against another; or a light greene colour above, underneath of a whitish greene. The floures themselves in the tops of the branches, many in number, long, white, sweet of smell, hollow within; in one part standing more out with certaine threddes growing out of the middle. The fruit is like little bunches of grapes, red when they be ripe, wherein is contained small, hard seed.<sup>95</sup>

The honeysuckle derives its name from the Germanic *Honigsugen* – literally translated as to suck honey, <sup>96</sup> and Gerard's *Herball* tells us that “the water of Honisuckles is good against the sorenesse of the throat and uvula ... and likewise for ulcerations ... in the privie parts of man or woman.”<sup>97</sup> The conflation of the mouth and “the privie parts” is something we will see again in *Bocca Baciata* (fig. 13).

In *Venus Verticordia* nature strips away all pretensions of sexual inhibition, and takes questions relating to sexual behaviour right back to the source – to the ancient world – to re-examine and to re-define the nature of

(im)morality in the nineteenth century. Flowers, for Rossetti, are intermediaries: they are mercurial interlocutors. He seems to understand that flowers were a means of mixing contextual values to communicate a host of sexual allusions, which would otherwise not have been possible nor even necessarily palatable in the nineteenth-century milieu he inhabited. Ruskin, on the other hand, would tell his readers subsequently that he would have “nothing to do” with “the recent phrenzy for the investigation of digestive and reproductive operations in plants,” declaring himself “amazed and saddened” by the “ill-taught curiosity” that seeks to explain “every possible spur, spike, jag, sting, rent, blotch, flaw, freckle, filth, or venom, which can be detected in the construction, or distilled from the dissolution, of vegetable organism.”<sup>98</sup> Instead, he chooses to reject evidence for the sexual processes involved in “plant fertilization and insectivorous species” preferring to cleave to his evangelical compulsion to place the artist as an intermediary between God and Man, instead.<sup>99</sup> Rossetti’s insistence on deliberately and meticulously ‘staging’ *Venus Verticordia*’s flowers, is tantamount to disconnecting from the divine, the Natural source of inspiration, and by inference, a demonstration of hubris. This can only end badly.

The evidence from the empirical investigation provides confirmation of Rossetti’s use of Gerard’s *Herball* for help in drawing specimens, and a close visual analysis of Rossetti’s most luxuriant floral painting reveals three assertions: firstly, there is no evidence that Rossetti ever went “to Nature in all singleness of heart” for Ruskin’s definition of Nature demands an acknowledgement of the Divine, and in His presence, self-subjugation, humility, and self-denial rather than reliance on one’s own creative power.

Secondly, Rossetti did not choose to walk with Nature “laboriously and trustingly,” but rather he expected nature to come to him by selecting the best from nature. He sought to improve upon nature, rather than adhering to the Ruskinian view that Nature was perfect in its own way. He manipulated nature to his own theatrical ends. Thirdly, although these negations might imply that Rossetti’s ends were less noble or less inspired than Ruskin’s, Rossetti did turn to nature “to penetrate her meaning,” and to prompt a generosity of human spirit, “rejoicing always in the truth.” It is just that ‘meaning’ for Rossetti meant something quite different.

At the core of Rossetti’s painting is the idea that pleasure could be and should be placed at the heart of human existence. Ruskin’s instruction “to go to nature/Nature in all singleness of heart” is peppered with restriction: a notion which the young (and not-so-young), ebullient hedonist Rossetti was prone to reject. Rossetti does not subscribe to the idea that the passions of the flesh should be controlled by a prescriptive moral code. Much of what Rossetti paints is self-conscious: it is deliberately researched; deliberately observed; and deliberately placed for maximum effect. By using flowers, the intermediaries between Christian and pagan creation, his women neither fully exist in one dimension nor the other, but rather stand in limbo between both possibilities. While Ruskin directs us to grapple with what it means to aspire to be humanly divine by walking with Nature, *Venus Verticordia*, in her “awful” realism presents us with a tactile and perfumed vision of what it is to be divinely human: to do what comes naturally.

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- <sup>1</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "The King's Tragedy." In *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William M. Rossetti, 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886), vol. 1, 159, lines 331-32.
- <sup>2</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*. In *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols., ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn. (London and New York: George Allen and Longmans, Green & Co., 1903), vol. III, 624.
- <sup>3</sup> Malcolm Andrews, *Ruskin at 200: The Art Critic as Word-Painter*, Gresham College Lecture, 4 February 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Amabel William-Ellis, *The Tragedy of John Ruskin* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 89.
- <sup>5</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*. In Cook and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. III, note 1, 624.
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Gorer, *The Growth of Gardens* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1978), 128.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 129.
- <sup>8</sup> M. A. Berg, "The Artistic Relationship between John Ruskin and Dante Gabriel Rossetti," PhD dissertation, University of Oxford, 1979.
- <sup>9</sup> John Ruskin, "Pre-Raphaelitism." In Cook and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. XII, preface, 339-394, 339.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 355.
- <sup>11</sup> William Michael Rossetti ed., *The Germ: The Literary Magazine of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1992), Introduction, 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Simon Toll, "Venus Verticordia," *Sotheby's Catalogue – British and Irish Art 2014*, accessed 9 November 2019.  
<https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2014/british-irish-art-114133/lot.8.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> John Holmes, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 6.
- <sup>14</sup> Bryan C. Keene and Alexandra Kaczynski, *Sacred Landscapes: Nature in Renaissance Manuscripts* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty, 2017), 15.
- <sup>15</sup> Austin Alfred, "The Poetic Interpretation of Nature," *The Contemporary Review*, November 1877: 961-980, 963.
- <sup>16</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 6<sup>th</sup>. edn., 2 vols. (London: Rivington, Davis, Payne et al, 1785), vol. 2, 182-83.
- <sup>17</sup> P. M. Harman, *The Culture of Nature in Britain 1680-1860* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 336.
- <sup>18</sup> For more background to nature in this period, see Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Nature*, trans. by Michael Petry, 3 vols. (London: George & Allen, 1970); Erasmus Darwin, *The Botanic Garden: A Poem in Two Parts* (London: J. Johnson, 1791) and *Temple of Nature* (London: J. Johnson and T. Bensley, 1803); Susan Faye Cannon, *Science in Culture. The Early Victorian Period* (New York: Science History Publications, 1978); and Andrea Wulf, *Brother Gardeners. Botany, Empire and the Birth of an Obsession* (London: Windmill Books, 2008).
- <sup>19</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters II*. In Cooke and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. IV, 364.



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- See also Michael Wheeler, *Ruskin's God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999), 29-72 and C. Stephen Finley, *Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), 161-225.
- <sup>20</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters* I. In Cooke and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. III, 623-624.
- <sup>21</sup> Andrews, *Ruskin at 200*, Gresham College Lecture.
- <sup>22</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Alexander Munro, February 1863. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 10 vols., ed. William E. Fredeman and others (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-15), vol. 3, 39-40 (letter 63.37).
- <sup>23</sup> It will be noted that I do not include *Sancta Liliis* (1874) in this survey (S224C), believed to be a cut-down version of *The Blessed Damozel*.
- <sup>24</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 128.
- <sup>25</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Gordon Hake, 11 September, 1875. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 91 (letter 75.124).
- <sup>26</sup> Frederic George Stephens, "Mr Rossetti's New Pictures," *Athenaeum* 2581 (14 April 1877):486-7, 487.
- <sup>27</sup> Nicola Frear points out that to be a carnation, the bud would to be more elongated and have tiny leaves close to its base.
- <sup>28</sup> William M. Rossetti, "Notes on Rossetti and His Works," *Art Journal* 46 (July 1884): 204–208, 206.
- <sup>29</sup> John Gerard, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London: Adam Islip, Joice Norton, and Richard Whitakers, 1636), 975.
- <sup>30</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic George Stephens, 10 August 1875. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol.7, 67-71 (letter 75.93).
- <sup>31</sup> Sarah Hamilton Phelps Smith, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery and the Meaning of his Painting," PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1978, 5.
- <sup>32</sup> Virginia Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1828-1882: The Paintings and Drawings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. ((Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), vol. 1, 113.
- <sup>33</sup> A. C. Swinburne, *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1875), 99.
- <sup>34</sup> Rossetti's inscription from Aeschylus' Agamemnon appears on verso.
- <sup>35</sup> Jennifer J. Lee, "Venus Imaginaria: Reflections on Alexa Wilding, Her Life, and Her Role as Muse in the Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," MA dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, 2006, 17.
- <sup>36</sup> Jennifer Potter, *Seven Flowers and How They Shaped Our World* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), 194–195.
- <sup>37</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 126.
- <sup>38</sup> G. C. Williamson, *Murray Marks and His Friends* (London, 1919), 75-83.
- <sup>39</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 977.
- <sup>40</sup> Tessa Paul, *The Illustrated World Encyclopaedia of Saints* (London: Lorenz Books, 2014), 57.
- <sup>41</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 16 August 1866. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 459-60 (letter 66.139).
- <sup>42</sup> Thomas Henry Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 230.

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- <sup>43</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 19 July 1873. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 212-213 (letter 73.219).
- <sup>44</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 16 August 1866. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 459-60 (66.139 plus note 1).
- <sup>45</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to George Rae, 7 December 1865. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 354-355 (letter 65.172).
- <sup>46</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic George Stephens, ca. 10 August 1875. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 67-71 (letter 75.93).
- <sup>47</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to George Rae, 20 September 1867. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 574 (letter 67.134).
- <sup>48</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, ca. 18 March 1880. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 99-102 (letter 80.94).
- <sup>49</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, 23 February 1880. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 61-2 (letter 80.59).
- <sup>50</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ellen Heaton, 4 July 1863. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol.3, 63 (letter 63.70).
- <sup>51</sup> Two herbals appeared in the inventory of Rossetti's library sold in July 1882, just three months after his death. In the auctioneers' listing they appear as *Leyte's Herball* (foolscap folio, in leather, 1578) and Gerard's *The Herball or Generall History of Plantes* (second edition, 1636).<sup>51</sup> There are no references to *Leyte's Herball* in Rossetti's correspondence. John Gerard's *The Herball or General History of Plantes*, however, is referred to on several occasions. <sup>51</sup>
- <sup>52</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, 23 February 1880. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 61-2 (letter 80.59).
- <sup>53</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 148.
- <sup>54</sup> Charlotte Gere, "Portraits," in *Edward-Burne Jones*, ed. Alison Smith (London: Tate, 2019), 147-168, 154.
- <sup>55</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Gordon Hake, 24 September 1872. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman and others, 10 vols. (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-2015), vol. 5, 280 (letter 72.77).
- <sup>56</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Gordon Hake, 23 September 1872. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 278 (letter 72.74).
- <sup>57</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic James Shields, 12 February, 1880. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 50-51 (letter 80.48),
- <sup>58</sup> For example, *The First Booke of The History of Plantes Containing Grasses, Rushes, Reeds, Corne, Flags, and Bulbous or Onion-rooted Plants; The Second Containing the Description, Place, Time, Names, Nature, and Vertues of all Sorts of Herbes, for meat, medicine, or sweet-smelling use etc., and The Third Containing the Description, Place, Time, Names, Nature, and Vertues of Trees, Shrubs, Bushes, Fruit-bearing Plants, Rosins, Gums, Roses, Heath, Mosses, Some Indian Plants, and other rare Plants not remembered in the Proeme to the First Booke. Also Mushrooms, Corall, and their Severall Kindes etc.*
- <sup>59</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, 26 February 1880. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 67-8 (letter 80.64).

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- <sup>60</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, 19 July 1880. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 232 (letter 80.251).
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>62</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic James Shields, 30 April 1878. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 8, 90 (letter 78.100).
- <sup>63</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Mrs William Cowper-Temple, 23 December 1877. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 475-76 (letter 77.180).
- <sup>64</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic James Shields, 29 April 1878. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 8, 90 (letter 78.99) (Listed in Surtees's Catalogue Raisonné as undated letters to Frederic Shields, ca. 1877).
- <sup>65</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic James Shields, 1 May 1878. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 8, 91 (letter 78.101).
- <sup>66</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, 19 April 1878. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 8, 85-6 (letter 78.94).
- <sup>67</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, 16 August 1878. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 136-37 (letter 78.169). The common wildflower, scarlet pimpernel - (*Anagallis arvensis*) sometimes called shepherds' weatherglass because it closes its petals as rain approaches.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage, Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore, Md: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 93
- <sup>70</sup> See William Blunt and William T. Stearn, *The Art of Botanical Illustration*, 2<sup>nd</sup>. edn. (Woodbridge: ACC, 1999) and Gill Saunders, *Picturing Plants and Plant: Exploring the Botanical World* (London and New York: Phaidon, 2016) for more background to the growth in botanical illustration from the earliest manuscript illustrations to the present day.
- <sup>71</sup> Anne Second, "Botany on a Plate: Pleasure and the Power of Pictures in Promoting Early Nineteenth-Century Scientific Knowledge," *ISIS* 93, no. 1, March 2002: 28-57, 45. See also M. M. Mahood, *The Poet as Botanist* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- <sup>72</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. C. T. Onions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 851.
- <sup>73</sup> John Ruskin, *Proserpina: Studies of Wayside Flowers*, 2 vols., (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1888), vol. 1, 69.
- <sup>74</sup> William Blake, "The Sick Rose," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London: Tate, 2012), 39.
- <sup>75</sup> With the notable exceptions of the lone rose in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, the roses on *St Catherine's* wheel, and the wild roses in *Dis Manibus*.
- <sup>76</sup> See Brent Elliott, *Victorian Gardens* (London: Batsford, 1986).
- <sup>77</sup> Alice Schwarz, "Connections", accessed 20 January 2020.  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/connections/hands#/Feature/>.
- <sup>78</sup> *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1876), 14.
- <sup>79</sup> Harman, *The Culture of Nature in Britain*, 334-35.

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- <sup>80</sup> John Ruskin to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1865. In Cooke and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. XXXVI, 491.
- <sup>81</sup> *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1853) 713-14.
- <sup>82</sup> Of these, however, the most referenced version of Venus is that of her springing forth from the froth of the sea, after the mutilated phallus of Uranus was thrown there by Saturn.
- <sup>83</sup> *Lemprière's Classical Dictionary* - a source we know the Rossetti family used and a text Dante Gabriel requested from his publisher on more than one occasion.
- <sup>84</sup> Ruskin, "Pre-Raphaelitism." In Cooke and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. XII, 339-394, 350.
- <sup>85</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 23 August 1864. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 185 (letter 64.118).
- <sup>86</sup> Rosemary Verey, *The Scented Garden* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981), 12.
- <sup>87</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 9 & 12 August 1864. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 179-182 (letters 64.110, and 64.113).
- <sup>88</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 16 August 1864. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 83-84 (letter 64.116).
- <sup>89</sup> John Holmes, *Pre-Raphaelites and Science*, 176.
- <sup>90</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Bell Scott, ca. 26 August 1873 (on *La Ghirlandata*). In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 248-49 (letter 73.257).
- <sup>91</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederick Richards Leyland, 4 October 1873. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 284-286 (letter 73.293).
- <sup>92</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Gordon Hake, 9 June 1874. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 473-475 (letter 74.117).
- <sup>93</sup> Ruskin, *Modern Painters V*. In Cooke and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. VII, 331.
- <sup>94</sup> *ibid*, 333.
- <sup>95</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 890.
- <sup>96</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 446.
- <sup>97</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 892.
- <sup>98</sup> Ruskin, *Proserpina*. In Cooke and Wedderburn, *Works*, vol. XXV, 390-391.
- <sup>99</sup> Jonathan Smith, "Domestic Hybrids: Ruskin, Victorian Fiction, and Darwin's Botany," *SEL* (Autumn 2008) 48, 4: 861-870,867.

## 2. Symbol

“Sometimes, through the summer mists, the sea and sky are one and if you half shut your eyes, as of course, you do, there is no swearing to the distant sail as boat or bird, while just under one’s feet the near boats stand together immovable, as if their shadows clogged them and they would not come in after all, but loved to see the land. So one may lie and symbolize till one goes to sleep, and that be a symbol too perhaps.”<sup>1</sup>

## Symbol

The language of flowers is extremely pretty and pleasant, if only you can learn it perfectly; but, like other languages, if you bungle at it you render yourself painfully ridiculous. And you may easily bungle at it, in spite of the most praiseworthy industry and application, simply because it does not appear to be a fixed language.<sup>2</sup>

The *Athenaeum* literary critic reviewing John H. Ingram's *Flora Symbolica: Or the Language and Sentiment of Flowers* shortly after the anthology was published in 1869 succinctly summarises two of the primary pitfalls when relying on the language of flowers for symbolic interpretation. Firstly, you have to apply yourself to learn the language (which might differ according to the volume to which you refer) and secondly, even within one volume, definition is mutable. To demonstrate the dilemma, the writer goes on to present typical faux pas:

We began by plucking and presenting with a desponding and dejected aspect a fine Tulip, which our pretty little book had noted as a symbol of "hopeless love." This Miss Mary received with a delighted smile – at that time to us most perplexing, but we now see the reason; for Mr Ingram tells us that the tulip means "a declaration of love." Next, in our simplicity we presented a sprig of Clematis, but alas! We now find that this signified "artifice." We then tried a bit of Geranium, but how malapropos was this; for it means, according to Mr Ingram, "deceit." A magnificent Dahlia was at hand, and we plucked it, and confidently handed it to Mary, little suspecting that it signified "instability." Evidently, we were not signalling aright to Mary's lovely mind, but we felt sure we could make no mistake in indicating to her that we despaired of her remembrance, and dreaded her obliviousness, when

we offered a Scarlet Poppy; but this, however, was the unluckiest of all our floral presents, for it appears in the present work to symbolize “fantastic extravagance.”<sup>3</sup>

Misinterpretation can easily create embarrassment and misunderstanding between floral iconographers primarily because there is no one agreed principle of interpretation, and yet, as we have seen, both Sarah Hamilton Phelps Smith and Debra Mancoff refer to John Ingram’s *Flora Symbolica* as a lexicon for interpreting Rossetti’s paintings.<sup>4</sup> As this resource was identified as early as 1869 to be subjective in its interpretation, it follows that, at best, any reading has to be open to question, and even of dubious credibility. Although Ingram claimed to have “thoroughly sifted, condensed, and augmented the productions” of his predecessors, and affirmed “that followers will find little left to glean,”<sup>5</sup> by his own admission, he makes use of “numerous anecdotes, legends and poetical allusions,” travelling into “shadowy obscurity” as far back as the ancient Greeks.<sup>6</sup> The *Athenaeum*, predictably, critically demonstrates its own reservations as to the veracity of his work:

for if you gallantly present your Mary with a Calceolaria, you intimate either “I offer you my fortune,” – which no doubt she will instantly accept, - or “I offer you pecuniary aid,” which she will doubtless indignantly reject. Should you present her with the Garden Daisy, you florally announce “I share your sentiments”; but pray avoid the Wild Daisy, which only means “I will think of it.” Not only must you distinguish between different daisies, but also between differently coloured roses. With the White Rose you mean to say, “I am worthy of you,” if the flower be fresh; but take heed that it is not withered, in which state it indicates “transient impression.” The Austrian Rose is



very appropriate, as it signifies “Thou are all that is lovely,” and nothing could make a deeper impression on Mary’s lovely mind; but pray do not mistake by offering the Japan Rose, which says “Beauty is your only attraction.” Give her a Christmas Rose, and you petition thereby “Tranquillize my anxiety.” Should she only return you a leaf from the same, she in effect says, “You may hope.” But beware of the Musk Rose, which, though you might naturally presume it to be a very suitable offering, really intimates “Capricious beauty.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite Victorians apparently revelling in this “double think,” believing that “flowers were the source of abiding truths in the Ruskinian sense,” whilst simultaneously wanting to “relinquish such a belief and celebrate the semiotic openness and uncertainty the language of flowers offered,”<sup>8</sup> there was little sympathy for Ingram from the *Athenaeum*. This ludic review prompted further derision, for two weeks later, on Christmas Day, the *Athenaeum* published the following complaint:

Mr Ingram, the author of *Flora Symbolica*, writes to us about what he calls our “facetious review” of his book, but he does not send us the expected botanical symbol of “I feel my obligations,” which would have gratified us more than the date of his birth. He explains that he did not write all the title-page, nor all the matter of his volume – “The vocabulary belongs to the publishers.”<sup>9</sup>

Condemned by Ingram’s own words, *Flora Symbolica* is not only identified as a pastiche of random ideas, but it is, at least in part, written by unidentified persons within the publishing house. Ingram never again ventured into the world of floral symbolism, although he subsequently established a reputation as a biographer and general interest author.<sup>10</sup> These

*Athenaeum* critiques humorously demonstrate that floral interpretation in general, and Ingram's *Flora Symbolica* in particular, is severely challenged. It follows that this unfixed, fluid, contradictory "language" is destined to befuddle even the most conscientious examination of Rossetti's work.

As we have already learned, there is no evidence that Rossetti actually owned or ever consulted a text devoted to *flora symbolica*, with his library being by no means large for its time, his collection of books being "eclectic rather than desultory."<sup>11</sup> The inventory of his library, itemising more than one hundred and fifty titles, does not mention a single volume dedicated to the Victorian language of flowers, although it is possible that one may have been included in the several non-specific listings of "twenty-five vols" "various" and "ditto."<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, like many of his contemporaries, Rossetti would use floral symbolism in his poetry, with extended floral metaphors in "Jenny", for example, referencing casual sexual relations while alluding to intimate parts of the female body, clearly au fait with the anatomical symbolism of lilies and roses:

What, Jenny, are your lilies dead?  
Aye, and the snow-white leaves are spread  
Like winter on the garden-bed.  
But you had roses left in May, –  
They were not gone too. Jenny, nay,  
But must your roses die, and those  
Their purpled buds that should unclose?  
Even so; the leaves are curled apart,

Still red as from the broken heart,  
And here's the naked stem of thorns.<sup>13</sup>

Manipulating sexual innuendo behind the veil of seemingly innocent flowers, Rossetti is able to express graphic ideas without offensive impropriety. However, his poetic floral repertoire proves to be limited, and he does repeatedly refer to the plant kingdom in generic terms. For example, in another poem, "The Portrait", Rossetti is comfortable incorporating plants, trees, blossoms, and leaves (*italics are added*), rather than extolling the virtues of any specific flower:

She stood among the *plants* in bloom  
At windows of a summer room,  
To feign the shadow of the *trees*.

And as I wrought, while all above  
And all around was fragrant air,  
In the sick burthen of my love  
It seemed each sun-thrilled *blossom* there  
Beat like a heart among the *leaves*.<sup>14</sup>

Of all his major poems in *The Collected Works* (1886), there are two, arguably three, named in honour of a particular flower: "The Honeysuckle" (1853), "Love-Lily" (1869), and "Rose Mary" (1871).<sup>15</sup> The rose is the flower most often mentioned in Rossetti's poetry, if one counts the overall appearances of the flower.<sup>16</sup> The term lily (or lilies) appears less frequently, but more prolifically if one considers the number of poems in which they occur.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the honeysuckle makes an appearance in two poems: its

eponymous “The Honeysuckle” (twice) and “Chimes” (on three occasions), whereas the poppy appears in three poems, but merits just one mention in each.<sup>18</sup> The snowdrop appears twice and the apple-blossom, marigold, iris and sunflower appear just once.<sup>19</sup> Beyond these inclusions, there is no reference in Rossetti’s poetry collection to the other flowers appearing in his paintings: no pansy (nor heartsease), carnation (nor gilly flower), primrose, wallflower, cornflower, passion flower, convolvulus, foxglove, daisy, daffodil (nor narcissus), larkspur, (nor aconite), tulip, antirrhinum, and no anemone. In contrast, the term “flower” is mentioned on nearly sixty occasions in the collection, and the colours white (eighty-eight) and red (forty-six) are clearly shown to be significant.

As I commence writing this chapter, forty years after Sarah Hamilton Phelps Smith’s hypothesis was first advanced,<sup>20</sup> I think about whether it is fair, true, or even accurate to assume that Rossetti imitated his contemporaries in what we assume was their symbolic use of flowers? Moreover, is it really possible to read Rossetti’s flowers as clearly as a sonnet on the frame as Phelps Smith suggests,<sup>21</sup> or, as I contend, is there sufficient evidence to adduce that something far more complex and polyvalent may be at work? By revisiting Rossetti’s use of flowers, I seek to demonstrate that the enduring allure of Rossetti’s symbolic language is not that it can be interpreted by the erudite few who have the code to unlock a variety of floral symbols and other significant details. It is not that he placed himself in the vanguard of a movement of similar artists, all painting symbolic flowers in a similar way and it is not that he worked to a tri-partite formula of Classical/Christian, Victorian language of flowers, or something else, as

Phelps Smith claims.<sup>22</sup> Rossetti's symbolism is much more fluid than any of these reductive statements would have us believe.

### Why Symbol?

The two terms, 'symbolism' and 'Symbolism' are often confused. The first relates to the notion that a work of art may be decoded. This idea owes much to the work of Erwin Panofsky who published *Studies in Iconology* in 1939. Originally developing iconology as a tool for interpreting Renaissance art, in his later book *Early Netherlandish Painting* (1953) he proceeds to show how, despite its outwardly naturalistic appearance, northern art of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, could be rendered symbolic by introducing the idea of 'disguised symbolism'. This explains how apparently realistic representations of common motifs in art, such as flowers, could assume symbolic significance.

European Symbolism, on the other hand, was a movement particularly prevalent in the second half of the nineteenth century, reaching its zenith around 1885-95, after Rossetti's death. Inspired by Romanticism,<sup>23</sup> it was never a style, and if Symbolist artists had a collective *raison d'être*, it was to express a hidden reality – a timelessness through dream, imagination, and eternal truths. Until the publication of Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone's *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910* in 1997, it had been assumed that Symbolism was essentially a Continental phenomenon, having only marginal links with Victorian Britain.

However, Rossetti is now often categorised, at least in the early part of his career, as a Symbolist, alongside Moreau, Klimt, and Picasso.<sup>24</sup>

The debate around the extent to whether this ‘Symbolist’ attribution is proven is for another paper, and written evidence in support of Rossetti’s symbolic tendencies tends to be spurious. It is suggested by William Sharp, that William Michael, Rossetti’s brother, recognised Dante Gabriel as an artist who “... painted very few things, at any stage of his career, as mere representations of reality, unimbued by some inventive or ideal meaning....It was into his work— not into his utterances— that he infused the higher and deeper elements of his spirit.<sup>25</sup> Yet, according to Oswald Doughty, William Michael also judged that Dante Gabriel “was as much indisposed to shuffle concrete things into allegory as he was prone to invest with symbolic detail or suggestion things which are in themselves simply physical and substantial.”<sup>26</sup> Johnston Forbes-Robertson, on the occasion of the centenary of Rossetti’s birth, recounted in *The Times* how:

On one of my visits (to Cheyne Walk) I recall his showing me the picture, which was never finished, called “Found,” where is so poignantly depicted the young farmer finding his betrothed in the streets of London. He had called in a butcher-boy to sit for the figure, and when Rossetti showed him the sketch the young man realized what the subject was at once. Telling me this incident, Rossetti beamed with pleasure, saying, “Now I know the picture is right. If the subject of a picture cannot tell its own story, but has to be explained, that picture is a failure.”<sup>27</sup>

Rossetti would, therefore, appear to be much more interested in the symbolic (with a small ‘s’) mode of thought which can be defined as “primary, intuitive and emotional,” as opposed to the allegorical which is essentially “secondary, logical, rational.”<sup>28</sup> The symbolic imagination is essentially a process of distortion and transformation of natural objects, “a manner of self-expression by a projection of the self onto the external world, or a dissolution of the self into objects of visible reality.”<sup>29</sup> Allegory, on the other hand, relies on rational, prescriptive joined-up thinking.

If this interpretation is correct, and Rossetti was, indeed, primarily a symbolist, rather than an allegorist, then he is presenting his conventional representations of flowers to represent something abstract, surely aware of the fact that the intuitive process cannot and does not end there. The engaged viewer, on recognising the symbol, cannot help but ruminate on what it could ‘mean’, conjuring, in conjunction with all other contextual placements, a plethora of potential allegorical narratives. Critically, however, Rossetti never stipulates what his symbols mean. The closest Rossetti comes to explicating ‘meaning’ is when corresponding with his patron, W. A. Turner, about *Proserpine*, when he writes: “The ivy may be taken as a symbol of clinging memory....”<sup>30</sup> However, as Sarah Phelps Smith points out, even in this instance he uses the proviso “may be” which might suggest that “he did not care whether Turner understood his meaning or not,” and also “that the reality of the ivy exists on more than one level, its meaning being dependent on the level from which it is read.”<sup>31</sup> Unlike, Dante, whose “career-long obsession with defining how his texts signify and how they should be interpreted ... to control the reception of that writing by readers,”<sup>32</sup> Rossetti

bestows agency upon the viewer, as the following interpretations serve to demonstrate:

#### Flower as Signpost or Revelation of Hypocrisy?

We begin, though, with a painting named after a common, widely recognised Victorian flower, Arthur Hughes's *Forget Me Not* (fig. 50). Here is a flower and a painting with apparently little to offer beyond Dante's first literal layer of interpretation. Arthur Hughes was known for the intense, visionary quality of his paintings, reminiscent in many respects of some of Rossetti's best work. *Forget Me Not* is, according to Hughes himself:

of the old 'Good Night' kind: a young girl on her knees looking up at a window; last evening light; cap on floor with wreathed wild flowers; little bed behind with lute laid on it; little head drapery with angels with gold nimbuses; old blue cloak embroidered with flowers etc. Shall quote 'Ere I let fall the windows of my eyes'; forget-me-nots in her hand.<sup>33</sup>

This maiden's final thoughts before she falls to sleep are of remembrance. We cannot be sure whether she may be thinking of someone else or whether she is hoping that someone is thinking of her, but we recognise instantly the overriding sentiment. This is a simple, straightforward, uncomplicated literal painting. Or is it? Rossetti often spoke of Hughes's genius and greatly admired his work, so it is hardly surprising that this painting, even though apparently easy to understand, is awash with deeper layers of symbolism.<sup>34</sup> Although the little blue petals of the *Myosotis palustris* apparently enfold "no hieroglyphic secret," forget-me-nots, "so well known, and so much



admired” imbue legends passed down from generation to generation.<sup>35</sup> Hilderic Friend alludes to one such narrative in *Flowers and Flower Lore*, but frustratingly elects not to repeat “what I have said elsewhere about the German knight.”<sup>36</sup> Instead, I discovered the legend in a contemporary anthology of poems: the fable tells of a chivalrous knight who, in an attempt to keep his betrothed happy, ventures forth to gather flowers for her bridal wreath. These flowers are to “speak of constancy, unchanging to the death,”<sup>37</sup> and bear a fragrance which “lasts even when its life is gone:”<sup>38</sup>

On parting kiss of his fair bride, and swiftly far away  
Like the wild swan whose home he sought, young Albert met the spray  
Of rising waves, which foamed in wrath, as if some spirit’s hand  
Awoke the genii of the lake to guard their mystic land.  
The flowers were won, but devious his course lay back again;  
To stem the waters in their tow’ring rage he strove in vain:  
Fondly he glanced to the yet distant shore, where in despair  
His Ida stood with outstretched arms, ‘mid shrieks and tears and pray’r.  
Darker and fiercer gathered on the tempest in its wrath.  
The eddying waves with vengeful ire beset the fatal path;  
With the wild energy of death he well-nigh reached the spot.  
The azure flowers fell at her feet – “Ida, Forget-me-not!”  
The words yet borne upon his lips, the prize seem’d almost won.  
When ‘mid the rush of angry waves he sank – for ever gone!<sup>39</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that the forget-me-not epithet could be easily suggestive of a lost love, therefore, rather than simply framing an innocent wish that the maiden’s lover should return her tender regard, as Mancoff suggests.<sup>40</sup>

Although Hughes himself does not explain his preference for ox-eye daisies and red poppies, which accompany the forget-me-nots in the painting, self-seeding flowers such as these are common symbols. The red poppy (*Papaver somniferum* and *Papaver rhoeas*) “means” both consolation and oblivion, although it is not clear how we should decide between them.<sup>41</sup> Ingram suggests there is no disparity for as “the producer of Nature’s sweet restorer, balmy sleep” it follows that it should be chosen as the emblem of “the alleviation of our troubles,” but this is not entirely persuasive.<sup>42</sup> The poppy’s intense redness is also often interpreted as a symbol of the Passion of Christ and sometimes may be seen in Crucifixion scenes. As it grows freely in fields of grain, it also alludes to the Eucharist: the grain being the bread, and the red flower, the blood of Christ. However, its “petals fall so quickly that it is unsuitable for bouquets, its smell is anything but pleasant, and its texture is fragile and wanting in endurance.”<sup>43</sup>

The poppy may offer, therefore, little solace for if we place all three flowers together in context and attempt to translate “meaning” it could be that a suitor, who while still waiting for a ‘yay’ or a ‘nay’ from his virginal maiden, has died in youthful innocence, or maybe the fateful maiden is fearful that his love will be as ephemeral as the poppy at her feet or as the last remaining bloom entangled in her flowing tresses. Hughes has given his viewers a trail of readily recognisable clues to pique their interest and stimulate both their superficial and/or intellectual knowledge of flowers and the legends and folklore associated with them, regardless of the conclusion which might be anywhere on a scale from the lyrical ‘she is grieving for her one true love’ to the more prosaic ‘she lost her chance and now he is dead’.

There is scant opportunity, however, to delve into deeper floral psychological transactions. Flowers, although meticulously observed, act predominately here as signposts to a visible, if frustratingly imprecise, reality and to a potential background narrative explaining the situation captured in the painting: a phenomenon characteristic of Victorian narrative paintings generally. Flowers are, however, more than just ‘meaning carriers’. Even in this supposedly ‘easy to read’ painting, the flower symbol has a depth which is often overlooked.

Where the poppy, daisy and forget-me-not may possess only subtle Classical and Christian iconographic value today, the lily and iris are far more instantly recognisable as religious symbols. In Hughes’s *Annunciation* (fig. 51), a profusion of white lilies (*Lilia candida*) grow abundantly at the threshold to Mary’s bower, cushioning the feet of the lily-adorned angel. The gladiolus-like purple iris (*Iridiceae*), meanwhile, protrude from the terracotta vase, leaving us in no doubt that the traditional Marian symbols of the Middle Ages are central to this encounter. Deriving its most enduring power from its affinity with the Virgin Mary, *Lilium candidum*’s “astonishing whiteness and all-pervading sweetness” made it “the perfect emblem of spiritual and physical purity.”<sup>44</sup> The *Iris germanica*, or the fleur-de-lis (flower of the lily), would appear alongside or even substitute for the lily itself as in Rossetti’s *Sancta Lilies* (fig. 1).<sup>45</sup>

This painting is a traditional depiction of the New Testament arrival of the Archangel Gabriel when he visits Mary with the Annunciation:

And the angel said unto her, “Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:

And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. .<sup>46</sup>

Just a short distance from Dante’s final resting place in Ravenna, white lilies can be found at the feet of both male and female divine beings in the Basilica of Sant’Apollinare in Classe (ca. 534 AD) (*fig. 52*). However, since earliest antiquity, the lily has been a particular attribute of all Great Mothers, due to its extraordinary reproductive ability.<sup>47</sup> Born of the milk Juno spilled to the ground while feeding baby Hercules, this rose of Juno represents female fecundity and many passages are devoted to the lily in the Old Testament to allude to fertility, beauty and spiritual flowering.<sup>48</sup> In Christian iconography, of all religious themes, with the exception of the Nativity itself, none is more familiar than the announcement of the conception of the Christ Child.<sup>49</sup> The white lily as a symbol of chastity and purity is almost always present in scenes of the Annunciation, and often in scenes depicting the Assumption of the Virgin, for:

Their whiteness meant that Mary knew no sin, that her vocation spared her the yoke of human bondage, she was as white and pure as they, as sweet, as golden-hearted. Sometimes the painter pushed the symbolism beyond the metaphor and placed in the angel’s hand a stalk with three blossoms to give a graphic form to St Bernard’s *virginitas ante partum, in partu, et post partum*, and to signalise the Trinitarian

nature of her child; but such elaborate symbolism had less appeal to Renaissance taste than it had in mediaeval times when hidden truth seemed sweeter.<sup>50</sup>

It is this medieval-inspired hidden truth that clearly appealed to the Pre-Raphaelites. The iris, for instance, because of the distinctive shape of its leaves and its erect stem, is often compared to a sword capable of piercing the heart. It is, therefore, commonly attributed to the Virgin's grief over the death of her Son on the Cross.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, on the threshold to Mary's sanctuary, the vine bears fruit, clinging to the trellis outside as a conscious and deliberate reminder of Christ's mission and the inevitability of His sacrifice. This theological resonance is, therefore, far more profound than the Victorian language of flowers' meaning of "a warning to be heeded."<sup>52</sup>

In Rossetti's Annunciation scene, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (*fig. 15*), the colour of the lily is mirrored in the liberal use of white paint against the two primary colours of red in the foreground and blue in the background and the gilding of the halos and the angelic fire at the angel's heels. The red, too, contrasts beautifully with the radiance of the white in the electrified, tiny, precise brushstrokes, all springing from Mary's red hair. Whereas, in Hughes's version, the yellow-white works to reflect the magnificence of the angelic host in contrast to the virginal white veil worn by the dutiful Mary, against nature's background of verdant green, there is something cold, almost clinical in Rossetti's decision to depict Mary in what could easily be a fresco from the Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence (*fig. 53*).<sup>53</sup> This decision was clearly deliberate on Rossetti's part, there being "an ideal

motive for the whiteness.”<sup>54</sup> This concentration on the key elements of the story explicated in his “blessed white picture,”<sup>55</sup> “the blessed daub,”<sup>56</sup> and “the blessed white eyesore”<sup>57</sup> directs a spotlight onto the key elements of the narrative.<sup>58</sup> With few distractions, the viewer is confronted with the physical reality of the situation as it might *really* have unfolded, rather than being able to avoid an inherent truth by embracing a stance of theological idealism.

Here, Rossetti takes symbolism to a whole new level. Where Hughes decides to focus on the arrival of the angel, sacred but decidedly mute, communicating his mission via telepathy perhaps, Rossetti in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* gives his equally verbally stoic messenger a physically active role in the proceedings. Rossetti chooses, in contrast to his predecessor, to depict the bearer of the heavenly lily as human, naked beneath his gaping white shift. He elects to portray him using the lily stalk, rather indelicately, to indicate where Mary’s procreative power lies.<sup>59</sup> The predominant use of white in the floor, the walls, Mary’s nightgown, and the archangel’s shift, as well as highlighting the unstained virginity of the lily, creates a place of confinement, literally and metaphorically. Wearing only a thin lily-coloured nightdress, she is half-sitting, half-lying on the bed with her feet rooted within the folds of her gown. Straight vertical and horizontal lines dominate the composition with the exception of two diagonal lines: the lily stalk moving towards Mary and the line of the Virgin’s bent right leg, moving in the opposite direction.

Traditionally experiencing *conceptio per aurem*, that is the conception of the Christ Child on hearing the Word of God, the deliberately provocative

treatment of the lily stalk emphasises the natural human process of achieving conception. Indeed, Rossetti's original naked study for Mary has her shielding her ear with her right hand, her arm moving diagonally across her naked breast and her other arm raised as if about to fend off unwanted advances (*fig. 54*). Although the lily does not appear in this drawing, she is staring hard at the space it should occupy. An argument could be made for Mary displaying some disquiet (*conturbatio*) in this painting, but the other four conditions identified by Michael Baxandall as central to fifteenth century Annunciation scenes – reflection (*cogitatio*), inquiry (*interrogatio*), submission (*humiliatio*) and merit (*meritatio*)<sup>60</sup> – are missing. Instead, Mary here appears to have more in common with one of the damned at the Last Judgement: anorexic, sorrowful, and fearful.

Mary is decidedly vulnerable to the attentions of the angelic presence, who looks a little too human for comfort. Her traditional mantle of ultramarine, commonly worn around her shoulders as a sign of her elevated status, is absent, reappearing as a practical blue curtain on a screen behind her, her bare shoulder revealing the flesh of an elongated arm and clenched fingers. Pushed into a wall, she has nowhere to go. Despite what Simon Cooke calls “the artist’s playful suggestiveness,” the implications are far from ludic.<sup>61</sup> Her personal space is invaded just as the Spirit prepares to conquer her private space. Although any suggestion of violation is mitigated by the androgynous nature of Gabriel this is, at best, an intensely uncomfortable encounter.

Where both paintings are similar is in the way in which they both depict supernatural beings. In Hughes's *Annunciation* the serene, statuesque manifestation of the angelic hovers above the crushed lilies as if in a meditative state, his wings closed in around him, gems of light sparkling around the top of his floral gown. It may only be a wooden pillar that separates Mary from Gabriel, but He and Mary are from completely different worlds. Not so in Rossetti's version. Both the angel and Mary are identified as sacred by the inclusion of halos, although Mary's is made to look more like ill-fitting headwear, quite purposefully. It is not clear whether Gabriel is hovering above the ground or if his bare feet have imminently touched down on the cold stone floor. Flames lick at the soles of his feet. Gabriel is, of course, flying in from an unseen realm, although he is curiously wingless and his muscular arm would not be out of place in Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (*fig. 7*). Rossetti depicts him as simply a man, albeit it a man in spiritual form; a spirit manifest in a human body.

Rossetti's painting, as well as being an original rendition of the biblical story, captures both the moment of sexual realisation and of sexual violation. Sexuality remains at the core of the flower's existence and his presentation of the flower leaves little to the imagination, for it is "the plant's reproductive organ, coloured and perfumed to attract insects that spread the pollen and permit fertilisation ... the very word 'flower' is a sexual metaphor in several languages, as in deflowering a virgin ... leading to her blossoming forth as a woman."<sup>62</sup>



Rossetti, unlike any of his contemporaries, dared to use the best-known moment in Marian theology to expose a hidden truth: sexuality and the act of sexual consummation are at the heart of this narrative. “The lily, by its nature, evocatively flaunts its sexuality, with its erect stamens, each one bearing pollen, the flower’s sperm surrounding the pistil at the centre of the flower: the entry to the ovary deep within the petals.”<sup>63</sup> The flower is no shrinking violet when it comes to sex. Rossetti has something provocative to say and he wants to say it with authority. His was an overt challenge, demonstrating a ludicrous double standard. He is blatantly revealing the accepted moral code that applauds the interaction between God and a virgin, here portrayed as a less than willing adolescent, and simultaneously castigates the deflowered Victorian innocents who became the “pariahs” and outcasts of Victorian society.<sup>64</sup>

Revisiting his poem, “Jenny”, written in 1848, his intimate soliloquy, addressing ‘a woman of easy virtue’, he punctures these clichés with what Tim Barringer terms “the compromises and negotiations of real life.”<sup>65</sup> His empathy with the plight of the fallen Madonna rallies against “the machine of religious and sexual morality that categorises and condemns women as commodities.”<sup>66</sup> Rossetti writes poetry about these women, whom he sees as “the fresh, poor flowers left torn since yesterday.”<sup>67</sup> Jenny, though apparently sullied by her profession according to contemporary morality, is nonetheless, still “full of grace,” no less worthy, no less sacred.<sup>68</sup>

The blasphemous potential of this provocation did little to endear him to his outraged critics. Already aghast by the apparent arrogance of the

Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's attempts to usurp the stature of the Royal Academy, they found this painting's hard-edged realism culturally, theologically, and aesthetically offensive, deriding the young Rossetti's apparent immaturity and naïve style. It was not only that Rossetti chose to exhibit an unconventional representation of this, the most sacred Christian moment, but that he did so while seemingly caring little for the sensitivities of protocol. Indeed, the *Athenaeum* critic writing in 1850, determined that Rossetti was expressing himself "more with the presumption of a teacher than in the modesty of a hopeful and true aspiration after excellence."<sup>69</sup> The painting attracted dismissive criticism for the critic – in just one paragraph had – "exhausted all the praise due, in our opinion."<sup>70</sup> *The Times*, too, criticised its "hard paganism" and "flat Catholicism," claiming that it looked like "a leaf torn out of a missal" with "nothing human in its intensity."<sup>71</sup> Evidently, Rossetti was walking a veritable tightrope between the profane and the sacred and rather unceremoniously 'falling between both camps'.

Not surprisingly, this painting remained unsold when it appeared at the National Institution (formerly Free Exhibition) in 1850. For Rossetti it became "a filthy joke," "a millstone round the neck of [his] spirit," sinking it "to the lowest abyss of degradation."<sup>72</sup> It was to remain in Rossetti's possession until 1853 when, after what Rossetti referred to as some "alterations" best not referred to as "amendments," it was sold for £50 to "an Irish maniac," Francis McCracken.<sup>73</sup> The painting was moved on within two years by Christie's auction house when this Belfast industrialist made a small profit of 26 guineas.<sup>74</sup> It is a common misconception that the whole

experience made Rossetti vow never to exhibit his paintings in public again, possibly because of William Holman Hunt's insistence that the "effect of rancorous criticism upon Rossetti was such that he resolved never again to exhibit in public, and he adhered to this determination to the end."<sup>75</sup>

However, as Alicia Craig Faxon points out, Rossetti's works were displayed in at least eighteen documented exhibitions between the years 1849 and 1881,<sup>76</sup> and Virginia Surtees records in her *Catalogue Raisonné* more than thirty instances of works being shown during Rossetti's lifetime.<sup>77</sup>

Certainly, by the time he executes his striking *Annunciation* watercolour in 1855 (*fig. 55*), Rossetti appears a little more subdued, adhering more faithfully to traditional theological symbolism.<sup>78</sup> Here, the Virgin, bathing her feet in a small stream (River of Life/Baptism) catches sight of the angel's reflection on the surface of the water (supernatural presence). We catch her *in medias res*, as she is about to turn to face Gabriel. His arms are outstretched between two vertical tree trunks (Christ/Crucifixion/and Ascension). The dove (Holy Spirit) hovers about Mary's head, while the two Annunciation flowers of Florence appear together, as in Arthur Hughes's painting – the iris growing in marshland near the stream (a message) and white lilies growing abundantly around them, indicating the angelic presence and his mission (Annunciation, the sacred, Mary, fecundity, Immaculate Conception).

## Flower as Symbolic Prop or Psychological Insight?

Just four years later, however, Rossetti is back to his old tricks, this time with a refined subtlety that only comes with mature experience. *Bocca Baciata* (fig. 13) was first exhibited in the Hogarth Club in 1860.<sup>79</sup> Representing a major deviation from his earliest paintings, *Bocca Baciata* nonetheless continues to use flowers as symbols of provocation. According to Virginia Surtees, this painting represents the epitome of Rossetti's new style in which:

the sweep of the neck, the curved lips, the indolent pose of the head and the emphasis given to the fall of hair foreshadow his prolific output of studies of women ... sensual and voluptuous, mystical and inscrutable but always humourless, gazing into the distance with hair outspread and hands resting on a parapet, often with some heavily scented flower completing the design.<sup>80</sup>

Gone is the strong narrative element, and instead Rossetti becomes increasingly interested in the tension between external appearance and internal drama. He is now much more intent on conveying psychological sensitivity, although that is not to say that the physicality of his models is insignificant.

Fanny Cornforth, the model for *Bocca Baciata*, was, by all accounts, warm, open, unsophisticated, uncomplicated, uneducated, and vigorous.<sup>81</sup>

J. B. Bullen speculates that:

Her attitude to sex, however, was far more liberal than was conventional in the mid-nineteenth century, and at some time ... she

took both Boyce and Rossetti into her bed... This triangulation allowed him (Rossetti) to enjoy heterosexual pleasure, but because he was sharing the female body with another man it heightened that pleasure into a kind of intensely exciting homosociality. The liaison between the three seems to have involved no possessiveness or jealousy. Fanny enjoyed having the two men, and the men enjoyed having her.<sup>82</sup>

Rossetti's patron and friend, the watercolour artist George Price Boyce, possibly enjoyed an "improper," if not intimate relationship with their shared muse, as this pen and ink drawing (*fig. 56*) by Rossetti suggests.<sup>83</sup> Her familiar embrace, his comfortable response, the picture of the actress Ruth Herbert in the background, all tend to strongly hint at the nature of their relationship. This "head in oils which Boyce commissioned" is reputedly, therefore, a memento of their shared pleasure.<sup>84</sup> The words written on the verso of the painting are from Boccaccio's *Decameron*<sup>85</sup> – "*Bocca baciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna,*" or "the mouth that has been kissed does not lose its fortune, rather it renews itself just as the moon does."<sup>86</sup> This may refer to the promiscuous nature of their ménage à trois, if such an intimate relationship existed. The inference is that the infinitely self-regenerative aspects of human desire outweigh any other considerations,<sup>87</sup> and that this is a painting of a sexually attractive object, the mouth being a displaced sign of female sexuality.<sup>88</sup> There is also the suggestion that Rossetti's choice of title may be celebrating oral sex because the assumption is made that:

It is unlikely that Lizzie with her limited sexual experience would have known of this variation. As a dollymop, however, Fanny may well have been asked for this favour in the past and would not have been reluctant

to comply. For this reason, it is likely the 'bocca' of the title may have had very special meaning for both Rossetti and for Boyce, and that meaning would have been understood by close friends.<sup>89</sup>

Hunt thought he recognised indecent, transgressive elements in the work. Although he was impressed by its "very remarkable" power of execution, he could not suppress his disgust at the display of such "gross sensuality of a revolting kind," betraying the core moral principles of the whole movement by making "mere gratification of the eye" and "the animal passion ... The aim and end of art."<sup>90</sup>

Phelps Smith may be correct, therefore, in her third assumption – that flowers held a special meaning shared by Rossetti's intimates. Certainly, the choice of marigolds for the background was prompted, not for their inherent symbolism, but rather in gentle mockery of the intonation of the model. When writing to George Price Boyce on 5 September 1859, he sends a pen and ink sketch of "Fanny's portrait, which you will see has taken after all a rather Venetian aspect. Them be'ind's merrygoes," as the fair original might say in her striking rendering of the word marygolds."<sup>91</sup> Here, however, Bullen recognises three distinct but related symbolic interpretations, two of which are quite different from Phelps Smith's original trinity. Along with the symbolic associations only recognised by Rossetti's intimate friends, Bullen points to the symbolism of colour and form (the significance of which I repeatedly highlight throughout this thesis) and to the symbolism of the voluptuous courtesan.

If, though, we see *Bocca Baciata* as merely a Venetian-inspired portrait of 'loose morals' and sexual objectivity then we are in danger of sharing Robert Buchanan's haste.<sup>92</sup> In October 1871, writing under his pseudonym, Thomas Maitland, it is hypothesised that his criticism of Rossetti's lack of sensitivity precipitated Rossetti's breakdown. Buchanan claimed that "whether he (Rossetti) is writing of the holy Damozel, or of the Virgin herself, or of Lilith, or of Dante, or of Jenny, the street walker, he is fleshly all over, from the roots of his hair to the tip of his toes .... Never spiritual, never tender."<sup>93</sup> Deriding Rossetti for apparently allowing his base instincts to influence his work so strongly, he completely misses the point that Rossetti is far more interested in the relationship between the flesh and the spirit than in the flesh alone. In time, Buchanan came to appreciate and acknowledge his error, dedicating his work, *God and the Man*, to his old adversary with the words:

I would have snatched a bay leaf from thy brow,  
Wronged the chaplet on a honoured head;  
In peace and charity I bring thee now  
A lily-flower instead.

Pure as they purpose, blameless as they song,  
Sweet as thy spirit, may this offering be;  
Forget the bitter blame that did thee wrong;  
And take the gift from me.<sup>94</sup>

Regretting that he ever underrated Rossetti's "exquisite work," Buchanan acknowledges that his criticism was "conceived adversely, hastily and from an unsympathetic point of view" and that at the time of writing he had been

with Philistines.<sup>95</sup> What is particularly striking is that although he goes some way to healing old wounds, his contrition still betrays an inference that the body is base, inferior to the spirit, whereas Rossetti quite clearly does not concur.

It is typically assumed that the marigold is named after the Virgin Mary as the marigold, or marygold (*Calendula officinalis*) appears around the time of the Annunciation, or Ladytide (25 March 2).<sup>96</sup> Consequently, it is reasonable to make an association between the Virgin and *Bocca Baciata*, which in conjunction with the *Decameron* story alludes to the possibility that the figure's virginity is always intact. This is potentially too facile, however, because a great many flowers are dedicated to Mary, and while the marigold is arbitrarily set apart for her on Lady-day by the Church, it is not so certain that the name of the flower has any connection with, or reference to, the name of the Virgin. Even in the nineteenth century, according to Friend, "those who said so were somewhat hasty, and have withdrawn their statement."<sup>97</sup> Instead, Ingram tells us that the marigold means "grief,"<sup>98</sup> but he does not deem it necessary to explain how or why in the main text of his *Flora Symbolica*. The presence of the marigold is interpreted by Phelps Smith as "she offers grief in return for a kiss," with Fanny's expression, she suggests, adding to the element of sadness introduced by the marigolds.<sup>99</sup>

However, aside from Ingram's floral vocabulary, it is interesting to note that marigolds were formerly identified as heliotropes, because they open and close at the sun's bidding. This quality made them a firm favourite with emblem users of the past, as a symbol of constancy in affection, and



sympathy in joy and sorrow.<sup>100</sup> St Frances de Sales remarks that: “all yellow flowers, and above all those that the Greeks call Heliotrope, ... not only rejoice at the sight of the sun but follow with loving fidelity the attraction of its rays, gazing at the sun, and turning towards it from its rising to its setting.”<sup>101</sup> In other words, the marigold’s devotion to the sun is totally natural, absolute, and steadfast. While the towering figure of *Bocca Baciata* reflects the splendour of her Venetian courtesan predecessors, Fanny’s hair assumes the appearance of the flower itself: golden and heliotropic. The swathe of marigolds behind her, Rossetti’s golden marigold flowers around her neck, the one flower stalk in her hand, the one rose in her hair, the one wisp of hair held between the fingers – these are all signs of her loyalty and constancy to the one true sun in her life: Rossetti. If the story of their shared relationship is to be believed, what fun it must have been for the impish Rossetti to charge Boyce £40 for the privilege of owning the portrait of their shared partner, knowing that he had painted her as his sole possession.

The towering marigold at the centre of this portrait is necessarily silent. Although we do not hear her voice, from her gaze we can suppose that, if bestowed with the opportunity to speak, she would be loquacious. She avoids direct eye contact, but there is, nonetheless, a connection between her and an empathetic viewer. We cannot help but recognise her longing, her fears, her doubts, her awareness of the transience of attraction and the fragility of experience. Is she grieving for her lost virginity, her former youth, her peace of mind? Is she lamenting the artifice of pretence? Is she contemplating the nature of temptation? No one can tell. She is enigmatic, connecting with the viewer but in a tantalisingly and elusive way. She is

flesh, yes, she plays with the senses, inviting a sensuous tactile response but she also has warm blood running through her veins as a fully complex individual. Rossetti employs nature to convey deeper layers of understanding, but if we only see them as simple signifiers of meaning, we run the risk of missing other possibilities. Mystically, the marigold is portentous of something more profound. This marigold beauty transcends earthly pleasures, radiating a divine aspect, indicating that whatever Rossetti's predilections and whatever his intentions, *Bocca Baciata* is so much more than an incarnation of sexual desire.

Is it possible to catch sight of a moral or an infinite truth within the portrait? Notice that the marigold in her hand, the rose in her hair are cut flowers. They do not have long to live and the marigolds in the background are ambiguous – how are they growing? They are too tall to be growing in soil, level with the figure's feet. They could be growing in a wall, perhaps? Or they could have been picked and arranged around her? Or maybe even added afterwards? They are curious, disembodied flowers, that don't quite fit, not unlike the woman herself in her heavy, ill-fitting, decorative clothes. Yet, the formation of marigolds above her head give the impression of a golden halo, deifying the woman who dares to defy societal expectations and boundaries. The portrait becomes an homage to a woman who is simultaneously gauche but worthy, physically voluptuous but with spiritual depth, common and yet extraordinary.

Where Rossetti uses floral symbolism to convey a host of elusive possibilities, all existing in the same frame, John Everett Millais in

*The Bridesmaid* (fig. 57) is more pragmatic with his deliberations. While both portraits feature women with their voluminous red hair, their hands holding symbols, in front of a horizontal surface on which rests at least one more symbol, Rossetti relies more significantly on metaphors from the natural world, Millais on a combination of natural and material symbols.

According to Ingram, the orange blossom Millais's bridesmaid has pinned to her dress is attributed to chastity, it being customary for brides to wear a wreath of it on their wedding day,<sup>102</sup> and it denotes "your purity equals your loveliness."<sup>103</sup> Dr Brewer, quoted in Hilderic Friend's *Flowers and Flower Lore*, explains that "Saracen brides used to wear Orange blossoms as a sign of fecundity: and occasionally the same emblem may have been worn by European brides ever since the time of the Crusades; but the general adoption of wreaths of Orange blossoms for brides is comparatively a modern practice, due especially to the recent taste of flower language."<sup>104</sup> Millais is demonstrating his knowledge of popular culture in adopting the orange blossom symbol. However, here, in conjunction with the other symbols, the orange blossom pinned to the centre of her chest, through the golden chain around her neck, clearly encompasses her desire and her anticipation of the marriage bed, so far eluding her.

The strangely foreshortened orange on the red-rimmed plate next to the slice of wedding cake could easily allude to the hymeneal altar, for the fruit represents the golden apple presented by Jupiter to Juno on the day of their wedding.<sup>105</sup> Millais's bridesmaid is practising the St Agnes's Eve ritual of passing wedding cake through a wedding ring nine times to reveal her true

love. Meanwhile the glistening phallic-shaped silver sugar caster brazenly hints at the preoccupation of her thoughts.<sup>106</sup> This painting is saturated with sexual desire and offers us a rare insight into the needs of a soon-to-be sexually active woman. Take the orange blossom away and the inference would still be there thanks to the symbolist power of the phallus, the binary opposition of white and red on the plate, the cake and the ring, and the orange or golden apple. The flower adds to the symbolism, rendering it all the more potent, but the painting does not rely on the flower for its power. Millais's flower is much more an accessory alluding to recognisable cultural practice. It is placed to direct the eye – for emphasis. Without it, the title would suffice, and little would be lost in comprehension. Not so with Rossetti's *Bocca Baciata*, where the removal of the natural world would significantly affect its allegorical potential.

#### Flower as Symbolic Backdrop or Appeal for Freedom?

Burne-Jones's *The Beguiling of Merlin* (fig. 58), commissioned by the same patron as *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35), Frederick Richards Leyland, was first exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery, Bond Street in London in 1877. One of eight pictures submitted by Burne-Jones, it received critical acclaim. It illustrates an episode from the French medieval *Romance of Merlin* in which the sorcerer is lulled to sleep by the enchantress Nimue (The Lady of the Lake) in the forest of Broceliande. From a literal point of view, the principal floral symbol, the hawthorn tree with its florets of tiny white flowers provides a suitable place of rest for the slumbering Merlin. It is ironic that Classical Greek brides carried sprigs of hawthorn, boughs of which were also placed

upon the bridal altar full of blossoms, as an emblem of the flowery future they anticipated.<sup>107</sup> Merlin's hope of intimacy with the alluring, sinuous figure of Nimue is as transitory as the hawthorn blossom as they are more likely to provide a funeral shroud than be a joyous matrimonial accoutrement.

The hawthorn trunk's serpentine qualities make it a perfect choice for the artist. The snake, of course, has long been the symbol of demonology. According to Ingram, however, the hawthorn is a symbol of hope,<sup>108</sup> a strange thought, given that it is about to entomb the betrayed sorcerer by winding its meandering branches around his body, according to one of the many legends. As the hawthorn makes ready to smother the magician, a clump of blue iris, as the archetypal messenger, reminds us that Merlin knew of his impending fate, although he was powerless to resist. Their colour also pre-empt his eternal condition, the blue of his gown reflected in the blue of the flower, as well as providing balance to the predominantly blue/white composition. While *The Beguiling of Merlin* stands as a salutary lesson around the concepts of infatuation, abuse of power, entrapment, and ultimate betrayal, Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35) expresses a similar kind of sentiment, that the "love of female beauty leads to destruction," according to Phelps Smith.<sup>109</sup> Assuming this to be the case, Rossetti, like Merlin, appears more than happy to face oblivion in the pursuit of one with such hypnotic seductive power.

I take issue, however, with Phelps Smith's assertion that *Lady Lilith* "shows perhaps Rossetti's most extensive use of [the] language of flowers to symbolise the ideas of a painting."<sup>110</sup> I would argue that Rossetti is far more

interested in the flowers' colour and form than he is in their inherent language of flowers symbolism. *Lady Lilith*, commenced in 1864 with Fanny Cornforth modelling, and later replaced by the head of Leyland's favourite, Alexa Wilding, sits nonchalantly combing her hair, in this, Rossetti's "toilet picture."<sup>111</sup> Rossetti himself describes *Lady Lilith* as "a picture that represents a modern Lilith combing out her abundant golden hair & gazing on herself in the glass with that self-absorption by whose strange fascination such natures draw others within their own circle."<sup>112</sup> This description is significant because it is clear that the contemporary Lilith's weakness lies, if anywhere, in *vanitas*, rather than in the exhibition of the traditional Lilith traits associated with the powerful and evil temptress and murderer of children.<sup>113</sup> Lilith could be beautiful and self-absorbed, however, without the one state being dependent upon the other. Rossetti does place two mirrors strategically in the painting: the looking glass Lilith holds in her hand and the other on the wall behind the candlesticks reflecting the garden outside. Is Rossetti paying homage to Giovanni Bellini's *Woman with a Mirror* (fig. 59) or Titian's painting of the same name (fig. 60)? How far does Rossetti place his mirrors to engender a subtext about the nature of seeing and its shifting relationship to what is real and what is imaginary or a mere reflection of the truth? Are we meant to question *Lady Lilith's* relationship to the stark realities of life or, perhaps, as with Bellini, is she there to remind us that the purpose of the artist "is to reflect nature, to mirror and to recreate reality?"<sup>114</sup> Perhaps the mirrors are there to invite us to reflect on the prejudice of judging a beautiful woman enjoying the sensual pleasures of our own body in the confines of her own private space?

The roses, meanwhile, according to Phelps Smith are “an inappropriate colour [...] when they also come in red which would suggest “passion” or pink which Rossetti often used for roses to reflect the skin tones and emphasise the metaphor between flower and woman.”<sup>115</sup> They are only “inappropriate,” however, because they do not fit into the ‘meaning’ ascribed to them. Phelps Smith’s explanation is that the “answer to the puzzle is the popular legend that all roses in Paradise were white at first, until Eve kissed one because of its great beauty, and all of the roses blushed red with the compliment.”<sup>116</sup> Certainly, Rossetti has nothing to say on the subject, never mentioning the symbolic associations of the rose, foxglove nor the poppy in any of his correspondence. The foxglove is also missing from Rossetti’s sonnet for only the “rose and poppy are her flowers.” Phelps Smith suggests that this omission might have been “to improve the meter, or perhaps because its meaning was not as well-known as those of the poppy and the rose.”<sup>117</sup> Why, then, did Rossetti feel it necessary to include it in the painting? Why is it needed at all? Phelps Smith points out that according to the language of flowers, the foxglove signifies ‘insincerity’.<sup>118</sup> She further highlights that as a beautiful flower containing a deadly poison, the foxglove is particularly appropriate as an attribute for Lilith, who is herself beautiful but deadly.<sup>119</sup> Certainly, although Rossetti’s version of Gerard’s *Herball* does not mention its toxic qualities, in the mid-nineteenth century it was widely known that *Digitalis purpurea* possessed “a deadly poison in its exquisite cup-like cups.”<sup>120</sup> Indeed, by 1859, although formerly a favourite with herbalists and so called “fairy doctresses,”<sup>121</sup> *digitalis* was placed on the Sale of Poison Bill.<sup>122</sup>

However, there are many other reasons why Rossetti might have used the foxglove. Firstly, it had long been associated with its resemblance to the finger of a glove.<sup>123</sup> It has a number of common names alluding to this quality including ‘thimble’, ‘glove finger’, and ‘finger flower’.<sup>124</sup> Could the provocative Rossetti have been mindful of the sexual connotations of the finger flower, laid bare on Lilith’s dressing table? Maybe he knew that “among the Italians of the seventeenth century the foxglove was freely used to heal fresh wounds and cleanse old ones, whence the adage – ‘*Aralda, tutte paighe salda*’ (the foxglove is a balm for every wound)” – intimating that whatever harm Lilith does, there is redemption to be found?<sup>125</sup> Maybe he was aware that foxgloves, “although tolerated when they have self-sown, have never found much favour even though they are showy and easy to grow,” reflecting the unwelcome proliferation of modern-day *Lady Liliths*?<sup>126</sup> Did he reflect on the foxglove’s nature to bend its tall stalks as if stroked by an unseen presence of supernatural beings?<sup>127</sup> Or perhaps Rossetti was alluding to the belief that the flower got its name from ‘folks’-glove’.<sup>128</sup> Friend explains that to our ancestors ‘folks’ meant ‘good folks’ or fairies. The foxglove, being held in high esteem by witches, who would decorate their fingers with its largest bells,<sup>129</sup> could have been present in the painting to convey ‘witchery’, rather than resorting to the more clichéd familiar? It is unlikely that we will ever have definitive evidence to support any possibility, but assuming *ceteris paribus*, these conjectures illustrate conclusively that relying on the symbolism of flowers for meaning is, in its very essence, an entertaining, if inherently subjective, pastime.



What we do know is that Rossetti is particularly interested in finding a rose that is visually appealing and sympathetic to his composition. He requested white roses from the garden of Charles Augustus Howell on more than one occasion. He wants them as “branches growing out behind her head as if in a pot.” He tells him that he should have “branches in the right direction as in sketch, and I want a good cluster of roses up in the corner above the head. But of course I could combine much, only the direction of the branches is desirable & plenty of leaves & red buds.”<sup>130</sup> The flowers provided by the Howells serve “their turn splendidly,” proving to be “a perfect godsend” to the picture.<sup>131</sup> Growing on the right side of the painting, as if in a pot, the flowers arch over Lilith’s head, recreating the motion of the comb through her hair. The delicate white of the roses, although inappropriate to Phelps Smith, echo Lilith’s diaphanous gown and the swansdown throw beneath her, both tactile fabrics, while the brilliant red of the poppy marries with the crimson tones of the cord twisted around her left wrist and the colour of her lips, forming an imaginary triangle, serving subliminally to draw the eye, one to another (see *Lady Lilith* compositional schematic (*fig. 61*) where the centre of the triangle hovers above Lilith’s left breast). The contrast between the striking white of the dress combined with the swathes of white roses and the three splashes of red evokes Venus’ allegory of the deflowering of the pure flower. The open cups of the foxglove flower, the two candles reflected in the mirror, and uterine shape of the perfume bottle are all suggestive of the desired consummation of the body beautiful.

The circlet of silver daisies, however, resting on Lilith's lap in a particularly intimate space was a late addition. Although Phelps Smith admits that they are not a true attribute of Lady Lilith, meaning "innocence," we are led to believe that they are, instead, an "intentioned disguise," adopted by Lilith in order "to entrap the hearts of men."<sup>132</sup> According to Phelps Smith, "she wears the wreath to make her beauty seem harmless or to make each man feel that he is her first lover."<sup>133</sup> Their symbolism was seemingly of little consequence, however, for they could just have easily have been a sleeping kitten,<sup>134</sup> had the "massacre of the feline innocents" taken place, according to correspondence with his brother, William Michael.<sup>135</sup> By considering the curled up circular form of "a white kitten on the white dishabille of the Lady," (*fig. 62*), no doubt for associative provocation, it certainly does appear to have been the shape and positioning of that shape that Rossetti prioritised, not the flower and certainly not its inherent symbolism.

Rossetti's painting works at all four levels identified by Dante. Literally, it is a painting of a beautiful woman combing her hair, surrounded by floral attributes and other significant details. Allegorically, it is presumed to be a picture of the personification of Vanity. Morally, it is assumed to be a study of how self-absorption can lead to ruin. Anagogically, as the shadowy and timeless figure of Lilith manifests before our eyes, it reflects the suspension of time itself.

## Flower as Sermon or Conscience of the Heart?

The influence of theological doctrine is particularly strong in William Holman Hunt's *Light of the World* (fig. 63). In this, "the most famous Pre-Raphaelite religious painting of all," Hunt employs the natural world to fuse Christian scripture with contemporary spiritual desolation.<sup>136</sup> He creates a visual sermon, extolling the virtues of the text from Revelation (3:20): "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hears My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me" with a direct call for individual action. Firmly planted in theological symbolism, where "flowers growing in the garden are men and women who, like flowers, bloom ... and then fade away and die, the (bind)weed represents sin. The nature of sin is that it entwines itself about the hearts and souls of people, preventing them from coming to perfection, in a similar manner to the way in which weeds destroy the plants in our gardens."<sup>137</sup> The Saviour, carrying the lantern of enlightenment, knocks on the door of the soul and waits patiently for an answer. The overgrown thorny brambles, the puny, dry, gone-to-seed flowerheads and the emaciated, woody ivy are used to represent the dearth of spiritual enlightenment in those who deny Christ.

Hunt is meticulous in his almost photographic replication of the weeds growing at the sinner's door. He had gone to a great deal of trouble, painting *en plein air* by the light of the moon, to capture the scene. However, despite his efforts, the painting was not an instant success and John Ruskin felt the need to write to the editor of *The Times* after a visit to the Royal Academy in May 1854, to ensure that "justice should be done." During his

visit, he had noticed that “few stopped to look” at the painting, “and those who did almost invariably with some contemptuous expression, founded on what appeared to them the absurdity of representing the Saviour with a lantern in his hand.”<sup>138</sup> He, on the other hand, thought it “one of the very noblest works of sacred art ever produced in this or any other age.”<sup>139</sup>

While the door to the soul is fast barred, the tendrils of ivy indicative of the door being shut for some considerable time, the brambles, nettles, fruitless corn and wild grass point to severe neglect and abandonment of Christian truth. The ivy grows down, the weeds push up, and it is only a matter of time before the door is overgrown for eternity.

Rossetti has a different kind of eternity on his mind when he paints *The Blessed Damozel* (fig. 11). Completely at odds with Hunt, rejecting tradition, conformity and religious symbols for religion’s sake, Rossetti’s Saviour is represented by the imparadised lover who desires physical communion even beyond death. As Elizabeth Prettejohn points out: “the composition, which exists in two oil versions, represents the sole occasion when Rossetti based a pictorial work on a pre-existing poem of his own,” with the picture capturing the alternation of voices between lovers by presenting the Damozel in the large upper canvas and the male recipient of her affection in the smaller predella below.<sup>140</sup> There are no dying weeds in Rossetti’s vision of the immortal soul, rather abundant, jaunty wild roses bursting into bloom, along with three tenderly painted white lilies, their stamens delicately painted. Couples are locked in passionate embraces around the damozel who gazes down to her lover on earth, supine in the

predella below. According to Phelps Smith, the roses in the main painting and the beech trees in the predella speak of “pleasant memories” while the rose also reminds us of the “pain of separation by death,”<sup>141</sup> but this interpretation fails to acknowledge the passionate frisson radiating from the painting, the lily and the rose being emblems of deflowering, as we have already seen.

The damozel’s undulating veil rises like a spectre above the three lilies, reminding us of all their tenderness, sweetness and purity and yet also their fragility. The lily, used by the church as a metaphor of death and resurrection, here encompasses both functions:

Suppose that when the flower falls and the leaves wither that the root is dead too. Oh, no! It is natural that the lily should only bloom for a short while in each year; but the bulb, or root, continues to live on and on for many years. And when winter comes round with its frost and snow and biting winds, the root of the lily lies hidden below in the earth, quite safe, quite healthy, only waiting till the spring rain and sun come again, to cause it to shoot forth more flowers in all their fresh beauty.<sup>142</sup>

The flower may be short-lived; the life-force that brought it into existence is, however, infinite and eternal. By the time Rossetti completed the first of his painted blessed damozels for Glaswegian William Graham in 1875 (his original poem appeared in *The Germ*, 1850) there was little hope that new shoots would emerge from the metaphorical lily bulb of his life. Having lost a child Elizabeth Siddal had been carrying, he lost another when his Lizzie died from a self-administered overdose of laudanum in February 1862.<sup>143</sup> This

conflation of expectant pleasure with tremulous foreboding is reflected in the painting where lilies, cradled in the damozel's arms, emerge from beneath her diaphanous veil, its spectral presence threatening the pungent blooms. Beauty is tinged with apprehension as Rossetti deftly creates a vacillating field of attraction and repulsion, drawing us in and then pushing us away, so typical of his *modus operandi*. Nonetheless, the lily in all its natural delicacy, may offer some hope from beyond the grave. The flowers are, after all, at their peak in this supernatural realm and it is being held by a woman, although dead, very much alive. The sword-hilt of the enamoured youth in the predella below leaves little to the imagination.

We have a curious dichotomy established between these two paintings. In the Hunt, a supernatural being treads the earth in search of a lost soul, whereas in the Rossetti, a natural being looks down from heaven in search of a kindred spirit. Hunt is interested in saving souls via Christian ideology, Rossetti in expressing natural desires via recognisable Christian imagery. Both employ the natural world to convey the essence of the problem. The spirit of Man for Hunt is dying if not dead; the spirit of Woman for Rossetti, although dead, is pulsating with life and desire and sexuality and sensuality. The relationship between the wizened weeds and the luscious lily could not be further strained. Rossetti is not interested in dead nature, despite his first strong impression of nature's decay. He could recall from his earliest childhood, the occasion "he gathered up the fallen pods, fumbling in a dying garden, and ran to his mother to ask her what they were."<sup>144</sup>

Unlike Hunt, Rossetti presents a moving image. All of his floral symbolism is transitory, hovering between the sacred and the secular interpretive possibilities. Resolutely refusing to land on either, Rossetti creates multi-layered dimensions for us to experience, not, like Hunt in this painting, didactic formulaic interpretations of established ideas.

For Rossetti “the pursuit of art is a bore, except when followed in the dozing style.”<sup>145</sup> As this was written while on holiday with Siddal in Hastings, in 1854, Rossetti presumably meant that he preferred to create in a leisurely way, without the daily pressure of producing art for much needed “tin” – his term for money. But his term “dozing style” is a useful way to think about his paintings, for he creates art that defiantly obscures the boundaries between reality and imagination, between anticipation and realisation, between the defined edges of our earthly existence and something far removed. It is as if he dwells in that place halfway between being awake and falling asleep: a limbo space of possibilities.

It is clear that although Rossetti and his Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries use flowers in their compositions, they are employed in quite different ways. From the examples studied, we can see that Hughes employs flowers for signposting, where Rossetti uses flowers to elucidate an imbalance, an hypocritical double standard. Millais uses flowers pragmatically, as a springboard from popular culture, employing them as floral props, where Rossetti uses them to develop a sense of psychological sensitivity while marrying that empathy with sexual realisation. Burne-Jones, like Rossetti, employs the symbolism of colour, form and composition

with his flowers, but Rossetti goes further, using recognisable floral symbols to elucidate the dichotomy between Church and Nature, between conformity and free expression, between self-denial and self-realisation. Hunt uses flowers as sermon-carriers, whereas Rossetti uses them as the incarnation of an eternity of sexual indulgence: a place where the heart's conscience rules over the mind's conscience, for there are "many avenues by which the soul can be reached, stirred, and elevated, besides the understanding. Do not indirect and quite inarticulate influences often melt into us more powerfully, do us more good, than the clearest, most forcible appeals to the intellect?"<sup>146</sup> For Rossetti, flowers were external manifestations of the internal spirit. They bring the intangible within our grasp, but just as easily allow the moment to be transient.

Of the three distinct ways Phelps Smith suggests Rossetti uses flowers, I have only found evidence of two. He most certainly relies on the tension between Classical and Christian allusion to create an environment where polyvalence can thrive, and from time to time he employs floral symbolism that has a meaning only intelligible to himself and his close circle. However, I have not discovered any conclusive evidence that he uses the Victorian language of flowers to convey hidden meaning. He does, however employ flowers in other ways, notably for their form and colour, and predominantly for their associative properties relating to free and natural sexual expression. There is no key to veiled, esoteric meaning, deliberately obscured from benighted viewers. There is no secret doctrine that Rossetti encodes with meaning to be revealed in some artistic epiphany. We cannot read his flowers as clearly as a sonnet on the frame, or at least, we do so at our peril,



for it is just not possible or even desirable to interpret specific meaning from Rossetti's employment of flowers. It is simply not the case that the "meanings of Rossetti's subjects are precisely indicated by their (floral) accessories."<sup>147</sup> Indeed, not only is it impossible to decipher specific meaning, but the act of seeking is, in itself, missing the point. Rossetti wants blurred edges, transitory moments, and possibilities, not certainties. But to what end?

Jerome McGann, although referring to Rossetti's poetry rather than his painting, is close to the mark when he writes that "Rossetti is not interested in conveying symbolic meaning through his details."<sup>148</sup> McGann argues that Rossetti is fundamentally interested in sensation and appearance and that he achieves this by manipulating traditional imagery. This process inevitably "purifies" the imagery of its inherited content, enabling us to experience it afresh, along with what he calls the "sublime value of enduring human affections, and correlatively, of man's infinite capacity for sensational response."<sup>149</sup> However, I would suggest that the inherited content does not wholly disappear. The fact that the symbol was associated so closely with traditional content ensures that it is never totally eradicated, and indeed, Rossetti, plays on this fact.

Rossetti was born out of his time. By this, I don't mean that he belonged to the Early or even the High Renaissance, but rather that he was well ahead of his time as one of the first true modernists. I am mindful of an essay written by Hsin-yu-Hung concerning the Irish writer, James Joyce, and

in particular the fifth episode of his major work, *Ulysses* (1918). In the strangely curious “The Lotus Eaters”, the essayist points out that, although Joyce was hardly unusual in identifying flowers with women or erotic love, he is one of the few writers to condense the consecrated and the blasphemous into such floral imagery.<sup>150</sup> Significantly, he is doing this nearly four decades after Rossetti’s life was cut short. Both used floral metaphors to express unspeakable thoughts because one of the primary attributes of the symbol is to obfuscate and to transform. The symbol is an alchemist, not simply a signpost, and what better way to veil an impropriety than behind a seemingly innocuous mask. The flower, the embodiment of reproduction, and the sign of Rossetti’s *donna angelicata* pledges the continuity of birth and rebirth, and the natural desire for sexual communion. Equally, it possesses intrinsic sacred qualities, too. Like Joyce, Rossetti combines the two most significant experiences in human life: religion and sexuality. But Rossetti’s is no conformist religion. It is not something we are ever likely to discover in scripture or hear in Sunday sermons. His religion is far less contrived, yet all the more powerful in its authentic expression for Rossetti’s compulsion is the dramatisation of erotic flirtation. His flowers do not fulfil some base animal instinct, but rather celebrate the sacredly human process of anticipation, seduction, and consummation as the apogee of body and soul in sublime communion.

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown (writing from Hastings), 23 May 1854. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 10 vols., ed. William E. Fredeman and others (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-15), vol. 1, 353-355 (letter 54.49).

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<sup>2</sup> “Flora Symbolica: Or The Language and Sentiment of Flowers, including Floral Poetry, Original and Selected. By John Ingram. With Original Illustrations, Printed in Colours (Warne & Co.)” Book Review, *Athenaeum*, no. 2198 (11 December 1869): 770-771.

<sup>3</sup> “Flora Symbolica,” *Athenaeum* (2198): 771.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Phelps Smith cites “John Ingram’s *Flora Symbolica* as “one of the most extensive of Victorian collections of flower lore,” in “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Flower Imagery and the Meaning of His Painting,” PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburg, 1978, 19. Debra Mancoff writes that one of the most common and popular floral texts “was the compendium, such as John Henry Ingram’s *Flora Symbolica* (1869) which combined a cultural “history” of traditions and rituals with separate entries on individual flowers, and a double lexicon of both flowers and their meanings,” in *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers* (Prestel: Munich, London, and New York, 2012), 7.

<sup>5</sup> John H. Ingram, *Flora Symbolica: Or The Language and Sentiment of Flowers, including Floral Poetry, Original and Selected. By John Ingram. With Original Illustrations, Printed in Colours* (London: Warne & Co., 1869), Preface.

<sup>6</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 2-3.

<sup>7</sup> “Flora Symbolica,” *Athenaeum* (2198): 771.

<sup>8</sup> Molly Engelhardt, “The Language of Flowers in the Victorian Age,” *Victoriographies*, 3:2 (2013), 136-160: 144.

<sup>9</sup> Mr Ingram’s *Flora Symbolica*,” *Athenaeum*, no. 2200 (25 December 1869): 873.

<sup>10</sup> John H. Ingram is especially renowned for *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1875). In addition, he authored *Claimants to Royalty* (London: D. Bogue, 1882), *Oliver Madox Brown. A Biographical Sketch, 1855-74* (London: E. Stock, 1883), *The Haunted Homes and Family Traditions of Great Britain* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1884), *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1888), and *Christopher Marlowe and His Associates* (London: G. Richards, 1904).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Henry Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 231.

<sup>12</sup> *Dante G. Rossetti, Deceased ... Catalogue of the Household & Decorative Furniture [&c.] ... Which Will be Sold by Auction* (Wharton (T.G.), Martin & Co.) July 5-7, 1882.

<sup>13</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Jenny,” in *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 2 vols., ed. William Michael Rossetti, (Ellis and Scrutton, 1886) vol.1, 83-94, lines 111-120.

<sup>14</sup> Rossetti, *Collected Works*, “The Portrait,” 240, lines 61-68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, “The Honeysuckle,” 298; “Love-Lily,” 240-243; and “Rose Mary,” 103-136.

<sup>16</sup> Of the poems in vol. 1 of *Rossetti’s Collected Works* (1886) the rose appears in the following: “Rose Mary” (28 times); “Jenny” (8 times); *Collected Sonnets* (8 times); “The Stream’s Secret” (twice); “Mary Magdalene At the Door of Simon The Pharisee” (twice); *Michael Scott’s Wooing* (twice); “The King’s Tragedy” (once);

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“The Blessed Damozel”(once); “Eden Bower” (once); “Winter” (once); “Youth and Lordship” (Italian Street Song) (once).

<sup>17</sup> Of the poems in the same vol., the lily appears in the following: “Jenny” (4 times); “Dante at Verona” (3 times); “Love-Lily” (3 times); “The King’s Tragedy” (twice); “Down Stream (twice); “Mary’s Girlhood” (twice); “The Blessed Damozel” (twice); and once in each of the following: “The Staff and Scrip,” “The White Ship,” “Beauty’s Pageant,” “Collected Sonnets,” “Winter,” “A Last Confession,” “Ave,” “Love’s Nocturn,” and “For An Annunciation.”

<sup>18</sup> “The White Ship,” “Lady Lilith,” and “Collected Sonnets.”

<sup>19</sup> The snowdrop appears in “True Woman” (Herself - Sonnet LVI) and the snowdrop and apple-blossom appear in “Barren Spring” (Sonnet LXXXIII). The iris makes an appearance in “Gracious Midnight” (Sonnet XX) and the marigold in “Spring.” The sunflower appears in “For the Wine of Circe by Edward Burne-Jones.”

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Hamilton Phelps Smith, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Flower Imagery and the Meaning of his Painting,” PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1978.

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Phelps Smith, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Lady Lilith and the Language of Flowers.” *Arts Magazine*, 53 (February 1979): 142-145.

<sup>22</sup> Phelps Smith, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Flower Imagery,” diss., 1.

<sup>23</sup> See Basil Willey, “Imagination and Fancy,” in *The Romantic Imagination*, ed. J. H. Hill (London: The Macmillan Press, 1977), 119-136; S. V. Pradhan, “Coleridge’s Philocrysis and his Theory of Fancy and Secondary Imagination,” *Studies in Romanticism*, 13.3 (1974): 235-254; Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988); and Keith Hindcliffe “Wordsworth and the Kinds of Metaphor,” *Studies in Romanticism*: 23.1, 1984: 81-100.

<sup>24</sup> See Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone, *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860-1910* (London: Tate, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> William Sharp, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study* (London: Macmillan, 1882), 91.

<sup>26</sup> Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 477.

<sup>27</sup> Johnston Forbes-Robertson, *The Times*, 11 May 1928, (44890) 17-18.

<sup>28</sup> Irena Nikolova Nikolova, “The Allegorical and Symbolic Modes of Representation in W. Wordsworth’s Poems of the Fancy and Poems of the Imagination,” MA dissertation, University of Eastern Illinois, 1993, 1.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>30</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to W. A Turner, ca. late 1877. In *Correspondenc*, vol. 7, 477 (letter 77.182).

<sup>31</sup> Phelps Smith, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Flower Imagery,” diss, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Albert R. Ascoli, “Dante and Allegory,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, ed. Rita Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011), 128-135, 130.

<sup>33</sup> Arthur Hughes to Agnes Hale-White, 24 February 1902. In *Arthur Hughes: His Life and Works: A Catalogue Raisonné*, ed. Leonard Roberts, (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1998), 235.

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- <sup>34</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ellen Heaton, 28 November 1856. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, 136-37 (letter 56.52).
- <sup>35</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 172.
- <sup>36</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 178.
- <sup>37</sup> Anon, *Beautiful Bouquets, Culled from the Poets of All Countries: The Forget-Me-Not. With Coloured Illustrations from Original Designs* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1869), 6.
- <sup>38</sup> Anon, *Beautiful Bouquets*, 7.
- <sup>39</sup> Anon, *Beautiful Bouquets*, 8.
- <sup>40</sup> Debra Mancoff, *Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (Munich & London: Prestel, 2003),
- <sup>41</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 14.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 159.
- <sup>43</sup> Friend, *Flowers & Flower Lore*, 389.
- <sup>44</sup> Jennifer Potter, *Seven Flowers and How They Shaped Our World* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), 46.
- <sup>45</sup> According to Friend, Louis VII of France chose the purple iris as his heraldic emblem when he went on Crusade to the Holy Land. Thenceforth it became the Flower of Louis or fleur de Louis, and eventually what we know today as the heraldic fleur-de-lys. See Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 400-401.
- <sup>46</sup> King James Bible, Luke, Chapter 1: 30-33.
- <sup>47</sup> L. Impelluso, *Nature and its Symbols*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli, (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), 85.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>49</sup> See Kellie Costello, "An Exegetical Study of the Annunciation of Luke 1: 26-38 Through Text and Art," PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, Fremantle, 2018; Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Daniel Arasse, *L'Annonciation Italienne: Une Histoire de Perspective* (Vanves Cedex: Hazan, 2010).
- <sup>50</sup> Ruth Wedgwood Kennedy, *The Renaissance Painter's Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 15-16.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>52</sup> Mancoff, *Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art*, 16.
- <sup>53</sup> See William Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 31.
- <sup>54</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic George Stephens, 25 April 1874. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 443 (letter 74.85).
- <sup>55</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Holman Hunt, 8 December 1852. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 212 (letter 52.24).
- <sup>56</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic George Stephens, 21 August 1849. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 88 (letter 49.7).
- <sup>57</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 19 January 1853. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 228-29 (letter 53.6).
- <sup>58</sup> After Rossetti saw van Eyck's altarpiece in St Bavo's Cathedral in Ghent in 1849 he was inspired to re-think the traditional Annunciation theme in *Ecce Ancilla*

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*Domini!* Figures on the exterior panels of the altarpiece are all in white – possibly giving Rossetti the idea for his colour scheme.

<sup>59</sup> Upon the Annunciation, Mary answers: “*Ecce ancilla Domini, fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum.*” (“Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.”)

<sup>60</sup> See Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-century Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>61</sup> Simon Cooke, “The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers,” *PRS Review* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 69-71, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Marcia Reiss, *Lily* (London: Reaktion, 2013), 137.

<sup>64</sup> Hall Caine, *Recollections*, 221.

<sup>65</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (London & New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 109.

<sup>66</sup> See Wolfgang Kemp, *The Desire of My Eyes: The Life and Work of John Ruskin* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990) 293.

<sup>67</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Jenny” in *Collected Works*, 83, line 18.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Anon, “Fine Arts: National Institution,” *Athenaeum*, 20 April 1850, (1173): 424.

<sup>70</sup> “Fine Arts: National Institution,” 424.

<sup>71</sup> “National Institution,” *The Times*, 15 April 1850, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 18 September 1849. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 92-94 (letter 49.11+n1).

<sup>73</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Woolner, 1 January 1853. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 221-25 (letter 53.1n1).

<sup>74</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 11 May 1855. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, 36-39 (letter 55.24 + n5).

<sup>75</sup> William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1905), vol. 1, 204.

<sup>76</sup> Alicia Craig Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1989). Faxon lists all exhibitions where Rossetti’s work was exhibited during his lifetime: The Free Exhibition, opening 24 March 1849; the National Institution exhibition at the Portland Gallery, opening 13 April 1850; a winter 1850 exhibition organised by Thomas Seddon to raise money for the North London School of Design; the Winter Exhibition, 121 Pall Mall, December 1852-8 January 1853; The Pre-Raphaelite Exhibition, 4 Russell Place, Fitzroy Square in July 1857; two or three exhibitions at the Hogarth Club, 1858-61; the Liverpool Exhibition of 1858; the Liverpool Academy, 14 September 1861; the Royal Scottish Academy Exhibition, 1862; the International Exhibition, 1862; the Liverpool Academy, 1864; the Arundel Club, February 1866; Benefit Exhibition for Henry J. Hodding, Manchester, 1871; the Glasgow Exhibition, April 1876; the Manchester Exhibition, 1878; the German Gymnasium, 26 April – 5 May 1879; and the Liverpool Academy, August 1881.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

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<sup>78</sup> Along with *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* Rossetti executed at least four other Annunciation pictures: a drawing (1852, Birmingham); a watercolour (Fitzwilliam); a stained-glass design and this, the 1855 watercolour now in a private collection.

<sup>79</sup> Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism*, 204.

<sup>80</sup> Virginia Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1828-82: The Paintings and Drawings: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), vol. 1, 68-9.

<sup>81</sup> J. B. Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter & Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), 121.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Boyce was an early patron. He bought *Girl at a Lattice* and *Belcolore* as well as *Bocca Baciata*. Fanny Cornforth was also the model in *Belcolore* and a maid servant from Madox Brown's house modelled for the *Girl at a Lattice*.

<sup>84</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 23 August 1859. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, 269 (letter 59.34). There are two known oil versions of *Bocca Baciata*: one at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the other in a private collection.

<sup>85</sup> The phrase "bocca baciata" or "the mouth that has been kissed" may come from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but as so often with Rossetti this painting is not so much an illustration of Boccaccio as an appropriation of the text for Rossetti's purposes. The words which Rossetti wrote on the back of the painting, are the concluding lines to the seventh story on the second day concerning Alatiel, the daughter of the Sultan of Babylon, betrothed to the King of Algarve. On her journey to marry the King, she is shipwrecked on the coast of Majorca. Rescued by a nobleman, he seduces her and she becomes his mistress. The nobleman's brother also falls in love with her and kills his brother and abducts her. This pattern involving friends or relations is repeated several times. Finally she makes her way home and convinces her father that she has spent the time away performing good works. Despite the fact that eight separate men had made love to her on thousands of different occasions, she enters her husband's bed as a virgin.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Bocca Baciata*, in Julian Treuherz, Elizabeth Prettejohn, Edwin Becker, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 184.

<sup>87</sup> Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter & Poet*, 125.

<sup>88</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 2003), 178.

<sup>89</sup> Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter & Poet*, 125.

<sup>90</sup> See Surtees, *A Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 1, 69.

<sup>91</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to George Price Boyce, 5 September 1859. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, 269-70 (letter 59.35).

<sup>92</sup> Venetian painting and particularly the Venetian use of colour, was charged with moral significance for the Victorians. The Venetians, among them Giorgione, Titian, Veronese, were famous for their mastery of colour, but colour, so it was argued, appealed only to base senses. Furthermore, Venetian society with its long-standing culture of courtesans was identified with sexual licence, a link that went back to the days of the Grand Tour and beyond.

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- <sup>93</sup> Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry and Other Phenomena of the Day* (London: Strahan and Co., 1872), 33-55, 45.
- <sup>94</sup> Robert Buchanan, *God and the Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1890), Preface.
- <sup>95</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>96</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 102.
- <sup>97</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 144.
- <sup>98</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 51.
- <sup>99</sup> Sarah Phelps Smith, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Flower Imagery and the Meaning of His Painting," PhD diss. (University of Pittsburg, 1978), 84.
- <sup>100</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 340.
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid, 341.
- <sup>102</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, 94.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid, 360.
- <sup>104</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 112.
- <sup>105</sup> Ibid, 112-113.
- <sup>106</sup> There is some discussion as to whether the phallus reference is accidental or repressed on the part of the artist, but see Carol Jacobi, "Sugar, Salt and Curdled Milk: Millais and the Synthetic Subject," *Tate Papers* 18 (Autumn 2012), accessed 29 August 2019, who argues that this is not the first time Millais uses such imagery. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/18/sugar-salt-and-curdled-milk-millais-and-the-synthetic-subject>. John Guille Millais's two-volume monograph suggests that Millais was misguided by the influence of Rossetti's "perfervid imagination" (vol.1, 1899, 55-56).
- <sup>107</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 115.
- <sup>108</sup> Ingram, *Flora Symbolica*, vii.
- <sup>109</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 96.
- <sup>110</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>111</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to John Hamilton Trist, 23 April 1866. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 426-27 (letter 66.84.1).
- <sup>112</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Gordon Hake, 21 April 1870. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 449-51 (letter 70.110).
- <sup>113</sup> Delaware Art Museum, *Lady Lilith* (08.162.1), accessed 30 July 2019, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/08.162.1>.
- <sup>114</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 257.
- <sup>115</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 97.
- <sup>116</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>117</sup> Ibid, 96.
- <sup>118</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 96.
- <sup>119</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>120</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 21.
- <sup>121</sup> See Howard B. Burchell, "Digitalis Poisoning: Historical and Forensic Aspects," *American College of Cardiology* 1, no. 2 (1983):506-16.
- <sup>122</sup> "Sale of Poisons Bill," *The Times*, Saturday, 12 February, 10.



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- <sup>123</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 438.
- <sup>124</sup> Brian Halliwell, *Old Garden Flowers* (London: Bishopsgate Press, 1987), 59
- <sup>125</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 205-6.
- <sup>126</sup> Halliwell, *Old Garden Flowers*, 60.
- <sup>127</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 36.
- <sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 21-22.
- <sup>129</sup> Friend, *β*, 36.
- <sup>130</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 16 August 1866. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 459-60 (letter 66.139).
- <sup>131</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 21 August 1866. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 461-62 (letter 66.142).
- <sup>132</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 97.
- <sup>133</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>134</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 17 February 1867. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 512 (letter 67.31).
- <sup>135</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederick Richards Leyland, 17 January 1868. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 16-17 (letter 68.12).
- <sup>136</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate, 2012), 245.
- <sup>137</sup> Rev. John Bruster, *A Children's Flower Sermon: The Beautiful Valley and The Lilies* (London & Liverpool: Houston & Sons & Gibbs & Co., 1888), 6.
- <sup>138</sup> "Letter to the Editor: The Author of Modern Painters," *The Times*, 5 May 1854, Issue 21733: 9.
- <sup>139</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>140</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, "The Blessed Damozel," in Treuherz et al, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 213.
- <sup>141</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 133.
- <sup>142</sup> Bruster, "Children's Flower Sermon," 6.
- <sup>143</sup> Lucinda Hawksley, *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel* (London: Carlton, 2004), 196.
- <sup>144</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Holman Hunt, 20 March 1854. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 329-31 (letter 54.25).
- <sup>145</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 23 May 1854. Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 353-55 (letter 54.49).
- <sup>146</sup> John C. Shairp, "Aesthetic Poetry: Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Contemporary Review*, 42 (July 1882):17-32.
- <sup>147</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 95.
- <sup>148</sup> Jerome McGann, "Rossetti's Significant Details," *Victorian Poetry* 7, no.1 (Spring, 1969): 41-54, 41.
- <sup>149</sup> McGann, "Rossetti's Significant Details," 41.
- <sup>150</sup> Hsin-yu-Hung, "'They Like it Because No-one Can Hear': A Derridean Reading of Joyce's Floral Language in 'Lotus Eaters'," *James Joyce Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 348-356.
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### 3. Synonym

Changes of shape, new forms, are the theme which my  
spirit impels me  
now to recite. Inspire me, O gods (it is you who have even transformed  
my art), and spin me a thread from the world's beginning  
down to my own lifetime, on one continuous poem.<sup>1</sup>

## Synonym

I do contest the allegation that my brother concluded that “women and flowers were the only objects worth painting,” and several of his works executed later than 1859, are there to confute it. That he often did paint beautiful women with floral adjuncts is however quite true. The gentlemen who commissioned or purchased his pictures are chiefly responsible for this result; as he, on the contrary, would in several instances have preferred to carry out as paintings some of his more important designs, including sometimes numerous figures of both sexes.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter’s central proposition is that William Michael was correct in pointing out that Dante Gabriel was doing something quite different with flowers than any of his contemporaries or indeed any of his “generous imitators.” I dispute the premise that Rossetti was merely “exploring the decorative possibilities of women and flowers as subject matter for compositions conceived as harmonious arrangements of colours.”<sup>3</sup> Equally, I re-examine the notion that he was primarily concerned with continuing “a more traditional approach toward painting with specific symbols and attributes to transform a portrait into a subject with literary dimensions.”<sup>4</sup> Focusing on metamorphosis – simultaneously transforming flowers into women and women into flowers – flowers may no longer remain solely “signs of male creativity and virility,” but together reflect the restrictions placed upon female agency and liberty of expression.<sup>5</sup>

I seek to prove that Rossetti’s flowers are not just *like* his beautiful women. By assuming their condition, they *become* his beautiful women.

Rather than being introduced as accessories, background props, decorative flourishes or even symbolic tropes, flowers provide Rossetti with a means to embody the female experience in an anthropomorphic manifestation, the sympathetic treatment of which both mirrors and exemplifies the boundaries, dilemmas and injustices of the women he represents. Although often dismissed as displaying scant social purpose in his art (with the exception of the unfinished *Found* (fig. 16)), unlike, say William Holman Hunt with his *The Awakening Conscience* (fig. 64) or Ford Madox Brown with *Work* (fig. 7), as we have already noted, Rossetti is anything but passive where the treatment of women is concerned. Instead, he manipulates natural convention for a serious purpose. Not exactly engaged in a Hogarthian morality play, he nonetheless lays bare the underlying conformist beliefs relating to female sexuality. By provoking in this manner, Rossetti offers a poignantly profound and empathetic perspective on the condition of Woman, forever subjected to the dialectical opposites of virgin and whore: an on-going fiercely contested conversation, never more topical than in the present moment with the ongoing #MeToo campaign.<sup>6</sup>

I predominantly employ close visual analysis of two of Rossetti's oil paintings. I choose his first, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 10), for which Christina Rossetti modelled, and one of his final compositions featuring Jane Morris as *Proserpine* (fig. 46). I take into account other relevant artworks, which employ, at some level, similar or dissimilar synonymous language. I do so to demonstrate the importance of women and flowers as synonymous counterparts throughout his career, from his earliest experimentation with oil to his final creation. I also test the general assumption that there is a

chronological development to the complexity of his use of flowers by commencing with the later of the two. I compare Rossetti's use of flowers to similar subjects painted by John Everett Millais, Charles Allston Collins, Daniel Maclise, and Frederic Leighton to demonstrate the scope of Rossetti's originality. Conscious of the inherent danger of relying on biographical detail to make connections where none may exist, I consider the vagaries of Rossetti's life experience but rarely. Although Dante Gabriel Rossetti is undeniably a master painterly poet, I do not concur necessarily with the view that Rossetti's paintings rely on the poetry to "supply consciousness" or to present us with "fully living creations," and, therefore, do not rely too far on his poetic inscriptions or attached poems for interpreting his paintings, although I do refer to them where pertinent.<sup>7</sup> If we are truly to liberate the flower, then we need to sever as many potentially errant signposts to 'meaning' as possible.

"Beautiful Women with Floral Adjuncts" – What did William Michael Rossetti Mean?

William Michael Rossetti, writing his brother's biography somewhat tardily in 1895, thirteen years after his untimely demise, felt the need to defend him against criticism that following an initial halcyon period all Dante Gabriel did was paint beautiful women and flowers. Attributing responsibility to the close circle of predominantly middle-class businessmen who bought his art, William Michael is conscious, no doubt, of the extent of his brother's frustration, as he expressed in a letter of 1873: "to be an artist is just the same thing as to be a whore, as far as dependence on the whims and fancies of

individuals is concerned ...The natural impulse is to say simply – Leyland be d---d! – and so no doubt the whore feels but too often inclined to say and cannot.”<sup>8</sup>

Prostituting himself for his art may well have been vexing for the radical artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but William Michael is more interested in responding to what he considers to be the most damning suggestion - that of his brother’s implied infidelity. Just three years earlier Scott had maintained that:

He (Dante Gabriel Rossetti) was at that time creating his most poetical works as a painter – small water-colour pictures of lovely Arthurian sentiment and invention, done entirely without nature and a good deal in the spirit of illuminated MSS, with very indifferent drawing and perspective nowhere. Now he would paint beauty only: women and flowers were the only things in the world worth imitating.

The paradoxical conclusion that women and flowers were the only objects worth painting was brought about by the appearance of other ladies besides Miss Siddal coming within his orbit.<sup>9</sup>

Claiming Dante Gabriel as one of his three closest friends, Scott refers to two different periods, the “at that time” being around 1857 and the “now” being after 1859 when Rossetti gained a reputation for being attracted to “flowers” other than his eventual wife, Elizabeth Siddal. William Michael predictably takes issue with this all too public declaration that his brother was less than devoted to Siddal. While deflecting attention by apportioning blame to his male patrons, William Michael, nonetheless, admits that his brother did often paint beautiful women with floral adjuncts.

Over the years, following William Michael's apparent lead, it has been recognised that it is perfectly reasonable for "adjunct" to be interpreted as something relatively insignificant, "an additional flourish," an innocuous accessory, or at best, as we have seen, a symbolic signpost associated with the trivialised pastime of Victorian ladies immersed in the language of flowers. His re-assigned "female heads with floral attributes" have received much critical attention,<sup>10</sup> denigrated as being among Rossetti's frivolous confusions of irrelevant and unrelated notions.<sup>11</sup>

If we accept that Rossetti invented "the three-quarter-length pictures painted from one face, a type of female beauty which was akin to none other - something unique in the art of the world,"<sup>12</sup> how do we begin to comprehend why William Michael would respond to Scott's accusation with such candour, and then ostensibly go on to concur with him in the next sentence. Feeling somewhat perplexed by this apparent lack of empathy, I have been persuaded for some time that William Michael's own caveat - there "are several reasons why a brother neither is nor can be the best biographer" might have been well founded.<sup>13</sup> However, after much debate, I have come to the realisation that I have been unduly influenced by popular interpretation.

William Michael disputes the term "women and flowers," but he then meaningfully replaces that notion with the term "women with floral adjuncts." This deliberate change, from "flowers" to "with floral adjuncts" is noteworthy particularly when we recognise that the contemporary connotation indicated that the flower was not 'subordinate to', not merely an 'add on' or 'accessory'. According to *Samuel Johnson's Dictionary*, the



lexicon in common use, ‘adjunct’ was defined as “adherent to” or “united with.”<sup>14</sup> Flowers in William Michael’s précis are synonymous with the women they accompany. This simple revelation has the potential to change completely what has, until now, been accepted as William Michael’s stance. Similar to the inspiration behind, if not the visual execution of, Edward Burne-Jones’s *The Flower Book*, commenced the year of Rossetti’s death, Rossetti’s flowers and beautiful women may be, in fact, much more akin to “one soul together, and indissoluble, as if they could not exist apart.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore, although William Michael undertook his brother’s biography with some trepidation, the degree of understanding he shows towards Rossetti’s aesthetic may provide proof, after all, that “only those who live with a man can write his life with any genuine exactness and discrimination.”<sup>16</sup>

### Woman as Flower

The idea of woman *as* a flower rather than *like* a flower was not in itself pioneering. From a Christian perspective, the twelfth-century clergyman Adam, Abbot of Perseigne, has been credited as one of the first to conflate the Virgin and flowers:

*Maria hortus conclusus in quo immarcessibile Virginitatis albescit  
lilium, inviolabilis humilitatis fragrat viola, rosa rubescit  
inextinguibilis charitatis*

Mary is a garden enclosed where bloomed the white lily of her immaculate virginity, where the violet of her inviolate humility sent off its fragrance, and the rose of her inextinguishable charity bloomed in its redness.<sup>17</sup>

The Latin term *hortus conclusus* literally translates as ‘enclosed garden’ and is often depicted in Medieval and Renaissance art as an outdoor enclosure or bower within which sits the Madonna or, more often, the Madonna and Child. On a metaphorical level, of course, the enclosed garden also refers to the Virgin herself, or rather the purity of her procreative power, her womb remaining untouched and protected from sin.

The middle decades of the nineteenth century, as Dominic Janes describes, saw a dramatic change in the appearance of many ecclesiastical interiors. At the beginning of the century, flowers were rare in Anglican churches,<sup>18</sup> but their re-emergence was fuelled by the growing popularity of Catholic revivalism. Opposition to flowers adorning the inside of churches also drew strength from “cultural associations between flowers and dangerously alluring femininity and sexuality,”<sup>19</sup> but more, they were synonymous with the Virgin, and were, therefore, deemed to be incompatible with strict Protestant code. Extraordinary scenes ensued as the two Protestant factions jostled for supremacy. Janes discusses several examples, with one such collision concerning the lighting and precipitous extinguishing of altar candles during a Communion service.<sup>20</sup> On 4 February 1854, Mr Westerton, the churchwarden of St Paul’s Cathedral, laid a formal complaint before the Hon. and Rev. Mr Liddell. He protested against the “impertinent ceremonial and Romish custom which has been latterly, and is now, constantly, practised.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the placement of candlesticks on the high altar was, according to Mr Westerton, “a superstitious and vain custom, borrowed from the Roman Catholic church, calculated to bring

scandal upon public worship, and to pander to the worst and most superstitious appetites of a morbid imagination.”<sup>22</sup>

The mystery of the “Popish” Eucharist was at the heart of Tractarianism, the belief favoured by the Rossetti women. Although Rossetti was much influenced by his father, Gabriele, and in particular by his approach to religion, being an anti-Papist, and “free-thinker ... with a strongly spiritual nature,”<sup>23</sup> he did occasionally go to church with his mother and sisters.<sup>24</sup> The women had been known as early as 1843 to worship at Christchurch on Albany Street, St Pancras (one of the first nineteenth-century Anglican churches to have flowers on its altar).<sup>25</sup> They also worshipped at St Andrew’s in Wells Street, Marylebone, where the service was famous for its ritual. High Church Anglicanism was regarded as being dangerously close to Roman Catholicism, and, it is, therefore, not inconceivable that Rossetti, who “had no patience at all with religious controversies”<sup>26</sup> would have been aware of the Westerton-Liddell ornamental debacle. It is equally conceivable that he would have placed two extinguished candles on the altar of the beautiful anti-heroine, *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35), accompanied by the open foxglove of the female body as a veiled, but nonetheless provocative rejoinder.

Demonstrating what could have been regarded as a sinful fascination with sensuality, he could be using the cut flowers to highlight an anomaly in the Church, where seemingly carapaced churchgoers were serving both God and Mammon. Did he insist on white flowers for their emblematic associations, their fluidity, and to correspond with the whiteness of Lilith’s

sensuous gown and porcelain flesh and/or to make a caustic statement about what he must have regarded as gratuitous introspection in the Church? Adam's first wife according to rabbinic legend, was "the seductress and demon woman who gave birth only to devils and who wanted equal rights in everything,"<sup>27</sup> even, perhaps, like Rossetti's mother with her "flower loving heart,"<sup>28</sup> who "used to trot about after wild flowers and was as pleased with everything as a baby or an angel,"<sup>29</sup> the chimera of possessing the right to place flowers on the altar in her family church.

The situation became so divisive that a legal judgement was the only possible way to settle the matter.<sup>30</sup> In the case of Westerton versus Liddell, Dr Stephen Lushington (father to Vernon who was a good friend of Rossetti's, as we read in the Prologue) eventually handed down a somewhat ambiguous distinction between liturgical ornaments and mere decorations. He ruled that disputed elements such as flowers could appear in Church but only if they were in formal, restrained, symmetrical arrangements and they must never appear on the altar.<sup>31</sup>

Such floral tussles inevitably challenged the status and function of flowers in Christian churches. Centuries before, Ovid had encountered fewer restraints. He immortalised countless unfortunate protagonists, male and female, as honorary members of the plant genus, often transmuting their situations, predicaments, virtues or vices from human concerns into Nature's reflections. One only has to think about Narcissus (3.341-510), Anemone (10.731-39), Larkspur (13.394-98), Laurel (1.452-567), Hyacinth (10.160-218) or Reed (13.890-97) to recognise the progeny of this relationship.

Dante Gabriel read Latin along with French, German and a little Greek at King's College School from 1837-1842, and he would most certainly have been conversant with Ovid's transformative tales. These myths, while exploring an extraordinary range of experience, display "a penetrating psychological knowledge of the variety of human motivations and delusions."<sup>32</sup> As each animate human character merges with its floral equivalent, the line between what we take to be normal and extraordinary becomes blurred. The juxtaposition of the real and the imaginary is perfectly manifested in the polyvalent flower and its derivative, the fruit. As Leonard Barkan points out: "It follows from the metaphor of transformations that human experience is a series of contagions. If things turn into other things, then so do individuals, concepts, rules, emotions."<sup>33</sup>

Where Ovid and Rossetti clearly differ is in their approach to the portrayal of irrevocable change. Ovid's humans are absorbed by the natural world, never to be seen again. The nature of Rossetti's visual medium, however, allows the person and the flower to co-exist. Rossetti can reflect the essence of his women and their corresponding manifestations of the natural world within the same frame and, crucially, in the same moment, oscillating between the two states. Rossetti's metamorphic and psychological vision can, therefore, unfold *in medias res* and just as quickly revert to the original condition. This means that time, if not curiously suspended, loses its conventional linear definition. The timelessness of the portrayal suggests that the trials and tribulations facing his central protagonists exist beyond time, and effectively beyond any definitive or identifiable period of time.

These are challenges faced by women *throughout* time, rather than challenges faced by any particular woman *in* time.

I commence this exploration, rather fittingly, with a painting inspired by an Ovidian legend. The haunting figure of Proserpina (Persephone in Greek legend) or Proserpine according to Rossetti's anglicised spelling (*fig. 46*) is a woman caught between the seasons and between life and death. She occupied Rossetti for more than a decade, from 1871 until his death in 1882. Subjected to a catalogue of mishaps, *Proserpine* was repeatedly recreated. According to Rossetti himself, three versions of the "blessed picture" were:

Rejected after being brought very forward. The fourth cost me a quarrel with Parsons. The fifth has twice had its glass smashed and renewed, and has twice been lined to remedy accidents. The sixth has had its frame smashed twice and its glass once, and was nearly rendered useless by an accident which happened while transferring it to a fresh strainer, and now has narrowly escaped total destruction.<sup>34</sup>

Rossetti created eight or more versions of *Proserpine*, with the final painting begun in September 1881 and completed a few days before Rossetti's death.<sup>35</sup> Recounting Pluto's abduction and rape of his niece, a "poor innocent girl" from the "flowery carpet of Tyrian purple" where spring is eternal, the rape of Proserpine is a lurid tale of sexual violence, obsessive possession, and the consequences of sexual transgression.<sup>36</sup> Following Ovid, the fourth-century Latin poet, Claudian, recalls that Proserpine was picking flowers at Venus's bidding in the vale of Henna in Sicily,<sup>37</sup> when she was borne away in a winged

chariot, “her hair streaming before the wind beating her arms in lamentation.”<sup>38</sup> The place of her abduction is described as the “plain, with gentle swell and gradual slopes,” which “rose into a hill,” and from here “issuing from the living rock gushing streams bedewed their grassy banks,” providing an idyll as the archetypal *locus amoenus* as well as serving as metaphors for Proserpine’s youthful body.<sup>39</sup>

Having composed a sonnet, “For Spring by Sandro Botticelli (In the Accademia of Florence)”,<sup>40</sup> there can be no doubt that Rossetti was conversant with *La Primavera* (fig. 65), even though he relied on Charles Fairfax Murray to tell him about the colours used.<sup>41</sup> In the Botticelli version, Proserpine’s alter-ego, Flora, undergoes a metamorphosis before our eyes. Indeed, as Frank Zollner points out, she owes her very existence to metamorphosis.<sup>42</sup> The right of Botticelli’s canvas depicts the transformation, where, according to Ovid’s *Fasti*, Zephyrus, the god of the west wind, notices the beautiful nymph Chloris while she is out walking on a spring day. Touched by the warming breeze, she resists, but is overcome. Losing her virginity, flowers emerge from her mouth, represented in the painting by the naked, flower-breathing, gossamer-clad beauty fleeing from the elevated spirit. Paradoxically, her euphemistic deflowering transforms here into Flora, goddess of all flowers. The blossoming forth of the spring garden is obviously a trope for fertility. Here in this representation of eternal spring, everything is bursting with life, flowers, trees, meadows, even the very grass Flora treads pulsates with vibrancy. Flora, pregnant with flowers covering her flowering gown, and wreathed around her head, neck and waist majestically surveys her kingdom, deftly avoiding the flowers around her

bare feet, while scattering roses before her. Spring's gaze is as enigmatic as her ephemeral body, a scented manifestation of the re-emergence of new life. She is the epitome of "the season of eternal youth, when the earth, rich in germinating seeds, is covered with a rich and perfumed mantle of flowers of all kinds."<sup>43</sup>

Not so, in Rossetti's version of Spring, however, where April really does seem to be "the cruellest month."<sup>44</sup> Despite turning to Botticelli as "a model of serial complexity and historical mobility,"<sup>45</sup> Rossetti has a much more melancholic vision of the transformative power of deflowering, focusing on the aftermath rather than the act itself. Rossetti paints the moment of Proserpine's temporary re-emergence from the Underworld, but rather than depicting her as a revived incarnation of bountiful spring, he shows Proserpine stepping into her "wind-withered New Year," a pale and brooding figure.<sup>46</sup> She appears sculptural, but not as Gian Lorenzo Bernini may have envisioned her, with her abuser's urgent fingers forcing hard into her naked body (*fig. 66*), but as the embodiment of the Classical ideal, her shimmering drapery falling around her like water rippling over petrified flesh. The fluidity of her robe is spectral while the pungent wisps of incense fill our senses with the scent contradictorily associated with purgation, eroticism, contrition, sensuality, sin, and redemption. The light dawning in the background of the painting only serves to heighten the sombre shadows of her endless destiny.

Two of the three traditional attributes of Proserpine, the daffodil and the narcissus, are conspicuous by their absence in Rossetti's painting, and



none appear in *La Primavera*. The third – the pomegranate – appears not to emphasise the fertility of spring, but to highlight the psychological aftermath of the sexual act leading to her demise, with Rossetti highlighting the personal drama of negative transformation.

Considering this thesis's *raison d'être* is flowers, commencing this chapter with a canvas where there are no visible flowers would appear to be somewhat paradoxical, but it is precisely because the flower is absent that it assumes a new significance. The silent voice of the Unseen has something of value to offer, its eloquence of absence revolving around qualities which are "at once timeless and immediate, fleeting yet permanent, there but not there."<sup>47</sup> The fact that the flower is spent, that it has already turned to fruit and that fruit is over-ripe, is clearly at the heart of its synonymous relationship with the central figure. Like Proserpine, the deflowered maiden, the pomegranate flower has already been pollinated and fallen from the tree.

The pomegranate, the fatal fruit of the flower, the "partaking of which in Hades ...has precluded herself from returning to earth,"<sup>48</sup> has its etymology in the "apple having many seeds,"<sup>49</sup> and obviously resonates with the apple in the Garden of Eden. Indeed, Rossetti is thought to have originally conceived the notion of a fallen or latter-day Eve, complete with an apple.<sup>50</sup> As early as 1872, he refers to "that narrow upright picture with the apple (you know the drawing,)"<sup>51</sup> but within a few weeks he has started work on "a picture ... from the tall upright drawing you know of Janey with an apple (a pomegranate I shall probably make it.)"<sup>52</sup> He sourced the more exotic fruit from Treffry Dunn, who acquired pomegranates for him "in the

market at about 6d apiece.”<sup>53</sup> Clearly, it was not sufficient for Rossetti merely to cast Proserpine as the fallen woman with the conventional apple as her trope, traditionally associated with woman’s transgression. Proserpine did not transgress, but rather she was physically violated against her will like so many other Classical female figures before and after her: Antiope, Cassandra, Chrysippus, Europa, Hera, Leda, Phoebe, Hilaeira, Lucretia, Medusa, Philomela and the Sabine Women, to name but a few. Her and their succulently ripe sexuality is all the excuse their divine antagonists need to justify their actions. The exposed pomegranate fruit, round with fertile seeds, reflects Proserpine’s fecundity in a way that would not be otherwise possible.

Although Proserpine dominates the canvas, the pomegranate and her lips share the role as central protagonists. They are effectively connected but disassociated body parts, reflecting what Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock might identify as Rossetti’s fetishistic obsession with sexual difference.<sup>54</sup> Proserpine’s physicality is absolutely central to his proposition. Rossetti’s gaping cut into the pomegranate flesh is one of only two crimson red accents in the painting— Proserpine’s lips being the other. Combine these with her luxuriant hair flowing loosely about her shoulders – “an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness.”<sup>55</sup> The synergy shared by her luscious lips and the exposed pomegranate flesh, their placement, hue and shape, is overtly suggestive, not necessarily because Rossetti is striving to redefine woman as “image, as visibly different,” as Pollock and Cherry claim, but fundamentally because she is a sexually attractive woman first, a deity second.<sup>56</sup> When I observe *Proserpine*, I don’t see an artist expressing an

underlying degree of anxiety about difference, but rather an artist sympathetic with Proserpine's plight, empathetic with all women who have been condemned to a life not of their making purely because they are deemed to be 'ripe for the taking'.

Perhaps this is another reason why Rossetti chose to exclude the flowers – to avoid any suggestion that she was somehow complicit in her fate. Ceres, Proserpine's mother, curses the "guilty flowers" for lulling her daughter into a false sense of security, and no doubt, for being the symbol of sexual initiation, so eagerly and enthusiastically picked.<sup>57</sup> Barkan suggests that this pre-emptive deflowering of the maiden helps to "mediate between innocence and sexual initiation,"<sup>58</sup> but Rossetti has no mind to mediate, clearly demonstrating that the fruit of this encounter is not of Proserpine's making. She bears no guilt for her deflowering, she is silenced and subjugated, violated and condemned to a living death because the patriarch decides to give her in marriage to the lord of Hell, taking the opportunity to fulfil the prophecy when Proserpine was at her most vulnerable, inadvertently picking flowers.<sup>59</sup> This is not just an argument between sex and virginity – it is, instead, much more a statement about the right and justification of a young woman being empowered to explore her own identity. Rossetti surely invites us to consider why it is that she cannot live in the way she chooses, and how we, the observer, can feel comfortable confining her within the frame of a patriarchal culture which allows and encourages injustice to prevail: a culture that defines Woman purely in terms of her sexual attractiveness.

Rossetti was already too familiar with the polysemous resonance of the fruit, having introduced not one, but three, into his 1852 watercolour, *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* (fig. 67).<sup>60</sup> This was reputedly inspired following the 1839 Podestà chapel discovery of the Bargello fresco celebrating the glory of Florence. The remnants of this fresco possibly painted by Giotto or his school include the figure of a youthful Dante holding an outline of what might be a pomegranate branch (fig. 68).<sup>61</sup> Certainly, Seymour Kirkup, a Rossetti family friend, included the fruit in the copy he shared with the exiled family (fig. 69). Rossetti's curious watercolour imaginatively "recreates" the scene of the fresco's creation, combining two literary allusions he knew well.<sup>62</sup> First, occupying the majority of the page, a passage from the *Purgatorio* (XI, 94-99) and second, in the lower right triangle, a passage from *Vita Nuova*. Dante, sitting on an elevated platform, gazes down at the beautiful Beatrice below, as she modestly walks past in procession with her eyes downcast, holding a flame in her left hand and, perhaps a psalter or hymnbook in her right. Here, we have two distinct worlds – the patriarchal sphere of the revered artist gazing longingly towards the object of his affection and the subsumed but worthy figure of the redheaded virgin, whose attention he desires. He pays little regard to the fruit in his hand as he absentmindedly slices into the delicate skin to reveal the crimson fruit below, conjuring images of his descent into hell (*The Inferno*). These predicaments are encapsulated within Proserpine's depiction and, by implication, within the pomegranate transferred from Dante's hand to her own. These similarities are particularly revealing when we consider the resonance of the fruit's metaphorical qualities.

According to Mirella Levi D'Ancona in her extensive anthology of *The Garden of the Renaissance. Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting*, the pomegranate has multivalent metaphorical qualities. It was frequently employed to celebrate the notion of Christian Resurrection as in Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (fig. 70). When pagan beliefs were syncretised into the Christian religion it became associated with the chastity of the Virgin Mary, the blood of Christ in his Passion, Mary Magdalene, the Elect in Heaven, the Martyrs, and the Apostles. Then again, due to its association with Proserpine, its pagan symbolism attributed to the hope in immortality.<sup>63</sup> As a result, long before the pomegranate had Christian attributes, it and its seeds became symbolic of fertility, fecundity and lust. We have no way of proving which of these allusions Rossetti had in mind when painting, for he makes no reference to the pomegranate in his correspondence, although he does show Dante with the pomegranate in his painting *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*. Dante appears to be reflecting on the immortality of his love for Beatrice while illustrating the vigour of his desire by cutting into the fruit, gazing down on the virginal figure of Beatrice. In turn, Rossetti presents Proserpine, the defiled maiden, holding the cut pomegranate aloft, as a synonym for her ravaged body.

Where two additional pomegranates lie on the white cloth on Dante's platform, linking straight back to Christian iconography – the three pomegranates together reminding us of the Trinity and Christ's gift of his blood and body encapsulated within the juice and the purity of the textile – Proserpine has but one pomegranate. Dante is surrounded by his male friends and can look down on the beautiful women passing by. Proserpine is

totally alone. The lone piece of fruit emphasises her alienation, separated not just from the world she once knew, but even more significantly alienated from the person she once knew – her very being sliced in two. The mirroring we can see between Dante’s pomegranate and Proserpine’s beleaguered fruit, may also be extended to another familial fleshly outpouring by Rossetti’s younger sister, Christina. Her curious sing-song verse, part fairy tale, part erotic parable, *Goblin Market*, devoid of “ulterior meaning,”<sup>64</sup> was written while she was a volunteer at the St Mary Magdalene Home for Fallen Women in Highgate.<sup>65</sup>

In this, Christina details how virginal Laura falls victim to the goblins’ luscious globes of orchard fruit, including the “pomegranates full and fine.”<sup>66</sup> Laura, the Fallen Woman, is alienated from her previous existence when she partakes of the goblins’ juicy cornucopia of fruity produce. Dante Gabriel knew this work well, contributing two illustrations to its first edition. Interestingly, the renowned Arthur Rackham’s 1933 illustration of Laura cutting her golden curls to exchange for the goblins’ fruit (*fig. 71*) has no obvious pomegranates in view, whereas Dante Gabriel’s illustration of the same encounter (*fig. 72*) purposefully positions a pomegranate with a slice removed at the level of Laura’s lips, similar to that seen in *Proserpine*. She is forsaking an intimate part of her body to enjoy the goblins’ enticing juice:

She clipped a precious golden lock,  
She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,  
Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red:  
Sweeter than honey from the rock,  
Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,

Clearer than water flowed that juice;  
She never tasted such before,  
How should it cloy with length of use?  
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more  
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;  
She sucked until her lips were sore;  
Then flung the emptied rinds away  
But gathered up one kernel-stone,  
And knew not was it night or day  
As she turned home alone.<sup>67</sup>

Just as the transformed Laura turns for home, alone, so too, does Rossetti's Proserpine languish forever in the empire of despair.<sup>68</sup> They are both innocents, at least if we allow Laura mitigating circumstances (for it was her impulsiveness in the face of continuous persuasion that sealed her fate). Meanwhile, Proserpine's body was used against her will and, while imprisoned in the underworld, she dared to eat a few pomegranate seeds, which unknown to her, by some fantastical code of conduct laid down by her father, condemned her to a half-life. In *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante*, Beatrice passes unscathed, her purity intact, although the pomegranate in Dante's hand appears ravaged in her stead. The pomegranate in *Goblin Market* symbolises Laura's downfall at the hands of the ravenous goblins. The pomegranate in the painting of the underworld goddess, Proserpine, embodies her rape and the consequences of that violation. In all three instances, Rossetti deftly manipulates the pomegranate to be a substitute for the female body. In this way, Rossetti does so much more than create "an ... effective fusion of ageless beauty and sensuous immediacy."<sup>69</sup> In creating an intricate study of the natural world as an

intimate extension of Woman, he also, perhaps inevitably, conjures the potential for sexual desire and, with it, the consequences of intimate possession at any cost.

But what, if anything, does the ivy add to this symbiotic natural relationship? The seemingly innocuous sprig of ivy is loaded with a variety of allusions. In antiquity, the evergreen woody plant was sacred to Dionysus, supposedly because “like wine, the older it gets, the stronger it becomes.”<sup>70</sup> Over time, it became a symbol of death because as it grows it can strangle the plants it comes across along the way. By inference, it also represents attachment, fidelity and undying affection. A perennial plant, it is also associated with eternal life. However, its significance for Rossetti lies in the way it mimics the movement of Proserpine’s clothing, with the ability over time to turn her gossamer gown into an eternal shroud. Commencing in the top right corner, it curves around towards her, its tendrils reaching out, almost touching her. In time, they will twist and turn around her body, literally squeezing any last remaining life from her veins, but for now it branches in two, highlighting Proserpine’s tragic dichotomy.

This is not the first time Rossetti has used ivy for this effect. It originally makes an appearance in *The Loving Cup* (fig. 73), followed by *La Pia de’ Tolomei* (fig. 74). It would appear significant that whenever the ivy appears there are no flowers, natural or man-made, to accompany it. *The Loving Cup*, commissioned by Leyland in 1867, focuses on model Alexa Wilding wearing a voluminous red velvet dress with a green veil or scarf draped around the head and shoulders. She holds the eponymous object.



The implication is that as her right hand is occupied, she is less likely to use her 'dagger hand' when offering the cup to an intended recipient. Phelps Smith suggests that the ivy here means "fidelity" - a fitting attribute for the knight's constant sweetheart, and that the heart-shaped leaves of the ivy echo the heart shapes on the golden cup.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, it is surely possible that, as in *Proserpine* later, Rossetti is using the ivy to create a sense of constriction. The tendrils of ivy growing from behind her head mimic the tightness of the braided scarf, the elasticated cuffs of the chemise, and the girdle wound tightly around her waist. The dark green taut fabric about her neck, emphasising the many necklaces encircling her upper body, seem to extend into the ivy, the plant becoming part of her body by association, reflecting her psychological intent. Not so in an earlier painting of the same name, created by Daniel Maclise, an artist whom Rossetti much admired.<sup>72</sup> In *The Loving Cup* (fig. 75) a couple entwine their arms. He has offered her the loving cup, and she holds it close to her lips, without drinking. The faithful dog sits at her gallant suitor's feet, while the loyal steed waits patiently outside. The table nearby promises an intimate feast of ripe peaches and exquisite jelly, while the sheep's head acts as a traditional *memento mori*. The whole scene reminds us of Andrew Marvell's metaphysical poem, "To His Coy Mistress" (published 1681) where "Had we but world enough and time/This coyness, Lady, were no crime .../But at my back I always hear/Time's winged chariot hurrying near;" and the ivy acts as a narrative prop meandering around one of the four impenetrable stone columns as time passes so slowly. In contrast, Rossetti's *The Loving Cup* possessor is alone, about to offer her cup to a potential lover beyond the canvas. The lid cups her left breast and covers her heart in real or feigned

sincerity. The ivy, as a natural manifestation of her intent, may not be as innocuous as it first appears.

In the only other painting where ivy appears, *La Pia de' Tolomei* (fig. 74), Rossetti commemorates the wandering spirit of the *Purgatorio's* La Pia. Tormented by the ill treatment of her husband, who imprisoned her in the malaria-ridden marshes of the Maremma, her sculptural form is slowly consumed by the natural world. Meanwhile her most precious possession, her wedding ring, amplified by the gold braiding and bracelet around her wrists, binds her in this eternal state of limbo. Like Proserpine, La Pia's agency has been removed from her. She is no more than a pawn in her partner's game. As Rossetti allows the vigorously healthy ivy to encroach towards La Pia's body, not only does Nature begin to reclaim her motionless body, but La Pia's condition and state of mind are also highlighted. Just as the interminable waiting has rendered her immobile, the unfathomable betrayal has rendered her numb. Her stillness of mind allows and encourages ivy to grow in the cracks left behind. She will eventually be obliterated just as her husband has already erased her from his life. Here, as in *Proserpine*, the evergreen ivy is the one enduring link between two worlds, the seen and the unseen; the light and the dark; what is out in the open and what is, and nominally needs to be, covert and unspoken. It conveys the central figures' dilemmas and provides unique psychological insight into what it means to be the Silenced One.

Not so in Frederic Leighton's *The Return of Persephone* (fig. 76) now in the Leeds Art Gallery. Leighton, as we will see with Millais, uses the

manifestation of Nature predominantly as a theatrical scene-setter. In Leighton's case, he skilfully reimagines the legend of the fallen woman in a poignant depiction of a corpse-like daughter being returned to her grieving mother, Demeter. She stands, arms outstretched at the mouth of the cave as Proserpine's Greek namesake emerges from the underworld, held aloft by Hermes, messenger of the Gods. Leighton deftly manipulates our preconceptions of religious art by turning convention on its head. Where we might expect the crucified Christ to descend from the cross into the arms of his weeping mother, the mother here stands with her arms in cruciform as her resurrected daughter rises to embrace her. Persephone's apotheosis is heralded by Nature as the heliophobic plants just surviving below the mouth of the cave give way to tentative clusters of wildflowers and a sprig of cherry blossom strategically placed at Demeter's feet. The tripartite emergence of Nature acts as little more than a signpost to spring. It tells us little of the psychology either of this painting's central protagonist, or about the reasons for her descent into the underworld. We learn nothing about the complexity of identity that Rossetti engenders in *Proserpine* with his employment of the pomegranate and ivy.

John Everett Millais in *Spring* (fig. 77) uses Nature both as a backdrop and to amplify the tension between carefree innocence and its natural transition into womanhood. A group of young women, Proserpine-like, celebrate the end of winter while picnicking in an orchard of apple trees laden with spring blossoms. Their time of innocent pleasures is almost over. Dividing the painting almost in two horizontally, Millais has the young women juxtaposed with the apple blossom. Its petals will inevitably give way

to the fruit of their labours and, in time, the fruit, like the pomegranate, will fall from the tree. Where the flower was absent in *Proserpine*, but was all the more powerful *in absentia*, so here the fruit is not to be seen, but its implications are all the more persuasive. Whereas most of the girls are oblivious to the import of their impending transition, wearing celebratory blossom in their hair, there is one girl who is already identifiably precocious. She lies in the lower right corner, the scythe deliberately placed above her golden-draped young body. Not simply a sign of “the inevitability of death” as the Lady Lever Art Gallery claims, it also foreshadows the expiration of her virtue.<sup>73</sup> Supine with one leg raised, she languidly runs a piece of grass between her lips while gazing knowingly beyond the canvas. She is on the threshold of womanhood and she knows it. What is unknown is the consequence of her sexual awakening. We cannot know how, or even when, the fruit will fall, but we are left in no doubt that it most decidedly will.

Although Millais’s message is apparently centred on “the transience of youth and beauty ... expressed in the fragile bloom of adolescence, the wildflowers and the changing seasons,”<sup>74</sup> this painting has a foreboding often overlooked. While it is certainly true that “since antiquity, the image of the flower has been associated with the notion that both life and beauty are short-lived,”<sup>75</sup> flowers are also themselves harbingers of sexual consummation as we have already witnessed, with “sexuality lying at the core of the flower’s existence.”<sup>76</sup> Millais’s apple blossom and the girls are, therefore, intimately related, but not synonymous. They reflect one another most certainly, but they are not united. Rossetti is nowhere near as coy about Proserpine’s past sexual exploitation as Millais is about the girls’

impending sexual awakening. Like Millais or Leighton he has painted his picture to be aesthetically pleasing and to evoke an emotional response from the viewer. Beyond this, Rossetti has harnessed nature to demonstrate the ‘unnaturalness’ of his subject. All natural laws have been transgressed. Proserpine, the abused victim of her uncle’s uncontrollable libido, holds her violated body aloft to demand that we scrutinise it in intimate detail. This is the “fleshly” Rossetti at his best: not exploiting female flesh as commodity, but rather exposing its victimhood.

This uneasy sense of victimhood was also central to Rossetti’s first ever oil painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 10), albeit necessarily obscured, given the religious theme. Rossetti’s unorthodox, numinous beliefs and his rebellious attitude to theological humility only become evident when we consider the relationship between the young Madonna and her flowers.<sup>77</sup>

The adolescent, grey-gowned Mary sits with her mother, St Anne, embroidering a lily, while a young angel, arm outstretched, pours a golden vial of holy water into the vessel holding the flower. St Joachim, Mary’s father, prunes and secures the vine in the garden outside. Allusions to the purity of the Virgin are quite obviously embodied within not one, but the two separate lilies, the one growing upright, the other being diligently stitched into the embroidery to be held in place by the warp and weft threads of the red fabric. It is assumed that the lilies’ meaning is obvious, for “every worshipper would know the meaning of the lilies. Their whiteness meant

that Mary knew no sin, that her vocation spared her the yoke of human bondage, she was as white and pure as they, as sweet, as golden-hearted.”<sup>78</sup>

However, we do well to examine it “inch by inch,” giving “it much time,” as Ruskin would have it, for Rossetti is manipulating meaning to create many more layers of allusion, only revealed on more intricate examination.<sup>79</sup> Mary is copying the lily watered by the angel before her, having started with the three flower heads and now embroidering its interminable stem, which points directly towards her. The other lily is secured rather strangely in the decorative two-handled red jug. We have to assume that this lily is not a cut flower because it would be unable to stand so straight. It must, therefore, be planted, despite the lily bulb being comparatively large in relation to the slender vessel. It is not as nature intended. The lily flower will spring from the womb-shaped bulb, just as the Christ Child will emerge from Mary’s womb, both created from unnatural conditions: the lily flower from the dark, confined space of the pitcher and Christ from the Virgin Birth. Despite the incongruity of the lily growing so perfectly straight, it too, is “painted with minute, botanical fidelity: leaves, petals, stamens all clearly visible.”<sup>80</sup> In doing so, it revels in and flaunts its sexuality.

The rose, meanwhile, again perfectly observed down to the leaves submerged below the water, is balanced somewhat precariously on the terrace wall, its fragile stem and single delicate pink flower dwarfed by the lily in the foreground. It is only recently out of bud, thornless, and not yet flowering to its full potential, not unlike the young virginal woman herself.

Again, it is assumed that the meaning of the rose is sacrosanct, since it is one of the common attributes of the Virgin Mary, but if we look closely at its treatment, we see that all is not as it seems.

The rose feebly reaches up to the light, deformed and unremarkable next to the strong branches of the vine growing abundantly above it. The rose head coincides with the young leaves of the vine, and also ends at the same level as the cruciform horizontal, where co-incidentally, the third flower of the lily in the pot ends: the rose, the lily, the vine, and the crucifix are all related, theologically and practically. When the rose and lily are painted beside the Virgin, it is reasonable to assume that we are being offered the timeless flowers of love and beauty. Rossetti, however, creates the possibility of a counter-narrative – one which is suggesting that Mary is confined within a pre-determined destiny. This, the first publicly exhibited picture and the first to reveal itself as a Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood construct, shows Mary to be stifled, confined within the oppressive atmosphere of the painting.<sup>81</sup> The novice is pushed into the corner of the canvas, hemmed in by objects and people: the palms and her embroidery table before her; the angel guarding the lily, her virtue and her means of escape; the hefty volumes; her mother's ample body; her inability to see out of the window; and her father's turned back outside erecting a further barrier, obscuring her already restricted view.

Meanwhile, the iconic lily stands on the heavy, closed statutes of the three Christian virtues mentioned in Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians: *Spes, fides* and *caritas* (hope, faith, and love)<sup>82</sup> and three of the four cardinal

virtues, *fortitudo*, *temperantia*, and *prudentia* (courage, temperance, prudence). Significantly, in Rossetti's interpretation, the fourth cardinal virtue, *iustitia* (justice), is absent, surprising given that Rossetti is known for "enlightenment, justice, and mercy" disliking "obtuseness, oppression, injustice and ruthlessness."<sup>83</sup> If Rossetti were really extolling the virtues of this scene, then surely justice would be included, even if that meant omitting one of the lesser virtues? Even though it is widely accepted that his moral sense was somewhat "elastic," he was nevertheless widely regarded as "just."<sup>84</sup> The absence of justice could be seen, therefore, as deliberately placing emphasis upon the binary opposition between the divine prophecy and this all too human tragedy.

A close analysis of *Faust: Gretchen and Mephistopheles* (fig. 78) highlights several uncanny similarities to *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. The German legend tells of how Faust, who has made a pact with Satan, fathers an illegitimate child with Gretchen, a simple, innocent, virginal maid. A pious Christian, she drowns their child and sacrifices herself to free Faust from Mephistopheles' power. The biblical story tells of how God fathers a child with a young virgin via his angelic messenger, outside of mortal marriage. The child dies to deliver humankind from sin; Mary sacrifices her freedom to God's purpose and the ultimate promise of eternal salvation – something which demands her uncompromising mortal and physical incarceration in the pre-ordained narrative. Both Gretchen and Mary have the promise of their reward in the next life for accepting self-negation in this. The thematic confluence is clear.



Not at all attracted to the idea of renouncing the world, the flesh or the devil, he has no qualms, adapting his original composition of the satanic in Faust for the reimagining of the purity in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. Both are divided into vertical thirds. Mary occupies a similar space to Gretchen; St Anne to Mephistopheles; St Joachim to Faust; the angel to the two child figures (originally two angels); the books are replaced by the gravestone; the palm leaves by the sword. Both versions are divided in half horizontally by a wall; St Anne turns to Mary, as Mephistopheles turns to Gretchen; St Joachim looks away, as Faust turns his back.

Rossetti may well have inspired Charles Allston Collins to reflect on these contentious issues when *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* was exhibited in the Free Exhibition, Hyde Park Corner (1849). In Collins's *Convent Thoughts* (fig. 79) the tension between active engagement in the human experience and the secluded life of contemplation and devotion is interpreted through another grey-gowned female figure. Although the painting is commonly interpreted as a pious interpretation of the *hortus conclusus* convention with the novice's attention straying "from the missal in her hand to the sacred natural beauty that surrounds her," it is simultaneously a representation of a woman separated from expressing herself as nature intended.<sup>85</sup> The passionflower may evoke the passion of Christ, but the cut passionflower, held tightly in the hand, against the backdrop of the hidden female body and an impenetrable wall surrounding her prompts us to ponder the nature of a religion that demands such extreme confinement. Despite the strong theological content of both *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* and *Convent Thoughts*, both women are naturally stunted, emphasised by the unnatural

quality of flowers in the former and the novice's contrast with the abundant growth of flowers around her in the latter.

Seen in this context, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* is less an outpouring of religious devotion and more a systematic subversion of dogma by an artist who, by his sisters' example, understood only too well the cost of self-sacrifice and the cost of relinquishing one's self-determination. The tight-lipped pink rose and the unyielding lily are synonymous with the repressed and unnatural virginal figure of the young Mary as she prepares for the inevitable consequences of a pre-determined prophecy beyond her control. As the Chosen One she has no agency whatsoever. This may be a theological triumph, but it is simultaneously a human tragedy. Mary, an innocent, is singled out to be the vessel required to fulfil the divine prophecy. She has no choice. She is not invited to be the bearer of the Christ Child; she is instructed. She is not asked if she can carry the child to term, endure a potentially fatal labour in the most abject of surroundings, and then endure with him for thirty-seven years. She is not considered when the plan is drawn up to watch helplessly as nails are hammered into his flesh, or to witness all of the sins of the world being deposited onto his frail human body as he writhes in abject misery on the cross. No one seemed to think that it was necessary to ask if she acquiesced to this arrangement. No one deemed it pertinent to point out the pitfalls of this "honour." No one took her needs as a woman and as a human being into consideration. Her fate is unbending, as rigid as the tall, unnaturally straight lily, as broken as the delicate rose's stem.

But why does all this matter? Why does this new insight into the subtlety of William Michael's critique make any difference? What are the implications of this revelation? Alastair Grieve, in his definitive study of the Pre-Raphaelite modern-life subject, gives numerous examples of how the Pre-Raphaelites sought to bring what they saw as the vices of contemporary life to the attention of a wider public.<sup>86</sup> Although Grieve dedicates a chapter to Rossetti's contribution to social debate, it focuses entirely on how Rossetti, over thirty years, tried and failed to paint *Found*. This single unfinished work, showing a girl dropping to her knees in despair as a drover holds her hands "half in bewilderment and half guarding her from doing herself a hurt," is taken to be Rossetti's one and only attempt at contributing to material realism; his one and only failed attempt to confront contemporary ills and address pressing social questions.<sup>87</sup> The rest of the time he was apparently painting escapist medieval or mythological figures, predominantly as beautiful women with floral adjuncts.

Critically, as our understanding of this phrase has been affected by an inherent misunderstanding of the capacity of adjuncts to be united as one with their female counterparts, we tend to see flowers as peripheral: decorative accessories at worst and harbingers of the symbolic at best. Flowers are not merely harmonious arrangements of colours, not merely poetic transformers, and not merely symbolic signposts, and they can certainly grow without the stake of the Victorian language of flowers holding them in place. They are not incidental, not inessential and not innocuous. They are, instead, pivotal to Rossetti's aesthetic. They are precisely and

deliberately placed to provoke a response, and the inference that Rossetti is not engaging in any meaningful way with real life is misleading.

According to Grieve, *Found* is quite different from Rossetti's other pictures in so far as the female figure is degraded. "She has sunk on her knees in her shame before the man," and it is "perhaps partly because it shows a degraded woman that Rossetti found it difficult to finish the picture."<sup>88</sup> Yet, this picture has important similarities with *Proserpine* and *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* in that Rossetti uses the rose, the most frequent flower of all species appearing in his work, to demonstrate an intrinsic synergy. As with the other paintings, contextual cross-referencing can be helpful in clarifying the illusionary properties of the flowers Rossetti chooses. An early pen and ink study for *Found* (*fig. 80*) shows a rose lying discarded in the gutter soon to be washed into the sewer. In Rossetti's oil, the worthless rose has disappeared from the street, multiplied in the motif on the distraught woman's white dress. The rosebud-clad, red-haired woman is the antithesis of Botticelli's *La Primavera*. This modern-day incarnation of spring may be wearing flowers, but she is time-worn, sick and dishevelled. Her flowery attire, silk cape, and feathered hat are very different to the appearance of the miserable creature in Rossetti's drawing, but the wall they encounter – a barrier to social and sexual mobility – is inevitably impenetrable. Meanwhile, her 'saviour' has transformed from the nondescript, slipper-wearing William Michael in the drawing to a more rustic incarnation, with his smock, leather leggings and heavy boots.<sup>89</sup> Although seemingly 'rescuing' her from her predicament, there is something almost menacing about him. He certainly does not have the demeanour of a

paternal Mr. Peggotty rescuing Little Em'ly, taking his gullible ward back to the bosom of his family for protection.<sup>90</sup> The small bollard from the original drawing, now doubled in size, taking on the patina of a disused cannon, along with a decidedly phallic appearance, would attest to that.

Intent from the beginning on finding a brick wall to represent the city, he impressed on his mother and Christina that they should be searching for something “not too countrified (yet beautiful in colour ... A certain modicum of moss would therefore be admissible, but no prodigality of grass, weeds, ivy &c.”<sup>91</sup> There is no place for Nature in the cityscape, it seems. He was adamant that “the town subject” or his “modern thing” should be painted in London.<sup>92</sup> Eventually finding a spot “within earshot almost of Hogarth’s grave” in St Nicholas churchyard in Chiswick, he believes being close to the “great painter of mankind” (Hogarth’s epitaph) to be “a good omen for one’s modern picture.”<sup>93</sup>

Notably, however, Rossetti does not choose to paint the Strand Bridge, now known as Waterloo Bridge, associated from the 1840s “with tragic stories of women – specifically women – ending their lives.”<sup>94</sup> Rossetti also does not paint *Found* “in the language of the Old Masters, as Watts, with his brown palette characterising the Romantic obsession with the golden-brown tones of Rembrandt.”<sup>95</sup> Instead, he paints it in vibrant colour, turning to Ford Madox Brown for help laying white ground on the canvas,<sup>96</sup> to place a glaring spotlight on female misery and despair. He avoids the clichéd reputation of London’s suicide black spot, adopted by his artist friend, George Frederic Watts in *Found Drowned* (fig. 81). Instead, he evokes a

“Bridge of Sighs” of his own, adding more metaphorical layers.<sup>97</sup> The promise of redemption is limited. The tethered calf, destined for the slaughterhouse, the farmer’s resolute stony countenance, the woman’s pallid, grey, painted complexion, and the pitiful Flora, erstwhile queen of the spring, would all seem to suggest that there is little hope of change any time soon.

Griselda Pollock, in reflecting on the binary opposition of woman’s presumed morality, states:

Historians of sexuality have drawn attention to the construction of ‘Woman’ both in terms of gender contrast and around the polarity of virgin/whore Madonna/Magdalen. In the Victorian period the distinction between Madonna and Magdalen, which had previously been seen as residing in all women was reworked as a distinction between women. This is not to say that women were simply divided into two separate categories, but that woman was defined across the opposition of the pure, womanly woman and the impure whore.

Proserpine, the impure whore, and Mary Virgin, the pure woman, exemplify the two extremes of this paradigm. Mary, as a young Victorian woman, would pass, either before or soon after the age of majority, from the protection of her father to that of her husband.<sup>98</sup> Sexual ignorance and passivity were considered essential components of respectable femininity and heterosexual love, even within marriage.<sup>99</sup> As a married woman, according to Barbara Leigh Smith’s *Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws of England concerning Women* (1854), her existence would have been absorbed into that of her husband. Until the Married Women’s Property Act (1870), her personal property would have

become her husband's and he could assign or dispose of it at his pleasure.<sup>100</sup> If her property was stolen, it legally belonged to him and it had to be laid as his in the indictment. Neither the Courts of Common Law nor of Equity could oblige her husband to support her. If she earned any money, it belonged to her husband. Her receipt for the earnings was not legal, and he could claim the money at any time. He could give her permission to write a will, but he could revoke that consent at any time before probate. She would have no rights over any children they shared, and he could take them from her at any time and dispose of them as he thought fit. In the event of separation, he would always have right of custody. Neither her word nor her deed would be binding in law. Alarming, women possessed fewer rights than animals. Commit cruelty to a beast and the resulting punitive damages by law would be greater than if you had beaten your wife.<sup>101</sup>

*Proserpine* is not only “a glimpse into the underworld of Rossetti’s imagination,” as J. B. Bullen claims, but she is also a means by which Rossetti can hold a mirror to confront ‘convention’ and ‘normality’.<sup>102</sup> *Proserpine*, as a deflowered, unmarried Victorian woman, would have been beyond wretched. Her violation condemns her to the harlot archetype, “whose unnatural lusts lead to the destruction of families and the spreading of disease.”<sup>103</sup> It was held that:

Sexual indulgence, however guilty in its circumstances, however tragic in its results, is, when accompanied by love, a sin *according to nature*: fornication is a sin against nature; its peculiarity and heinousness consist in its divorcing from all feeling of love that which was meant by nature as the last and intensest expression of passionate love; ...in its

making that only one of our appetites, which is redeemed from mere *animality* by the hallowing influence of the better and tenderer feelings with which nature has connected it, *as animal as all the rest*.<sup>104</sup>

Rossetti, in *Proserpine* and *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, re-examines the nature of sexual indulgence, “the darkest, the knottiest, and the saddest” of subjects. Both Proserpine and Mary are chosen by deities to carry their seed. The Christian Mary is revered, adored and worshipped; the pagan Proserpine and all she stands for is condemned, ostracised, and cast out, sadly even by those who follow the Christian doctrine. By hijacking “nature” he reveals painful and perplexing hypocrisies, examining what is natural and what, by nature, is “harsh, savage, unjust, unchristian public opinion,” which has “resolved to regard a whole life of indulgence on the part of one sex as venial and natural, and a single false step on the part of the other as irretrievable and unpardonable.”<sup>105</sup> His depiction of the woman condemned to a distorted, unnatural human existence, although totally blameless, is as provoking in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* as it is in *Proserpine*, as tender in *Proserpine* as it is in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. In presenting us with these patriarchal constructs of female identity, he is surely inviting us to think about the nature of our responses in a world where this is all perfectly natural. The fact that he returned to flowers over and over again, as synonyms for the women he championed, suggests that either he had found the perfect vehicle of expression for this highly complex and divisive topic, or that at some level he, too, continued to struggle with the ambiguity of his response.



Flowers, in conjunction with the women they accompany have the potential to transform into sub-conscious or even unconscious gateways to self-examination and metamorphosis. Just as the treatment of the rose and the lily manipulates our perception of Mary (is she a young, chaste, unmarried woman or God's Chosen One?) or the pomegranate and ivy play with our preconceptions of Proserpine (is she the object of desire, the victim of a patriarchal hierarchy, or is she the iconic incarnation of female strength, surviving against the odds?) the viewer is able to access a space for self-examination. Invited to enter a realm where time loses its linear definition and our hypocrisies become almost tangible, if necessarily and tantalisingly veiled, we, too, are able to morph, to change, and to imagine a better way of doing things.

A critical pillar of feminist theory, the notion of the 'male gaze', is brought centre stage. The object of desire, created by and for privileged voyeurs, subjected to patriarchal scrutiny, is a potent, if disconcerting notion. The idea that Rossetti could have created these images of woman to gaze upon lasciviously and, in exchange for 'tin', pass them over for the amusement, titillation and gratification of his male patrons is only mitigated by the fact that one of our principal paintings, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, was sold to a woman, the Marchioness of Bath. But how far are the women in Rossetti's paintings incarnations of male sexual fantasy, and to what extent are they psychologically charged, vital human beings, expressing the extent of the injustice meted out to them? For contrary to general assumption, Rossetti exhibits a finely tuned social conscience not just in *Found*, but throughout his career. While others are more overt with their

intentions and the vehemence of their call to action, Rossetti is more measured, we could argue, more refined, more esoteric, but none the less outraged.<sup>106</sup>

By harnessing the metamorphic power of Nature herself, Rossetti paints women and flowers with something eternally profound to say. It is in their apparent silence that they speak volumes, but, as his sister Christina postulates, “flowers will only preach to us if we will hear.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), Prologue, 5, lines 1-4.

<sup>2</sup> W. M. Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Family Letters with a Memoir*, 2 vols., (London: Ellis & Elvey, 1895), vol. 1, 203.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Phelps Smith, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Lady Lilith and the Language of Flowers,” *Arts Magazine*, February 1979, vol. 53: 142-145, 142.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 2012, 119.

<sup>6</sup> #MeToo began to spread virally around the end of 2017 as a hashtag on social media aimed at demonstrating the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault. It sprang from allegations made against former American film producer, Harvey Weinstein.

<sup>7</sup> Lucien L. Agosta, “Animate Images: The Later Poem-Paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti,” *Literature and Language* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 78-101, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 28 May 1873. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 10 vols., ed. W. E. Fredeman and others (Cambridge: D S Brewer), 2002-2015, vol. 6, 157 (letter 73.146).

<sup>9</sup> W. B. Scott, *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott: and Notices of his Artistic and Poetic Circle of Friends 1830-1882*, ed. W. Minto, 2 vols. (London: Osgood, McIlvane, 1892), 315-16.

<sup>10</sup> J. B. Bullen, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Mirror of Masculine Desire,” *Nineteenth-century Contexts* 21, no. 3 (2008): 329-352, 329. See J Hillis Miller, “The Mirror’s Secret: Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Double Work of Art,” *Victorian Poetry*, 29, no. 4 (1991): 333-349 and Griselda Pollock, “Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings,” in *Vision and Difference* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 120-154.

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- <sup>11</sup> See G Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London: Methuen) 1961, 77 and P. Bate, *The English Pre-Raphaelite Painters. Their Associates and Successors*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., (London: Bell and Sons, 1910), 43.
- <sup>12</sup> Thomas Henry Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 282.
- <sup>13</sup> William M. Rossetti, *Family Letters with a Memoir*, preface.
- <sup>14</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language*, 6<sup>th</sup>. edn., 2 vols. (London: Rivington, Davis, Payne et al., 1785), vol. 1, 104.
- <sup>15</sup> Edward Burne-Jones to Eleanor Leighton, Lady Leighton Warren. In G. Burne-Jones, *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones* (London: Macmillan & Co. 1906), 119. Lady Leighton Warren shared her knowledge of the names and legends belonging to flowers.
- <sup>16</sup> Dr. Johnson quoted in Oswald Doughty, *A Victorian Romantic. Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London & New York: Frederick Muller & Wale University Press, 1949), 5.
- <sup>17</sup> Adam, Abbot of Perseigne in *Mariale*, quoted in Mirella Levi D'Ancona, *The Garden of the Renaissance. Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting*, (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1977), 176-177.
- <sup>18</sup> Dominic Janes, "The Catholic Florist: Flowers and Deviance in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Church of England," *Visual Culture in Britain* 12, no. 3 (2011), accessed 1 April 2018)  
<https://doi-org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/10.1080/14714787.2011.541138>.
- <sup>19</sup> Janes, "The Catholic Florist," 1.
- <sup>20</sup> "Perilous Crisis – Jesuits in the Church of England; and Conversions to Popery," *Liverpool Herald*, 25 November 1857.
- <sup>21</sup> The Church Services at St Paul's, Knightsbridge, *The Times*, Wednesday, 19 April 1854, 9.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> A. C. Benson, *English Men of Letters. Rossetti* (London: Macmillan & Co.), 1904, 5. See Valeria Tinkler-Villani "In the Footsteps of his Father? Dantean Allegory in Gabriele Rossetti and Dante Gabriel Rossetti," in *Outsiders Looking In: The Rossettis Then and Now*, ed. David Clifford and Laurence Roussillon (London: Anthem, 2004), 131-144.
- <sup>24</sup> Alastair Grieve, "The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Anglican High Church," *The Burlington Magazine* 111, no. 794 (May 1969): 292-295, 294.
- <sup>25</sup> Lona M. Packer, *Christina Rossetti* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1963), 6 and F. Bennett, *The Story of W. J. E. Bennett* (London, 1909), 190.
- <sup>26</sup> Dinah Roe, *The Rossettis in Wonderland: A Victorian Family History* (London: Haus, 2011), 62.
- <sup>27</sup> Alicia Craig Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1989), 203.
- <sup>28</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 23 February 1874. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 404-5 (letter 74.36).
- <sup>29</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Bell Scott, 31 August 1873. In Fredeman *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 257 (letter 73.265).

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<sup>30</sup> The Rt. Hon. Stephen Lushington's decision in this case proved to be a precedent for legal disputes concerning church ritual and this controversy continued until the end of the century. Lushington went on to decide significant interlocutory points in two further cases of clergy charged with illegal ritual: *Flamank v Simpson* (1866) and *Martin v Machonochie* (1867). See James Murray Dale, *Legal Ritual: The Judgements Delivered by the Privy Council and Dean of Arches, Sir Robert Phillimore, in the Recent Cases of Martin v. Mackonochie and Elphinstone v. Purchas, and Hebbert v. Purchas* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1871), 180, and S. M. Waddams, *Law, Politics, and the Church of England: The Career of Stephen Lushington* (London; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> A Parish Priest, *Dr Lushington's Judgement in the Case of Westerton v Liddell, upon "Ornaments of the Church," 2<sup>nd</sup> edn.* (London: Joseph Masters, 1856). See the frontispiece of one of the key handbooks of Anglo-Catholic ritual, the *Directorium Anglicanum* (1858) for visual reference.

<sup>32</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (London: Penguin, 2004), Introduction, xxix.

<sup>33</sup> Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1986), 91.

<sup>34</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown 6 January 1874. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 376 (letter 74.4).

<sup>35</sup> Measuring 78.7 x 37.5 cm this painting for L. R. Valpy, is a smaller replica of the F. R. Leyland version (number six) at 125 x 61 cm, finally delivered to him in 1874, and presented to the Tate in 1940. Apart from the size, the principal differences are that Valpy's version uses a lighter palette, Proserpine has red-gold hair rather than dark brown and the English version of the sonnet has been substituted for Italian.

<sup>36</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 390-400, 193.

<sup>37</sup> Claudius Claudianus, "Rape of Proserpine," in *Claudian*, trans. Maurice Platnauer, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), vol. 2, II:35, 327, line 119.

<sup>38</sup> Claudianus, "Rape of Proserpine," vol. 2, II:35, 247-249.

<sup>39</sup> Claudianus, "Rape of Proserpine," vol. 2, II:35, 325, line 101-03.

<sup>40</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "For Spring by Sandro Botticelli (In the Accademia of Florence)" in William Michael Rossetti ed., *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886). page 352.

<sup>41</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Fairfax Murray, 17 December 1880. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 9, 335, (letter 80.388)

<sup>42</sup> Frank Zöllner, *Botticelli, Images of Love and Spring* (Munich, London & New York: Prestel), 1998, 40.

<sup>43</sup> M. L. D'Ancona, *Botticelli's Primavera. A Botanical Interpretation including Astrology, Alchemy and the Medici* (Florence: Leo D. Olschki), 1983, 54. She lists 40 forms of plant life appearing in the painting, but erroneously lists the pomegranate as one, despite her earlier assertion that 'no fruit of the pomegranate is depicted in the *Primavera* (see 71 & 45).

<sup>44</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 38-56.

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- <sup>45</sup> Jeremy N. Melius, "Art History and the Invention of Botticelli," PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2010, 14.
- <sup>46</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "For Spring by Sandro Botticelli (In the Accademia of Florence), in *Collected Works*, 352, line 1.
- <sup>47</sup> Professor H. Wu, Reading Absence Lecture Series (2012), Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge.
- <sup>48</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic George Stephens, 10 August 1875. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 67-71 (letter 75.93).
- <sup>49</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. C. T. Onions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 695.
- <sup>50</sup> For details on all eight versions, see Fredeman 6, Appendix 2.
- <sup>51</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 30 September 1872. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 293-94 (letter 72.87).
- <sup>52</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 22 October 1872. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 307-9 (letter 72.100).
- <sup>53</sup> Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, Appendix 2, 589.
- <sup>54</sup> See Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock, "Woman as Sign in Pre-Raphaelite Literature: The Representation of Elizabeth Siddall," in *Vision & Difference. Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 91-114.
- <sup>55</sup> E. F. Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination," *PMLA* 99, no. 5 (1984): 950. See also J. B. Bullen, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Mirror of Masculine Desire," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 21, no. 3 (2008): 335-36.
- <sup>56</sup> Pollock, *Vision & Difference*, 120.
- <sup>57</sup> Claudianus, "Rape of Proserpine," vol. 2, III:36, 377, line 438.
- <sup>58</sup> Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh*, 16.
- <sup>59</sup> Claudianus, "Rape of Proserpine," vol. 2, II:35, 327, line 119
- <sup>60</sup> He returned to the subject in 1859 with another unfinished watercolour of the same name.
- <sup>61</sup> Jerome McGann, "Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante," *Rossetti Archive*, accessed 28 October 2019, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s54.rap.html>
- <sup>62</sup> See J. B. Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter & Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), 60.
- <sup>63</sup> Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and its Symbols*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: J. Paul Gerry Museum, 2004), 145.
- <sup>64</sup> Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London: Hurst and Blackett; Boston: Robert Brothers, 1898), 230.
- <sup>65</sup> For further details see Richard Menke, "The Political Economy of Fruit," in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti. Female Poetics and Victorian Contexts*, ed M. Arseneau, Anthony H. Harrison, and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (Athens: Ohio University Press), 1999, 105-136, 107.
- <sup>66</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market* (London: George G Harrap & Co., 1933), 10.
- <sup>67</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market*, 19-20.

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- <sup>68</sup> See A. De Vere's *The Search after Proserpine; Recollections of Greece and Other Poems* (1843) – to which Rossetti refers in a letter to William Allingham, 6 March 1856 (Fredeman, *Correspondence*, 56.9).
- <sup>69</sup> Faxon, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 17.
- <sup>70</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 3, 120–124, lines 582-667.
- <sup>71</sup> Phelps Smith, "Flower Imagery," diss., 105.
- <sup>72</sup> See Dante Gabriel Rossetti's article on Daniel Maclise in *Academy*, 15 April 1871.
- <sup>73</sup> Liverpool Museums, accessed 3 January 2018, <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ladyever/collections/paintings/gallery2/spring.a.spx>.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>75</sup> Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols*, 74.
- <sup>76</sup> J. Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 3.
- <sup>77</sup> J. B. Bullen, *Rossetti, Painter & Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), 30.
- <sup>78</sup> R. Wedgwood Kennedy, *The Renaissance Painter's Garden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 16.
- <sup>79</sup> Commenting on another Pre-Raphaelite painting in 1856 – Henry Wallis's *Chatterton* (Tate), Ruskin's advice is to "Examine it well inch by inch ... Give it much Time." (John Ruskin, *Works* eds E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12), vol. xiv, 60.
- <sup>80</sup> Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 8.
- <sup>81</sup> No. 368 in the Free Exhibition, Hyde Park Corner, late March 1849.
- <sup>82</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13: "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is Charity."
- <sup>83</sup> W. M. Rossetti, *Family Letters with a Memoir*, 411.
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid, 404.
- <sup>85</sup> D. Mancoff, *Flora Symbolica: Flowers in Pre-Raphaelite Art* (Munich & London: Prestel), 2003, 12.
- <sup>86</sup> A. I. Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Norwich: Real World Publications, 1976), 50. Consider James Collinson's *Answering the Emigrant's Letter* and *The Emigration Scheme* which highlight the conditions leading to the mass migration to the Colonies in the 1840s and 1850s; John Everett Millais's *The Woodman's Daughter*, *The Rescue* and *The Blind Girl* highlighting the precarious nature of life for London's poor; *Peace Concluded* provoking reflection on the horrors of war; and *Autumn Leaves* encouraging deep spiritual reflection. William Holman Hunt's *The Hireling Shepherd* mirrors the dissolute state of the Church; and *The Awakening Conscience*, raises the issue of the kept woman; Walter Deverell's *Irish Vagrants* and Ford Madox Brown's *Work* focus on the plight of the working poor and the uncertainties of emigration in *The Last of England*; Henry Wallis's *The Stonebreaker* and John Brett's painting of the same name shows the tedium of labour; Arthur Hughes's *April Love*, *A Mother's Grave*, and *The Long Engagement* focus on the effects of forced separation.
- <sup>87</sup> Grieve, *The Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 2.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>89</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 12 January 1854 and Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 14 January 1854. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 309-10 (letters 54.5, and 54.6)

<sup>90</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1849-50)

<sup>91</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 30 September 1853. In Fredeman *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 285-86 (letter 53.52).

<sup>92</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 1 July 1853 and Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Bell Scott, 25 August 1853, vol. 1, 270-71 (letter 53.41) and 282 (letter 53.49).

<sup>93</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 15 October 1854. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 388-90 (letter 54.67).

<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Tromans, *The Art of G. F. Watts* (London: Paul Holberton), 2017), 17.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>96</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 28 September 1854. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 383 (54.64).

<sup>97</sup> See poem "The Bridge of Sighs," Thomas Hood (1840s).

<sup>98</sup> J. Perkin, *Woman and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago: Lyceum, 1989), 1-2.

<sup>99</sup> F. Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex. A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2012), 354.

<sup>100</sup> The Married Women's Property Act (1870) secured to a married woman as her separate property the earnings she had acquired since the commencement of the Act in any employment carried on separately from her husband or through the exercise of any literary, artistic or scientific skill, as well as income from certain specified investments, personal property which descended to her as an heiress, the rents and profits of any real estate which came to her in the same way, and any sum of money not exceeding £200 which came to her by will or deed. See Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-century England* (Chicago: Lyceum, 1989), 304.

<sup>101</sup> See "The Earnest Englishwoman," in Joanna Bourke, *What it Means to be Human* (London: Virago Press, 2011).

<sup>102</sup> Bullen, *Rossetti, Painter & Poet*, 237.

<sup>103</sup> Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites*, 106.

<sup>104</sup> *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* 53, no. 2 (July 1850): 448-506, 449-450.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 471.

<sup>106</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886). There are a number of poems in Rossetti's Collected Works predicated to examining the fate of women betrayed by men, including "Rose Mary"(103), "Eden Bower"(308), "Sister Helen"(66) "A Last Confession"(18), and "Jenny" (83).

<sup>107</sup> Christina Rossetti, "Consider the Lilies of the Field," in *Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 247.

#### 4. Scent



Though storms may break the primrose on its stalk,  
Though frosts may blight the freshness of its bloom,  
Yet spring's awakening breath will woo the earth,  
To feed with kindest dews its favourite flower,  
That blooms in mossy banks and darksome glens,  
Lighting the green wood with its sunny smile.<sup>1</sup>

## Scent

There is a strength and breadth of style about these poems also which ennobles their sweetness and brightness, giving them a perfume that savours of no hotbed, but of hill-flowers that face the sea and the sunrise; a colour that grows in no greenhouse, but such as comes with morning upon the mountains.<sup>2</sup>

Algernon Charles Swinburne's critique of Rossetti's poetry, possessing "a perfume that savours of no hotbed, but of hill flowers that face the sea and the sunrise," (1875) pre-empts Maurice Maeterlinck's *Serres Chaudes* poetry cycle (1889) by more than a decade. Maeterlinck's 'hothouses' were to provide symbolists with a striking and somewhat dystopian metaphor for excessive sensuality and artificiality. God's natural creations were transposed, literally as well as figuratively, from the field into glass laboratories designed to force unnatural growth and to facilitate crossbreeding. Swinburne references similar tropes in this earlier essay, first published in 1870, no doubt aware of the growing interest in, and influx of, numerous alien blooms from the Orient and further afield, while also ruminating about any number of social and moral issues. He argues that the fragrance Rossetti creates is not of painted petals forced "sous les cloches" that Maeterlinck later describes,<sup>3</sup> but their antithesis: they are organic, and authentic manifestations of something quite wholesome and profound.

It is no accident that Swinburne uses the sense of smell to evoke Rossetti's aesthetic. This, the most ephemeral and intangible of the senses, is

so powerful, it can seep into our emotional, psychological and physiological wellbeing, without one ever being consciously aware of its effect.<sup>4</sup> It manifests as waves of emotional recognition, with every significant memory lingering as fragrant wisps, no more so than the scent of flowers, for as A. E. P. R. Dowling explained at the end of the nineteenth century in the *Contemporary Review* (1892): “Flowers seem to have retained more of the fragrance of a world which dwelt around the gates of the terrestrial Paradise than anything else in creation. To be in contact with them is purifying, refining, ennobling; their simple, gentle life soothes and softens the mind fretful and feverish with the restlessness of the moiling crowd and the traffic of life’s stage.”<sup>5</sup> Despite this cathartic property, however, the sense of smell is often more associated with carnivores following a scented trail to a potential sexual conquest or locating a good meal than it is with the more refined senses of *Homo sapiens*. Man’s superiority supposedly obviates the need for such rudimentary function. According to Grant Allen, writing in 1877, smell can have something quite “rude” about it, being tinged with a “raw physicality at odds with civilised manners and values.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason, smell has long been dismissed as belonging to the lower senses, placed at the foot of an aesthetic hierarchy, apparently lacking “the balance, climax, development, or pattern” required “to construct aesthetic objects.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this goes some way to explain why smell has not always been seen as a subject fit for art historical discourse.

It is Alain Corbin who can claim responsibility for prompting historians to think more deeply about the cultural connotations of smell in his book *The Foul and The Fragrant: Odor and the French Social*

*Imagination* (1986). Since then there has been scant research relating to the visual representation of odour, nor has there been much consideration of scent as an emotional or intellectual marker when appearing in a painting. However, as the popularity of experiential installations has grown, so too has academic interest in the art historical sense of smell. Christina Rain Bradstreet made a major contribution to the relationship between “seeing” and “smelling”—from the visualisation of invisible odour to the influence of scent upon mental imagery in her PhD thesis “Scented Visions. The Nineteenth Century Olfactory Imagination” (2008).<sup>8</sup> The significance of smell inevitably permeated into contemporary discourse, culminating, in 2012, in *The Art of Scent :1889-2012* exhibition held at the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in New York (20 November 2012-3 March 2013). This set out to develop a new discursive model for scent, presenting fragrance quite “naked, autonomous and regal,”<sup>9</sup> and, controversially, as analogous to other art forms.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Catherine Maxwell in *Scents & Sensibility. Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* has explored how odour wafts throughout literature, referencing historical and material context in her quest to comprehend smell’s ability to transport the mind and the emotions.<sup>11</sup> Although leading Pre-Raphaelite scholar Tim Barringer has previously noted that “a parallel exoticism” is indicated by the impression Rossetti’s flowers “give of a heavy scent than for their symbolism,” no one has yet attempted a dedicated study of this facet of Rossetti’s oeuvre.<sup>12</sup> Even now, this burgeoning interest in the olfactory function has yet to sniff out the artist Rossetti, whose poetic nose for scent was first critically appreciated by Swinburne nearly one hundred and fifty years ago.<sup>13</sup>

This chapter sets out to address this anosmia, by seeking to understand if, how and why Rossetti created a sense of fragrance in his oil paintings, and if he did, why it matters. We already know the extent to which Rossetti used flowers, but now I will, for the first time, assess to what extent his paintings depict *scented* flowers. I consult a leading nineteenth-century anthology, compiled by an associate of the Royal Horticultural Society, Donald McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers and Fragrant Leaves* (1895), together with a more recent compendium described as “the most comprehensive book on the scented flowers and leaves of plants of the world ever written,”<sup>14</sup> Roy Genders’s *Scented Flora of the World* (1994). In order to reach a reasonable consensus on which of Rossetti’s flowers were scented, in the event of any discrepancies, I favour McDonald’s contemporary explication. There then follows a brief comparative visual analysis of some of Rossetti’s most scent-infused oil paintings, spanning two decades of Rossetti’s career (1859-1879).

The “If?”

Jack Goody, author of one of the most authoritative twentieth-century studies on the culture of flowers, writes: “What strikes one in the literature of the Renaissance is the great emphasis given to flowers as sources of smell and of sweetness ... By contrast there appears to be little regard for the scent of flowers in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, where they are valued for colour and form.”<sup>15</sup> The flowering of the Renaissance coincided with the emergence of sugar as an expensive and elitist import and a renewed interest in the garden as a meditative and holistic space for the wealthy. Flavouring the explosion of artistic endeavour, sweet-smelling roses, violets, jasmine,

lilac, narcissi, honeysuckle and wallflowers, among a cornucopia of other flowers, often made an appearance in poetry and painting throughout this halcyon period. In contrast, as Catherine Maxwell points out, the relatively modest amount of research that touches on olfaction in the nineteenth century has mostly revealed “bad smells,” “privileging odour associated with labour, industry, urban development, inadequate hygiene and poverty.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, ironically, or perhaps necessarily, there seems to have been a simultaneous expression of olfactory sensitivity during this period. Cultivating and conspicuously displaying new blooms was a predominant pastime for Victorian horticulturalists, and there was a thriving and extremely lucrative perfume industry in England by 1860. Perhaps it is true that the abundance of flowers was designed to mask the actual and metaphorical stench of the industrial revolution.

Conversely, the appearance of the feminine in such profusion may have exemplified the growing tension between the New Woman and the intransigent patriarchy, intent on maintaining a stranglehold on her emancipation well into the twentieth century. However, it is true to say that it was not only perfume which became more feminised during this period, but also the sense of smell itself:

Beginning with the Enlightenment, smell had been increasingly devalued as a means of conveying or acquiring essential truths. The odour of sanctity was no longer an influential concept, nor were smells thought to have therapeutic powers. Sight, instead, had become the pre-eminent means and metaphor for discovery and knowledge, the sense par excellence of science. Sight, therefore, increasingly became

associated with men, who – as explorers, scientists, politicians or industrialists – were perceived as discovering and dominating the world through their keen gaze. Smell, in turn, was now considered the sense of intuition and sentiment, of homemaking and seduction, all of which were associated with women. It was maps, microscopes and money on the one hand, and pot-pourris, pabulum and perfume on the other.<sup>17</sup>

As Elaine Showalter explains in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, by nature woman was deemed to “the helpmate and companion of man.” “If she refused to be modest, self-deprecating, subservient ... she could expect to be ignored or (sometimes scurrilously) attacked.”<sup>18</sup> This ephemeral perfume was a beautiful scent designed to enhance Man’s physical presence, but it proved to be as transient as a breeze should it suit him. Unsurprisingly, there was a plethora of visual material featuring women inhaling floral fragrances, especially during the period 1860-1910. Floral scent was experienced in many ways, all of them subtly distinctive, and each contributing to “a compelling body of evidence about constructions of gender:”<sup>19</sup>

A variety of factors, such as the precise way in which the flower is held and its distance from the nose, as well as body posture, facial expression, open or closed eyes, clothes, and environment have a significant bearing upon the representation of femininity. Whether the female figure is shown daintily tilting the rose to her face, presenting the blossom to her lover, or lustily burying her nose into a lavish bloom, the simple gesture of smelling flowers can present a number of different meanings including eligibility for polite courtship, sexual impropriety, and the fantasy of sexual abandon.<sup>20</sup>

If flowers were synonymous with women's sexuality, the way a woman responded to a flower suggested the manner in which she would respond to a prospective lover's touch. Indeed, the seemingly innocent gesture of smelling a flower was conflated with the sexual fantasy of bringing a woman to orgasm. It was held that even the most chaste of women, when smelling a flower deeply, closes her eyes and, "if very sensitive, trembles all over, presenting an intimate picture which otherwise she never shows, except perhaps to her lover."<sup>21</sup> The erotic effect of floral perfumes had been celebrated by poets of many civilisations,<sup>22</sup> and was being purposefully exploited by the British perfume industry. Increasingly, perfume represented an elitist culture, creating an aura of exclusivity and superiority, rendering it, as Maxwell points out "an ideal accessory for the aesthete."<sup>23</sup> This emerging group of 'olfactifs' distanced itself from smell's animalistic overtones, and instead became aligned with the cultured Greeks, who saw perfume's ephemerality as magical and otherworldly, believing that "the breath was the soul and escaped only at death, then to re-join and merge with the universe."<sup>24</sup> Scented wood and floral fragrances would often sweeten animal flesh on the sacrificial altar, communicating the deepest desires of the supplicant, and carrying them to their gods in the higher realms. The word's Latin etymology - *per* meaning through and *fumare* to smoke – demonstrates perfume's bodiless essence. It has the unique ability to travel wherever and whenever it wishes and to transform all it touches.

Influenced greatly by the works of Charles Baudelaire and William Blake, this new breed of cultivated individual with a refined sense of smell included Algernon Charles Swinburne, Walter Pater and Dante Gabriel



Rossetti himself. We might, therefore, expect Rossetti to demonstrate this elevated appreciation by always ensuring that scented flowers would appear in his major paintings. However, by referencing McDonald and Genders’s anthologies, we notice that of all the flowers Rossetti paints, only ten out of the principal twenty-four are scented: the lily, rose, apple blossom, marigold, sunflower, honeysuckle, passionflower, wallflower, carnation and primrose. The same number of flowers are unscented: the pansy, poppy, cornflower, convolvulus, iris, cherry blossom, foxglove, larkspur, antirrhinum and anemone. Of the remaining flowers, four are possibly scented, depending on the variety: the daffodil, snowdrop, tulip and hellebore. A cursory consideration of these quantitative results would tend to suggest that scent may not have been as central to the artist’s aesthetic as we might assume initially. However, further investigation proves otherwise.

### Scent and Scentlessness in Rossetti’s Oil Paintings

Flower	Scientific Name	Scent
Lily	<i>Lilium candidum</i>	“It is peerless in purity, beauty, and honey-like fragrance while it lasts.” <sup>25</sup> “The scent of the flowers in the warmth of the midsummer sun is of heather honey.” <sup>26</sup>
Rose	<i>Rosa</i>	“Now-a-days we find this charming flower cultivated in every direction for the delicious fragrance imparted.” <sup>27</sup> “For its perfume, the rose reigns supreme amongst the flowers of the world.” <sup>28</sup>
Apple blossom	<i>Malus sylvestris</i>	“... the crab or wild apple, a native of the British Isles... has blossom with some degree of perfume.” <sup>29</sup>
Marigold	<i>Calendula officinalis</i>	“pungent” <sup>30</sup>
Pansy	<i>Violaceae</i>	“They are not scented.” <sup>31</sup>
Poppy	<i>Papaveraceae</i>	“A genus of about 100 species of almost scentless plants.” <sup>32</sup>
Sunflower	<i>Helianthus</i>	“has aromatic properties” <sup>33</sup>
Honeysuckle	<i>Lonicera</i>	“No flowers ... possess such a delightful odour as those of the honeysuckle.” <sup>34</sup> “Native of the British Isles ... delicious perfume, especially at eventide.” <sup>35</sup>

Passionflower	<i>Passiflora</i>	"The flowers of some kinds have an exquisite fragrance." <sup>36</sup> "A number of species bear scented flowers." <sup>37</sup>
Cornflower	<i>Centaurea</i>	"A genus of more than 600 species." Few have "any degree of perfume." <sup>38</sup>
Snowdrop	<i>Galanthus</i>	"G. Perryii – a species of our common Snowdrop, with large flowers possessing a delicate fragrance." <sup>39</sup>
Daffodil	<i>Narcissus</i>	"Many of them are also extremely sweet, having a perfume compounded apparently of the sweetness of the Lily and the odour of Violets." <sup>40</sup> "While almost all daffodils have the damp mossy fragrance of the woodlands, pronounced scent is present in only a small number of the trumpet forms." <sup>41</sup>
Convolvulus	<i>Convolvulaceae</i>	"About 200 species ... but only a few bear fragrant flowers." <sup>42</sup>
Wallflower	<i>Cheiranthus</i>	"Its scented attractions have through all succeeding ages rendered it a favourite." <sup>43</sup> "sweet perfume" <sup>44</sup>
Cherry Blossom	<i>Prunus</i>	"their flowers have no scent" <sup>45</sup>
Primrose	<i>Primulaceae</i>	"Many species have an "outstanding perfume" <sup>46</sup>
Iris	<i>Iridaceae</i>	Some scented, other not
Foxglove	<i>Digitalis</i>	Unscented
Carnation	<i>Dianthus</i>	"A number of species bear clove-scented flowers." <sup>47</sup>
Larkspur	<i>Delphinium</i>	Only 2 of the 40 species "bear fragrant flowers" <sup>48</sup>
Hellebore	<i>Helleborus</i>	Certain species "are all pleasingly scented of the Elder" <sup>49</sup> "The whole plant ... gives off a most unpleasant smell like that of decaying meat." <sup>50</sup>
Tulip	<i>Tulipa</i>	"We all remember the sweet-scented old cottage-garden Tulips of years ago; but alas! How rarely do we see them." <sup>51</sup> "It is not usually realised that a number of the large-flowered hybrids are deliciously scented" <sup>52</sup>
Antirrhinum	<i>Antirrhinum</i>	"a family which is almost entirely devoid of perfume" <sup>53</sup>
Anemone	<i>Ranunculaceae</i>	Unscented

When we cross-reference with the master list of paintings compiled in the first chapter, we see that there is quite clearly a dominant scent in the majority of paintings where flowers appear:

## Flowers and Their Floral Signature:

<i>The Girlhood of Mary Virgin</i>	Lily
<i>Ecce Ancilla Domini!</i>	Lily
<i>St Catherine</i>	Rose
<i>The Seed of David</i>	Rose
<i>Bocca Baciata</i>	Marigold
<i>The Salutation of Beatrice</i>	Lily-rose
<i>Regina Cordium</i> (1860)	Unscented
<i>Love's Greeting</i>	Rose/Sunflower
<i>Fair Rosamund</i>	Rose
<i>Girl at a Lattice</i>	Wallflower
<i>Monna Rosa</i>	Rose
<i>Bethlehem Gate</i>	No flowers
<i>Belcolore</i>	Rose
<i>My Lady Greensleeves</i>	Apple Blossom
<i>Joan of Arc</i>	Lily
<i>Helen of Troy</i>	No flowers
<i>Fazio's Mistress</i>	No flowers
<i>La Castagnetta</i>	Rose
<i>Beata Beatrix</i>	Unscented
<i>Venus Verticordia</i>	Honeysuckle-rose
<i>King Rene's Honeymoon</i>	Rose
<i>The Blue Bower</i>	Passionflower
<i>Il Ramoscello (Bella e Buona)</i>	No flowers
<i>The Beloved</i>	Lily-rose
<i>Regina Cordium</i> (1866)	Rose
<i>Monna Vanna</i>	Rose
<i>Sibylla Palmifera</i>	Rose
<i>A Christmas Carol</i>	Rose
<i>Joli Coeur</i>	No flowers
<i>Monna Rosa</i>	Rose
<i>The Loving Cup</i>	No flowers
<i>Jane Morris (The Blue Silk Dress)</i>	Rose/Carnation
<i>Lady Lilith</i>	Rose
<i>La Pia de'Tolomei</i>	No flowers
<i>Mariana</i>	Rose/Carnation
<i>Pandora</i>	No flowers
<i>Water Willow</i>	No flowers
<i>Blanzifiore</i>	Primrose-snowdrop
<i>Veronica Veronese</i>	Primrose-daffodil
<i>The Bower Meadow</i>	Rose
<i>La Ghirlandata</i>	Honeysuckle-rose
<i>Proserpine</i>	No flowers

<i>The Bower Maiden</i>	Marigold
<i>Dis Manibus</i>	Rose
<i>La Bello Mano</i>	Tulip
<i>The Blessed Damozel</i>	Lily-rose
<i>A Sea-Spell</i>	Rose
<i>Astarte Syriaca</i>	No flowers
<i>Mary Magdalene</i>	Hellebore
<i>A Vision of Fiammetta</i>	Apple Blossom
<i>La Donna della Finestra</i>	Rose
<i>The Day Dream</i>	Honeysuckle
<i>Mnemosyne</i>	Unscented

Indeed, although fourteen paintings are unscented in total, only three of these contain flowers: *Regina Cordium* (fig. 21), *Beata Beatrix* (fig. 14), and *Mnemosyne* (fig. 24). Of the rest, by far the majority are rose-scented (sixteen of the fifty-three) or have rose as one of two floral notes: the lily/rose (three), the rose/sunflower (one), the honeysuckle/rose (two) or the rose/carnation (two). Where the lily appears three times as a pure scent and three times mixed with rose, some scents appear only once: the wallflower, honeysuckle, passionflower, primrose/snowdrop, primrose/daffodil, tulip and hellebore, while some are repeated, but they appear no more than on two occasions. These include the marigold, apple blossom, and honeysuckle/rose. These findings help us to reach the conclusion that of all Rossetti's oil paintings, including those without any natural flowers, 70% have a floral signature. Of those containing natural flowers, 95% are almost certainly scented. These revelations would tend to support the view that scent was, after all, significant.

## The “How?”

It is, of course, one thing to employ scented flowers in his compositions, but exactly how does Rossetti evoke a sense of scent? How far did he follow the prevailing trend to position his model for the viewer to share in her moment of scented enrapture? John William Waterhouse, for example, does exactly that in *The Soul of the Rose* (1908) (fig. 82). Presenting his model in a half-length portrait, her face turned to the clambering rose, she curls her delicate long fingers around the base of a perfect flower. Her cheeks flushed, her lips gently brush the flower’s fragrant petals as she inhales its heady fragrance. George Frederic Watts, in *Choosing* (fig. 83) uses a similar technique.

In *Choosing* a dense camellia bush fills the space behind the figure, “almost entwining Ellen [Terry] with its lush flowering tendrils.”<sup>54</sup> Clasp ing a handful of scented, if inconspicuous, violets in her cupped left hand, the female figure reaches up to breathe in the scent from a striking red camellia, which, although spectacular in appearance, proves to be disappointingly unscented. Both models seek the solitary and intimate experience of sensual pleasure as they indulge in a moment of perfumed escapism.

In both the Waterhouse and Watts paintings, women have an intimate connection with the flowers, with their senses of sight, touch, taste and smell being heightened by their proximity to the blooms. In *The Soul of the Rose* it is as if the diaphanous figure is in some form of profound spiritual communion with the flower. In *Choosing*, the female figure appears to desire this soulful state, too, although it sadly eludes her. What is notable is that

there is no such relationship between woman and flower in Rossetti's paintings, however. The tumbling marigolds in *Bocca Baciata*, known for their pungent perfume, are deliberately positioned behind Fanny Cornforth. It is inconceivable that Cornforth would have been unaware of the scent from such a profusion of marigolds, and yet, she appears completely unmoved by them. She is slightly inclined away from the white rose in her hair, so that assuming it has a perfume, she is unlikely to be conscious of it, while the wispy single marigold flower in her hand is turned away from her face. In *Fair Rosamund* (fig. 84) Henry II's mistress waits patiently on the balustrade in the royal manor of Woodstock for the royal person to bestow his favour. She is similarly unmoved. Significantly, the rose is missing entirely from the rose branch of leaves, with a single bloom appearing in Rosamund's hair. Again, her head is inclined away from the flower, and she is apparently ambivalent towards its fragrance.

Less than a year later, Rossetti created *Girl at a Lattice* (fig. 12). Here, the maidservant gazes out of her window, clinging to the window frame with her left hand while her right is restrained by the red coral necklace entwined around her neck. This modern-day Madonna, her traditional blue and white attire being substituted by a similarly coloured valance billowing at the window, and the incongruous Delft pitcher of wallflowers on the window ledge have a connection, even in their apparent disconnection. The flower most associated with the Virgin's Annunciation, the regal lily, is replaced by the more commonly available wallflower. The distinctive wallflower perfume is subsumed by the visual impact of the bright flowers arranged in the

decorative ceramic, despite the odour of the wallflower being quite overpowering with its sultry perfume.

*Venus Verticordia* (fig. 4), meanwhile, is completely surrounded by fragrant flowers. She emerges from a bower of floral intensity, the pulpy roses and evocative honeysuckle serving to reflect the ripeness of the nubile flesh they caress. The goddess cannot but be aware of the flowers' overwhelming fragrance, and yet she does not stoop to enjoy their scent. In *Monna Rosa* (fig. 85), Frances Leyland decisively stretches to cut a single rose from her indoor rose tree, the weight of her damask gown almost restraining her from making any meaningful connection with the flowers in full bloom. While snipping a rose from its neighbours, she is not placed close enough to enjoy any sense of intimacy with the flower. Alexa Wilding in *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35) has the majority of tumbling white roses behind her and the few in front of her are above her head, away from her nose, while her gaze is directed downwards, away from them. So too, in *The Bower Meadow* (fig. 18) and *La Donna della Finestra* (fig. 43) the roses are once again predominantly behind both Alexa Wilding and Jane Morris, and although the apple blossom surrounds the figure of La Fiammetta in *A Vision of Fiammetta* (fig. 2) her nose is not inclined towards the flowers, and therefore, not directed towards the scent. All this is, on the face of it, rather odd. Is all this apparent nonchalance suggesting that scent is, after all, incidental, in Rossetti's pictures?

Certainly, Rossetti's women are not cupping flowers in their hands as Waterhouse's or Watts's models who give a definitive nod to the symbolism

of flowers. Rossetti's flowers appear placed to provide narrative value. Fanny Cornforth in *Bocca Baciata* (fig. 13) holds a limp flower stem between her thumb and forefinger, possibly as an ironic allusion to her alleged liberated sexual relationship with George Price Boyce, discussed in chapter three – Synonym. She is not caressing its petals nor seeking any kind of sense of transcendence. Perhaps this relationship is not as satisfying for her as Boyce might imagine. *Fair Rosamund* (fig. 84) holds a flowerless rose stem between her thumb and forefinger. The flowerhead has already been plucked and she wears it in her hair as a reference to her name, "rose of the world," perhaps, too, as a natural incarnation of her king's colours, red white and gold, but also surely as an allusion to her female genitalia: the cause of Henry's infatuation. Her flower stem is barren; its blossom used as adornment to attract her physical partner, rather than for her pleasure.

It is reasonable to deduce that both paintings evoke Rossetti's reflection on sexual love in the absence of spiritual connection: "Jenny". This poem that continually reverberates was the "most serious thing" Dante Gabriel Rossetti ever wrote.<sup>55</sup> It was also reputedly the poem he most wanted to recover from his wife, Lizzie Siddal's grave.<sup>56</sup> He treats this "lady of the night" with a high degree of empathy for "lazy laughing languid Jenny,/ Fond of a kiss and fond of a guinea," deserves the opportunity to rest from the procession of men who use her body for their own physical gratification:

... most from the hatefulness of man,  
Who spares not to end what he began,  
Whose acts are ill and his speech ill,



Who, having used you at his will,  
Thrusts you aside, as when I dine  
I serve the dishes and the wine.

Rossetti finds casual sexual relations devoid of spiritual connection unworthy, not because of any sense of immorality, but rather their lack of meaning, intensity, and emotional/spiritual connection. Contrary to the charge of critic, Thomas Maitland, aka Robert Buchanan, Rossetti is not concerned with “fleshliness,” but its antithesis.<sup>57</sup> He worships these “loose women” not for their dubious morals but more controversially for their nobility; not for their flesh, but for their endurance in the face of a never-ending stream of abuse.

The relationship between scent and touch is significant. The girl in *Girl at a Lattice* (*fig. 12*) holds back from touching her bunch of wallflowers. The wallflower is ostensibly chosen for its symbolic resonance of being “left out of the dance,” as much as its scent.<sup>58</sup> Venus (*fig. 4*), meanwhile, is the incarnation of the rose and the honeysuckle whose presence signifies the divine perfume. She has no need to hold flowers, she is the flowers, and besides, she has her hands quite full, holding the butterfly-clad arrow and apple of temptation. *Monna Rosa* (*fig. 85*) touches the highest flower stem merely as a means to sever its flower from the others. When Rossetti was painting this commission, Leyland had recently assumed the lease for the imposing Tudor mansion, Speke Hall, near Liverpool, making a very clear statement about his growing commercial superiority and elevated status. This portrait of his wife could be framed as a picture of conspicuous

consumption: an attempt by Rossetti to create a rendition of reflected magnificence.

*Lady Lilith* (fig. 35) is too preoccupied to spend time tending her flowers. Oblivious to the charms of the sensuality of the flowers around her, she chooses instead to brush her flowing locks and gaze at her reflection in the mirror. It is quite obvious that if the roses were missing from *The Bower Meadow* (fig. 18), or indeed from *La Donna della Finestra* (fig. 43), Alexa Wilding and Jane Morris would probably not miss them. *La Fiammetta* (fig. 2), in contrast, holds two branches of apple blossom quite firmly, less to enjoy their scent, one imagines, and more to steady a rather exhausting pose.

What is immediately obvious is that the olfactory organ – the nose – of all Rossetti's models is distanced from the provider of the scent. There is no suggestion that they are engaged in a process of inhalation or that they are in any way affected by the fragrance, and yet Rossetti, more often than not, chooses to paint commonly available flowers that viewers would instantly recognise as possessing a fragrance. This poses a real dilemma: why would Rossetti choose so many scented flowers and not be mindful of the experience of scent? It just does not make scents, if you excuse the pun. There must be something else going on here, but what exactly? Can returning to one of Rossetti's most fragrant paintings help us to move closer to an understanding of this microsmatic anomaly?

I touched on the significance of scent in *Venus Verticordia* in chapter one – Specimen – but now think specifically about *how* Rossetti evokes a

sense of scent. First, he created flowers which were visually realistic, but then he further enhanced their perfection, gathering together all that is lovely, and omitting “all that is low, discordant or ugly.”<sup>59</sup> As we have seen, Rossetti did not venture to paint *en plein air*, capturing just any rose that just happened to be growing in the garden or a nearby park. None are a little lopsided, none are fading away, none are dropping their petals or have green fly. Instead, we know that Rossetti went to exhaustive lengths to acquire just the right flowers, with “roses and honeysuckles leaving him penniless.”<sup>60</sup> We also know that he made an arrangement with a nursery gardener at Cheshunt to send him a couple of dozen roses every two days, and that he managed to acquire honeysuckle from Crystal Palace, after infinite labour on his part.<sup>61</sup> As viewers, we breathe their scent because we recognise them as scent-providers, and as we inhale their perfume, it becomes all the sweeter because our nose recognises that it is encountering the most exquisite scent imaginable.

Second, by employing complex layering, Rossetti builds up luscious tones in such a way that they become almost tactile, giving the subject a freshness, vitality and three-dimensional quality that creates the illusion that the flowers are effectively real, and thereby capable of producing perfume.

Third, Rossetti composes the painting to produce what Elizabeth Prettejohn describes as “an overwhelming effect of heady sensuality:”

The figure is as large as life, and faces the viewer at disconcertingly close range. The flesh is fully modelled in three-dimensional volume,

yet there is no surrounding space; the flowers are so tightly packed that there is no chink between them, and the recession into pictorial depth is blocked, as the hot pinks and reds push forward around the figure. It is as if the picture has been turned inside out, projecting into the viewer's space rather than receding safely into illusionistic depth.<sup>62</sup>

Again, this projected intimacy encourages intimate engagement with the painting, which necessitates inevitable visual and olfactory scrutiny. Simultaneously, Rossetti also indulges his invitation into a painterly erogenous zone. Venus, with her porcelain, iridescent flesh emerges from within her *hortus conclusus*, bedecked with resplendent pink and crimson roses, most in full bloom. Light is fading. It is approaching dusk when the honeysuckle swathing her body, just skirting her exposed nipple, smells the most sultry and exotic. This painting is designed not just to excite the senses, but rather it expects a physical arousal. According to Paul Jellinek, the author of *The Psychological Basis of Perfumery*, flowers become erogenous if one of several conditions apply.<sup>63</sup> In *Venus Verticordia's* case, all conditions are met. The flowers' scent contains one or more components that are reminiscent of the human body or its secretions. The painting's profusion of pulpy blooms emits an intoxicating mix of rose and honeysuckle fragrance, designed to be evocative of consummation. The flowers' odour gives rise to associations which result in sexual images, with the sweetness of the honeysuckle and the intensity of the rose conveying allusions to the sexual act. The honeysuckle and rose develop their fullest odours at the time of their "sexual maturity to attract insects which, as carriers of pollen, are instrumental in pollination and hence procreation."<sup>64</sup>

The opulently rounded shapes of the petals of a rose in full bloom are suggestive of the mature female body, and their rich red colour evokes thoughts of lips and kisses. The austere form of the bud before blooming, which only subtly hints at the rounded abundance and fragrance of full maturity, and its opening to amorous life, exhaling a ravishing scent are external manifestations of the flower's life processes which man sees and senses and which stimulate his erotic fantasy. The reason, therefore, why rose ranks among the most important aphrodisiac odour types is that its narcotic effect enhances the receptivity for the erotic images which are evoked by the colours, shapes and life processes of this flower and which are reminiscent of women and of love.<sup>65</sup>

The crimson/pink hues of the roses, mixed with the red and fleshy tones of the honeysuckle were in themselves reminiscent of intimate parts of the body, which are intrinsically connected, in our imagination at least, to sexual experience: “the swelling curves of the rose in full bloom recall the mature female body, the delicately curved lines of the closed bud – the Greeks called it “nymph” – are reminiscent of the body of an adolescent girl.”<sup>66</sup>

What is more, certain aspects of the biology or life processes of flowers reflect human characteristics linked to sexuality. As soon as a hawk moth lands on the honeysuckle's exposed stamens, it forces its elongated proboscis down each long tube to sample the nectar, before flying off and visiting as many other feeding stations as it can in one evening.<sup>67</sup> Of course, an important characteristic of many moths and butterflies is that they are themselves scented, as Rosemary Verey reminds us: “Flowers which are fertilised by them usually have a heavy, sweet scent, like that of the honeysuckle. The scent of these flowers resembling that of the insect, serves

to attract ardent suitors, who end up fertilizing a flower instead of another insect.”<sup>68</sup>

Mindful that the Greeks believed the only way for the spirit to enter the body is in the guise of sweet fragrances, Rossetti substitutes the traditional myrtle, normally associated with the goddess, with the honeysuckle. This substitution is perhaps curious given that the sweet-smelling myrtle was so closely associated with Venus and the myrtle was a firm favourite of contemporary artist, Simeon Solomon, a close associate of Rossetti's at that time. One of four sacred Jewish plants representing the scent of Eden, and “first a symbol of Mars, often alluding to the phallic, masculine creative force in the universe” according to the Simeon Solomon Research Archive, the myrtle was also “the perfection of neatness, elegance, and modest,”<sup>69</sup> a visual shrinking violet next to the visually-enticing honeysuckle, the sweetest flower imaginable: its root etymology embodying the primal eroticism of “sucking honey.”<sup>70</sup>

### The Synaesthetic Melody

It is not enough for Rossetti that he harnesses the power of scent, for he appeals to the viewer's senses of sight, smell and taste, while also inviting a desire to experience this sensory overload. We hear the imagined melody from the bird and the synaesthetic melody, or “perfume of hearing,” from the flowers themselves.<sup>71</sup> Synaesthesia, as a term, seems to have been first employed by Jules Millet in 1892,<sup>72</sup> but the idea was popularised by Baudelaire's “Correspondances” (1857) and Arthur Rimbaud's

“Voyelles”(1871). The term literally means “joined sensation.” According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, it is “a blending or confusion of different kinds of sense-impression, in which one type of sensation is referred to in terms more appropriate to another.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, synaesthesia occurs when we *see* a sound or *smell* a colour, for example. As Simon Baron-Cohen and John Harrison point out, it is important to distinguish between “metaphor as pseudo-synaesthesia’ and developmental synaesthesia, with the key difference being that with the former, the type we are referring to here, it is not *necessarily* triggered.”<sup>74</sup> However, many of us may have a predisposition towards synaesthesia, with language teeming with synesthetic metaphor,<sup>75</sup> although “only a handful of people are consciously aware of the holistic nature of perception.”<sup>76</sup>

Like Percy Bysshe Shelley, whom Rossetti admired “solely on account of the splendid versification,”<sup>77</sup> Rossetti revelled in “the finest examples of literary synaesthesia in the English Romantic period,”<sup>78</sup> and like Shelley, conflated all the senses to create a totally immersive sensory experience “Of music, so delicate, soft and intense, / It was felt like an odour within the sense.”<sup>79</sup> Just as “the quintessential synaesthetic image of Shelley’s poetry plunges the reader into a *mélange* of sensations,”<sup>80</sup> so, too, does Rossetti stimulate our senses, while totally discouraging the vicarious experience of scent. Rossetti is not in the least bit interested in third party encounter. He does not look to create the perfume equivalent of a voyeur, but rather he is presenting flowers to the person who experiences the sensation, stripping away any sense of an intermediary. The models are not smelling the flowers and the voyeur is not being invited to experience an olfactory allusion

through that process. Instead, the viewer sees the flowers and immediately experiences a form of synaesthetic appreciation. When we see the marigolds in *Bocca Baciata* we are not experiencing their pungency through Fanny Cornforth's experience of inhaling their fragrance. We are instead entering into a direct relationship with the flower itself. The same is true in each and every painting in which scented flowers appear. This is not a form of communication removed from the viewer through other interaction on the canvas, but rather the creation of a completely involuntary, experiential response.

This comparison of perfume with melody is not mere co-incidence. As Maxwell explains, "perfumery borrows the language of music – accords, notes, harmonies – to describe the successful blending of fragrance ingredients, and in older theories of smell, odour, like music, is understood as communicated through vibrations."<sup>81</sup> Rossetti incorporates musical instruments into his compositions on many occasions, particularly in paintings destined for Frederick Richards Leyland. Penelope Esplin, in her MA thesis "The Musical Imagery in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Paintings for his Patron, Frederick Leyland," claims that his musical instruments are more concerned with the physical shape and the symbolism of an instrument than the technicalities of the instrument itself:

As such, these musical instruments are often obscurely exotic, especially for a Victorian audience, or even entirely invented without reference to an instrument that exists. Moreover, these musical instruments are often depicted in ways that make them completely unplayable; either the hand positions of the player would negate any



sound, or the strings of the musical instrument are obstructed by another object (for example hair, flowers, material from a dress) which would result in no sound.<sup>82</sup>

What if the musical instruments are not obstructed by another object, but enhanced by it? What if the silent music is accentuated by those objects? Specifically, could it be that the music and the flowers merge to create a resonant entity? Just as for Shelley, “scent and music are partnered and, in the synaesthesia for which he is famous, the one can be experienced as the other,”<sup>83</sup> is it possible that the poet-painter Rossetti conflated both the notes of music, which we cannot hear, with the notes of the flower’s perfume, which we cannot smell, to deepen our synaesthetic appreciation of both senses and to transform them into something new? It is interesting to note that as a poet, Rossetti uses the terms ‘perfume’ and ‘scent’ but infrequently (approximately five and eight times respectively in *The Collected Works*, volume one (1886)). He is much more prolific in his use of the terms ‘music’ and ‘air’ (approximately sixty each). Shelley, however, as Maxwell explains, understood the poetic conceit of the fragrance of a flower is its ‘breath’: “a word commonly used at the time as a synonym for scent,”<sup>84</sup> and it is fascinating that Rossetti, too, was especially fond of the term (using it one hundred and twenty times in *The Collected Works*, volume one). What is more, Rossetti was prone to combine music and air as poetic devices: for example in “Dante at Verona”: – “And when the music had its sign/To breathe upon them for more ease;”<sup>85</sup> in “The Bride’s Prelude” – “And shook to music the close air;”<sup>86</sup> and in Sonnet XI – The Love-Letter” – “Like married music in Love’s answering air.”<sup>87</sup> Is Rossetti achieving a similar

conflation on the canvas, elevating the instrument and the representation of the female body into a chorus of divine vibration: the very breath of the soul?

The “Why?”

Smelling is as simple and natural as breathing. Even the most complex images can be immortalised by breathing through, in and around them.

Rossetti himself tells us in his sonnet, “Soul’s Beauty”:

Under the arch of Life, where love and death,  
Terror and mystery, guard her shrine, I saw  
Beauty enthroned; and though her gaze struck awe,  
I drew it in as simply as my breath.<sup>88</sup>

And yet, for all its innocence and apparent simplicity, “the extraordinary subtlety of the sense of smell appears to grow with the development of intelligence,”<sup>89</sup> and can, therefore, appeal to a more refined, some would infer more status-conscious viewer with more subtle tastes and more upwardly mobile aspirations. The perfumed invitation was infinitely more subtle, delicate, inviting and sensual than the more direct confrontation with the naked body. The ephemerality of perfume was far more ambiguous, amorphous and chaste than gratuitous bared flesh. Even Venus maintains her mystique, being seductively suggestive, not crudely blatant, in part thanks to the allusions associated with the flowers Rossetti chooses to paint.

Flowers evoke sensory pleasures, with perfume nostalgia contributing to the experience. However, just as one mind can flit between floral memory

banks, fragrances can evoke varied emotional connections in each of us for “If you ask ten different people to smell a flower ... and tell you what it smells like, you will get at least several different replies.”<sup>90</sup> The paradox is that although we now know almost everything there is to know about molecules, according to an olfactory specialist, bio-physicist Luca Turin, we are still no closer to understanding how our noses read them, and yet despite our ignorance our noses keep reading the air.<sup>91</sup> Therein lies the power in Rossetti’s synaesthetic approach, for just as Constance Classen points out the “perception of smell, thus, consists not only of the sensation of the odours themselves, but of the experiences and emotions associated with them.”<sup>92</sup> Former Tagore Professor of Fine Art and Design at the University of Punjab, Mulk Raj Anand, calls this process the ability to cultivate “fresh, variegated awareness, where instincts, feelings, emotions, thoughts and intuitions are constantly in touch with the shadows of fantasy and dream of the collective unconscious.”<sup>93</sup> A viewer can have an immediate and individual sensory response to Rossetti’s paintings, dependent upon his/her sensitivity to smell-memory responses. These can range from innocent childhood pleasures to nights on the fringes of a wild Bohemia, but whatever they are, they are private, internal nuances, known to the individual and only to the individual:

Smells spur memories, ... they also rouse our dozy senses, pamper and indulge us, help define our self-image, stir the cauldron of our seductiveness, warn us of danger, lead us into temptation, fan our religious fervour, accompany us to heaven, wed us to fashion, steep us in luxury.<sup>94</sup>

When we see a painting, we all, to some extent, see the same image, allowing for cultural and occasional ocular differences. Smell, on the contrary, belongs to one person alone. Each experience is personal and intimate, concerned with deep interior spaces, rather than with visual surfaces. Perfume nostalgia is involuntary. “Sweet airs are blown” where they will,<sup>95</sup> “mixing memory with desire.”<sup>96</sup> A fragrance can transport us back to any memorable occasion. It can make us happy; it can make us sad; it can make us fearful; it can rouse us to excitement, it can acquire affiliations “which charge (our responses) with suggestions, vitalities and meanings,”<sup>97</sup> as Charles Baudelaire demonstrates in his poem, “Correspondances”:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers  
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;  
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symbols  
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.  
Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent  
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,  
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la claret,  
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d’enfants,  
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,  
— Et d’autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l’expansion des choses infinies,  
Comme l’ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l’encens,  
Qui chantent les transports de l’esprit et des sens.

Nature is a temple, where the living  
Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;

Man walks within these groves of symbols, each  
Of which regards him as a kindred thing.

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,  
Heard from afar, blend in unity,  
Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,  
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond.

Odours there are, fresh as a baby's skin,  
Mellow as oboes, green as meadow grass,  
--- Others corrupted, rich, triumphant, full,

Having dimensions infinitely vast,  
Frankincense, musk, ambergris, benjamin,  
Singing the senses' rapture, and the soul's.<sup>98</sup>

Baudelaire's captivating work, highlighting how the senses merge in a mystical union, perfectly describes the Rossetti-effect. Rossetti uses this ambivalence to confuse the senses, ensuring that 'meaning' can remain free floating and unrelated in a way that "will not generate expectation, tension, harmony, suspension or release."<sup>99</sup> Rossetti liberates himself and he unfetters the 'one who experiences' from meaning in a way that paradoxically gives his paintings infinitely more potential meaning. We are able to enter a "vaporious, unaccountable Dreamworld"<sup>100</sup> where "Valleys full of plaintive air;/ There breathes perfume."<sup>101</sup> By relying on the deep-rooted, inexplicable, immediate response, the artist is putting us in touch with our own sensations, conceivably blurring reality and our relationship between reason and emotion. "As perfume seems to be the soul of the flower, so the spirit in man has seemed in all ages to be the evasive immortal essence of his mortal body. All that is sacred, pure, and innocent in man, all that suggests his

starry origin and destiny, seems in some way to be most poignantly hinted at in perfume.”<sup>102</sup>

This indefinable essence that remains and alters perception was noted by W. Graham Robertson when recounting his response to one of Rossetti’s lilac and purple “horrors.”<sup>103</sup> I discuss this malleable quality further in the final chapter. Suffice to say here, over time, “through the slimy surface” the beauty had shone out “despite the evidence of [his] eyes.”<sup>104</sup> Rossetti is able to make the encounter timeless and infinite, transporting us from our timebound existence to a space where the normal rules do not apply. The elusive quality of odour transforms it into a harbinger of revelation, a relayer of inner truths. Rossetti’s ability to manipulate odour gives his work emotional tones of place and time, unrestricted by physical boundaries, or as Rossetti expresses it “another breath of time.”<sup>105</sup> Like Blake’s poetry, Rossetti’s paintings have “a fragrance of sound, a melody of colour,”<sup>106</sup> where “mounting vapours wreath/Subtle-scented transports.”<sup>107</sup> By evoking the memory of scent, Rossetti is able to harness the sense, which more than any other, encouraged the individual to experience first-hand the natural harmony or the universe,<sup>108</sup> and in doing so, persuaded even the most aspiring social climber and patron that he was indeed raised to the aesthetic class.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “The Daemon of the World,” in *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and Humphrey Milford. (London, New York, Toronto, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1914), II:12, lines 551-556.

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- <sup>2</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, "The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1875), 97.
- <sup>3</sup> Maurice Maeterlinck, *Oeuvres I: Le Réveil de l'Âme* (Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1999), 65, line 18. accessed 24 October 2019, [http://www.ae-lib.org.ua/texts/maeterlinck\\_\\_serres\\_chaudes\\_\\_fr.htm#01](http://www.ae-lib.org.ua/texts/maeterlinck__serres_chaudes__fr.htm#01).
- <sup>4</sup> Constance Classen, David Howes and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma. The Cultural History of Smell* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 1.
- <sup>5</sup> A. E. P. R. Dowling, "Flora Sacra," *The Contemporary Review* 62 (September 1892): 395-411, 395.
- <sup>6</sup> Grant Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics* (London: Henry S. King, 1877), 83.
- <sup>7</sup> Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World), 1958, 99.
- <sup>8</sup> Christina Rain Bradstreet, "Scented Visions. The Nineteenth-century Olfactory Imagination," PhD Dissertation (Birkbeck College, University of London, 2008).
- <sup>9</sup> *Mad Perfumista, The Art of Scent: 1889-2012 – Exhibition Review*, accessed 14 July 2018, <http://madperfumista.com/2013/01/04/the-art-of-scent-1889-2012-exhibition-review/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Carol Kino, "Scent of a Museum," *New York Times*, 17 March 2011, accessed 20 August 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/17/arts/design/perfume-as-an-art-form-at-museum-of-art-and-design.html>.
- <sup>11</sup> Catherine Maxwell, *Scents & Sensibility. Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)
- <sup>12</sup> Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press [1998], 2012), 162.
- <sup>13</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, "The Poems of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," in *Essays and Studies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1875), 97.
- <sup>14</sup> Roy Genders, *Scented Flora of the World* (London: Robert Hale, 1994), back cover.
- <sup>15</sup> Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 182-183.
- <sup>16</sup> Maxwell, *Scents & Sensibility*, 10.
- <sup>17</sup> Constance Classen et al., *Aroma*, 84.
- <sup>18</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 2011), 123.
- <sup>19</sup> Christina Bradstreet, "Wicked with Roses: Floral Femininity and the Erotics of Scent," *Nineteenth-century Art Worldwide*, 16.1, 2007: Introduction.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>21</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Sexual Selection in Man* (Philadelphia, PA: F. A. Davis Company, 1906), 102.
- <sup>22</sup> Paul Jellinek, *The Psychological Basis of Perfumery*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (London, New York etc: Blackie), 1997, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 61-62.
- <sup>23</sup> Maxwell, *Scents & Sensibility*, 3.

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- <sup>24</sup> Rosemary Verey, *The Scented Garden* (London: Michael Joseph, 1981), 12.
- <sup>25</sup> Donald McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers and Fragrant Leaves* (London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1895), 67.
- <sup>26</sup> Roy Genders, *Scented Flora of the World* (Marlborough: The Crowood Press, 1994), 284.
- <sup>27</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 109.
- <sup>28</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 396.
- <sup>29</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 300.
- <sup>30</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 134.
- <sup>31</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 477.
- <sup>32</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 345.
- <sup>33</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 239.
- <sup>34</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 70.
- <sup>35</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 292.
- <sup>36</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 91.
- <sup>37</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 347.
- <sup>38</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 145.
- <sup>39</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 48.
- <sup>40</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 81.
- <sup>41</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 321.
- <sup>42</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 163.
- <sup>43</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 23.
- <sup>44</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 149.
- <sup>45</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 381.
- <sup>46</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 369.
- <sup>47</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 186.
- <sup>48</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 184.
- <sup>49</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 52.
- <sup>50</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 241.
- <sup>51</sup> McDonald, *Sweet-scented Flowers*, 130.
- <sup>52</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 466.
- <sup>53</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 109.
- <sup>54</sup> Barbara Bryant, *G. F. Watts Portraits. Fame and Beauty in Victorian Society* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2004), 134.
- <sup>55</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Allingham, 29 November 1860. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. W. E. Fredeman and others (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-2015), vol. 2, 332-4 (letter 60.54).
- <sup>56</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 14 October 1869. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 303-4 (letter 69.182)
- <sup>57</sup> Thomas Maitland, "The Fleshly School of Poetry: Mr D G Rossetti," *The Contemporary Review*, 1 August 1871:18.
- <sup>58</sup> Association first recorded in 1820 according to etymonline.com, accessed 29.1.20.
- <sup>59</sup> Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 87.



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- <sup>60</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 23 August 1864. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 185 (letter 64.118).
- <sup>61</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 16 August 1864. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 183-4. (letter 64.116).
- <sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art 1750-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131-132.
- <sup>63</sup> Jellinek, *Psychological Basis of Perfumery*, 47.
- <sup>64</sup> Jellinek, *Psychological Basis of Perfumery*, 3.
- <sup>65</sup> Jellinek, *Psychological Basis of Perfumery*, 54.
- <sup>66</sup> Jellinek, *Psychological Basis of Perfumery*, 46.
- <sup>67</sup> L. J. F. Brimble, *Flowers in Britain. Wild, Ornamental and Economic and Some Relative in Other Lands* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1945), 205.
- <sup>68</sup> Rosemary Verey, *Scented Garden*, 66.
- <sup>69</sup> Hilderic Friend, *Flowers and Flower-Lore*, 2 vols. (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1883), vol. 1, 450.
- <sup>70</sup> Simeon Solomon Archive, accessed, 25 February 2019, [simeonsolomon.com](http://simeonsolomon.com).
- <sup>71</sup> Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (London: Phoenix, 1996), 202.
- <sup>72</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen and John E. Harrison, *Synaesthesia. Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 3.
- <sup>73</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>74</sup> Baron-Cohen et al., *Synaesthesia*, 8.
- <sup>75</sup> Lawrence E. Marks, *The Unity of the Senses. Interrelations among the Modalities* (New York, San Francisco & London: Academic Press, 1978), 211.
- <sup>76</sup> Baron-Cohen et al., *Synaesthesia*, 27.
- <sup>77</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 14/15 August 1843. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol 1, 24-7. (letter 43.3).
- <sup>78</sup> Marks, *Unity of the Senses*, 236.
- <sup>79</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Sensitive Plant* (London; Philadelphia: William Heinemann, J. B. Lippincott and Co., ca. 1820), VII, 25.
- <sup>80</sup> Marks, *Unity of the Senses*, 237.
- <sup>81</sup> Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, 76
- <sup>82</sup> Penelope Esplin, "The Musical Imagery in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Paintings for His Patron, Frederick Leyland," MA dissertation, University of Otago, Dunedin, 2013, ii.
- <sup>83</sup> Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, 75.
- <sup>84</sup> Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, 76.
- <sup>85</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Dante at Verona" in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 9, lines 250-251.
- <sup>86</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "The Bride's Prelude," in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 35, line 25.
- <sup>87</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sonnet XI, "The Love-Letter" in *Collected Works*, vol. I, 182, line 8.

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- <sup>88</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Sonnet LXXVII, "Soul's Beauty" in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 215, 1–8.
- <sup>89</sup> Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant. Odour and The French Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 7.
- <sup>90</sup> F. W. Burbridge, *The Book of the Scented Garden* (London & New York: John Lane, 1905), 38-39.
- <sup>91</sup> Luca Turin, *The Secret of Scent: Adventures in Perfume and the Science of Smell* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 6-28.
- <sup>92</sup> Constance Classen et al., *Aroma*, 4
- <sup>93</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, *Seven Little-Known Birds of the Inner Eye* (London: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 145.
- <sup>94</sup> Ackerman, *Natural History of the Senses*, 37.
- <sup>95</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "A New Year's Burden," in *Collected Works*, 296, 1.
- <sup>96</sup> T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," in *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2001).
- <sup>97</sup> Anand, *Seven Little Known Birds*, 21.
- <sup>98</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances," *The Flowers of Evil* trans. James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 18-19.
- <sup>99</sup> Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 114.
- <sup>100</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Love's Nocturn" in *Collected Works*, 288, lines 89.
- <sup>101</sup> Ibid, 288, lines 24-5.
- <sup>102</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romance of Perfume* (New York & Paris: Richard Hudnut, 1925), 8.
- <sup>103</sup> W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945), 86-7. I revisit this encounter in Chapter 5 – Spectre.
- <sup>104</sup> Ibid. See Chapter 5 for more detail.
- <sup>105</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Dawn of the Night Journey," in *Collected Works*, 303, line 7.
- <sup>106</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, *William Blake* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1868), 9.
- <sup>107</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Love's Nocturn," in *Collected Works*, 291, lines 99-100.
- <sup>108</sup> Corbin, *Foul and the Fragrant*, 84.
- <sup>109</sup> Allen, *Physiological Aesthetics*, 84.

## 5. Spectre

Lovely girl, with vaunting  
Never tempt to-morrow:  
From all shapes enchanting  
Any joy can borrow,  
Still the spectre Sorrow  
Rises up for haunting.<sup>1</sup>

## Spectre

The spade squeals across the sodden coffin lid. The fire, lit to drench the anticipated stench, spits and curls, its smoke catching the nostrils of the shadow-dancing party. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, meanwhile, can be found skulking in Fulham, at his friends' home, having elected to stay a respectable distance away from the grave-robbing excursion. While Charles Augustus Howell proceeds to orchestrate the opening of grave 5779 on his behalf, Rossetti sits and waits "in a state of mind which can only be guessed at," his stream of consciousness perhaps focussing on how this clandestine outing could go incredibly awry: <sup>2</sup> Is it her coffin? Or, despite all assurances to the contrary, has my aunt been buried there, too?<sup>3</sup> What if Howell retrieves the Bible instead of my poetry?<sup>4</sup> Will he be able to tell the difference in his haste and this intolerably poor autumnal light? How will I face my mother if she ever discovers what I have done?<sup>5</sup> My reputation will be destroyed if news of this ever gets out, and how do I know that Howell can be trusted? What if my poetry is obliterated and this has all been for nothing? Will I be damned? Will her spectre rise from her cold grave and haunt my darkest dreams?

This now infamous macabre night-time foray into Highgate Cemetery, opening the grave shared by Rossetti's father, Gabriele Pasquale Giuseppe, and Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal, is burnished into Pre-Raphaelite folklore. We are told, rather poignantly, that some seven and a half years earlier:

At her request he had copied them (his poems) into a little book presented to him for that purpose and on the day of the funeral he walked into the room where the body lay and, unmindful of the presence of friends, he spoke to his dead wife as though she heard, saying, as he held the book, that the words it contained were written to her and for her, and she must take them with her for they could not remain when she had gone. Then he put the volume into the coffin between her cheek and beautiful hair, and it was that day buried with her ....<sup>6</sup>

The tale, recounted third-hand by Thomas Hall Caine, only added to the spectral frisson. Gothic embellishment aside, when we subdue the legendary phantoms, we cannot be sure, of course, what went through Rossetti's mind on the night the grave was desecrated for the princely sum of two guineas.<sup>7</sup> From his letters to Howell, his brother William Michael, and Algernon Charles Swinburne around the time of his wife's exhumation on 5 October 1869, Rossetti appears anxious to justify his decision to retrieve his poetry from his wife's final resting place. Just a week later, Rossetti is denigrating its significance by informing his brother that the disinterment happened "Wednesday or Thursday last, I forget which."<sup>8</sup> The truth is, he confided to Swinburne later in October: "no one so much as herself would have approved of my doing this. Art was the only thing for which she felt very seriously. Had it been possible to her, I should have found the book on my pillow the night she was buried; and could she have opened the grave, no other hand would have been needed."<sup>9</sup>

As Jan Marsh points out, the ghoulish image of Lizzie's corpse lifting her own coffin lid to return the book may well be "an oblique

acknowledgement that her soul had not been left to rest peacefully.”<sup>10</sup> Just as likely, this restless phantom could be Rossetti’s way of justifying his actions. This dichotomy brings us neatly to the pivotal dilemma in this chapter, for whenever spectres and Rossetti are mentioned in the same sentence, it is this fantastical scene, and/or Rossetti’s subsequent interest in the occult, that is re-imagined, invariably to the immediate detriment of other possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

The urge to indulge this morbid fascination is almost obligatory with Victorians themselves revelling in “gothic yarns of reanimated corpses.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, in this, my final chapter, I choose to lay those ghosts to rest by taking a fresh look at one of the most haunting Pre-Raphaelite images ever produced, *Beata Beatrix* (ca. 1864-70) (*fig. 14*) while communing once more with the spirit of journalist and author, William Tirebuck. After offering some observations on the relationship between woman and spectre in the nineteenth century, I will revisit the four overarching themes forming the backbone of this thesis: examining the flower as the four phantom-like incarnations of Symbol, Synonym, Specimen and Scent. I aim to prove definitively that this new methodology of approaching floral meaning is both fit for purpose and revelatory.

It may be an exaggeration to say that *Beata Beatrix* is “the most purely spiritual and devotional work of European Art since the fall of the Byzantine Empire” as Evelyn Waugh apparently claimed, but it is certainly an extraordinarily haunting portrait.<sup>13</sup> Of it, Thomas Craven of the *New York Herald Tribune* said: “There are manifestations of the human spirit that transcend the materials in which they are discernible; this picture is one of

them.”<sup>14</sup> Significantly, Elizabeth Siddal does not appear in Tirebuck’s memoir of Rossetti, except perhaps as a spectral muse to the artist. His comments regarding the nature of Rossetti’s work, on the other hand, as we have already seen, have been cited often in floral enquiry, albeit attributed erroneously to Walter Pater. Revisiting Rossetti’s first unauthorised biography, on this occasion, I want to think more deeply around the idea of spectre: “A flower (or rather the phantom of a flower, for even this bit of nature with Rossetti is dreamy) is sometimes introduced on his canvas...”<sup>15</sup> Often ignored in deference to the next line: “To the initiated his flower speaks parables; to the ignorant (the many) it is an obtrusive enigma,” this ambiguous phrase merits further exploration.

Spectres, phantoms, ghosts and an infectious curiosity about what lies beyond the deep, hallowed grave, were not uncommon in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. We might even say that “Victorians were haunted by the supernatural.”<sup>16</sup> This sense of the unknown “was both fearful and terrible and ardently desired; it was a spooky sense that there was more to the world than the everyday, or an intimation that reality might be transfigured by something above and beyond.”<sup>17</sup> The growing tensions between shifting religious beliefs, relentless scientific discovery, radical evolutionary theories and stark industrial realities spurred a preoccupation with the supernatural. As more and more people searched to make sense of the non-sensical, ghost stories, in particular, exerted a huge influence upon the Victorian psyche. There are numerous examples of supernatural stories, where visitations from unearthly beings gripped the popular imagination. We only have to think about *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *Jane Eyre* (1847),



*Wuthering Heights* (1847), *The Lifted Veil* (1859), and *Silas Marner* (1861) as typical examples. If a story failed to resurrect a ghost or two, it would instead fixate on the capricious nature of forces beyond man's understanding, peppering them with copious amounts of coincidence and serendipity, for example, as in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) or *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). These and other beyond-this-world tales helped to fuel an ongoing debate about the nature of spectrality – with investigations intent on discovering whether a so-called spectre was a physical disorder stemming from visionary problems or circulatory malfunctions,<sup>18</sup> an incarnation of the mind, a re-emergence of someone once alive, and now dead, or the manifestation of things well beyond our comprehension: a spectral visitation from the celestial realms.

What is particularly noteworthy is that there was a distinct demarcation between science, medicine, law, manufacturing and theology, typically male pursuits, and the home, commonly the female domain. If we were being cynical, we might suggest that this drive to keep wives, mothers, daughters and sisters away from the rational world and firmly ensconced in the sphere of the non-material and non-rational, was deliberate, for “Victorian society at large found it socially, morally, and culturally beneficial to locate woman between man and angel as a handmaid to that male genius ... synonymous with British civilization, which depended heavily on the establishment of the empire of science.”<sup>19</sup>

While ‘the madwoman in the attic’ phenomenon appeared as a ghastly spectral apparition whose insanity eventually destroys the bastion of the

male-dominated space, the angel in the house, immortalised by Coventry Patmore's eponymous narrative poem about domestic bliss (1854) is contained by the hearth, embroidering some trifle or other and directing the servants to keep her lord and master in the manner to which he had become accustomed. The ideal woman was to attend to the physical, moral, and spiritual needs of the family. One of the things expected of Victorian woman "was that she control herself and suppress desire and passion, as these would be disruptive to her mission as stabilizer of the home."<sup>20</sup> She was to fulfil her role by effectively becoming a ghost, a spectral manifestation that could appear and disappear at the will of the man of the house. In popular literature, we have only to think about the disenfranchised Bertha Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, living out her days in the attic as a menacing spectre of her former self, while her erstwhile husband cavorts with her replacement, the governess to his petulant illegitimate child.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the proliferation and power of this conditioning, while spectre began the century as a sign of superstitious maladjustment, by the end of the century, its shadow increasingly pointed to the possibility of disturbing mental instability, and a worrying propensity to hallucination and delusion. Spectres were framed as products of an overactive imagination, figments, illusions, mirages, and visions, emanating from disorders of the body and mind. While many women became unwitting victims of the prejudice, being shunted to the exterior, where insanity, the unreal and phantasmagorical reigned supreme, the New Woman precariously dared to take advantage of the developing growth in supernatural debate and challenged the status quo. One such passionate call

for change came from a respected member of the aristocracy, Marie Sinclair, the Countess of Caithness. Ironically, however, she claimed to be recounting a message given to her by the long-dead Mary Stuart, Mary Queen of Scots, ostensibly playing into her adversaries' hands: "Men are asleep over the material triumphs they are crowning their brows with, or so buried amid the burdens of life, they cannot be still and listen to the voice of Deific forces. But Woman [sic], the earth's Mothers, must do so – must be earnest and active, or her feet will sink into the mire of revolutionary forces."<sup>21</sup> Claiming that men were so preoccupied with their commercial activity and with their drive for material superiority that they were blind to forces beyond their control, women were to seize the opportunity to renounce all that was superfluous in their attempt to elevate the voice of the supernatural. It is precisely this mystical voice that Rossetti appears to be championing in his portrait of *Beata Beatrix*.

According to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, "a masterpiece always moves, by definition, in the manner of a ghost."<sup>22</sup> For him, spectrality is the study of something which is "ni vivant ni mort."<sup>23</sup> It is a quasi-concept that exists only in the space between neither and nor, being neither alive nor dead, but omnipresent somewhere between both descriptions. To haunt does not mean to be present, but rather to mark a relationship with what is no longer, or not yet manifested.<sup>24</sup> It is not nothing, it is everything: every possible permutation between the two extremes of neither one thing nor the other. The parallels between Spectre and Creator, by their very nature, prove to be indivisible.

The artist's flowers are also neither alive nor dead. As soon as they are in the process of being translated from the vase to the canvas via the artist's hand, they do not exist, and yet, they appear from nowhere, taking up a new position on the canvas, in Rossetti's case, as expressions of idealised nature. They are somewhere between neither and nor and, therefore, by definition, manifest as spectres of the imagination. In their non-existence, they paradoxically and simultaneously communicate something of what it means to be both alive and dead as spectres of the human condition. In *Beata Beatrix*, we could argue that spectral resonances fade in and out of the frame, flitting around the canvas, inhabiting a Derridean space, a powerful force of displacement, alterity, otherness, abjection or revenance.<sup>25</sup>

Ghosts, by their nature, are often misunderstood, misinterpreted and misrepresented, states equally attributable to Rossetti's work, which was only seldomly exhibited. On the rare occasions Rossetti allowed a work to be subject to public scrutiny, some viewers were positively repulsed by them, even his eventual admirers. Indeed, W. Graham Robertson recounted a time when a "few years ago I was straying through some loan collection ... On this occasion I shied violently across the room at a terrible work which, to my shocked and instantly averted gaze, announced itself as an unusually bad Rossetti. I saw – against my will – a lilac face with purple lips, huge lilac arms sprawling over lumpy fulvous folds, distorted drawing, tortured, 'gormy' paint."<sup>26</sup> It was not until this reluctant advocate had the time and space to allow the distorted, tortured painting to "haunt" his thoughts that he appreciated its merits.

He recalled how:

Some days afterwards, I began to be haunted by a beautiful Presence, vague, half-remembered. A wonderful face, gentle and noble, with eyes that dreamed and lips that faintly smiled, a lovely pattern woven of clinging white fingers and clustering apple-blossom, the gracious fall of glowing draperies ... Suddenly it came to me – it was the picture that Rossetti was trying to paint when he produced the lilac and purple horror.<sup>27</sup>

Recognising the artist's skill in creating those indefinable spectral possibilities, he subsequently declared Rossetti to be "a wonder":

How strong and insistent must that original purpose have been, that the mental photograph, taken during that momentary glance, should be that of the picture that might have been instead of the picture that was. Through the slimy surface and muddy colour the beauty, dreamed of but unattained, had shone out and stamped itself upon my mind despite the evidence of my eyes.<sup>28</sup>

Robertson's visitation left him full of enthusiasm for Rossetti's genius, and yet only days previously Robertson had thought him to be a charlatan. His apparent enlightenment owed much to the work's spectral quality.<sup>29</sup>

The Tate claims that "Rossetti draws a parallel in this picture between "Dante's despair at the death of his beloved Beatrice and his own grief at the death of his wife."<sup>30</sup> It cannot be denied that "Rossetti experienced a particularly harrowing interchange between the world of his own imagination and actual life when Elizabeth Siddal, the model he had cast so many times in the role of Dante's Beatrice, died at a young age in 1862, thus

repeating Beatrice's fate in reality."<sup>31</sup> However, did he truly set out to exorcise his wife's ghost when painting *Beata Beatrix*?<sup>32</sup> Was this his posthumous tribute, the exhumation "haunting him like a ghost," causing him repeatedly to purge his guilty conscience with anguished replicas of his dying wife?<sup>33</sup> Replicas admittedly formed a significant aspect of Rossetti's output and *Beata Beatrix* was an image revisited with more frequency than others, but this apparent preoccupation to appease his conscience belies the fact that Rossetti positively loathed working on these replicas.<sup>34</sup> Duplicates were exceptionally "dreary work."<sup>35</sup> Indeed, Rossetti reports being "in deep disgust,"<sup>36</sup> about being compelled to undertake the "beastly job,"<sup>37</sup> wishing that he "could (instead) live by writing poetry."<sup>38</sup> "Hopelessly and heedlessly unthrifty, flush of money one day, out-at-elbows the next,"<sup>39</sup> Rossetti demonstrated "a distinct lack of interest" in painting anything unprofitable.<sup>40</sup> Rather than being a conscious desire to immortalise his wife, an inference which is ours, not his,<sup>41</sup> "lucre [could have been] the lure."<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, *Beata Beatrix* was conceived as a Dantesque subject Rossetti had long meant to do.<sup>43</sup> It was several months after first suggesting the possibility of painting Dante's heroine that he discovered an old canvas and several drawings of his wife. Recognising an opportunity to utilise them to discharge a debt owed to the intended recipient, Ellen Heaton, Rossetti, ever the opportunist, reports that he had lately "found a commencement of a life size head of my wife in oil, begun many years ago as a picture of Beatrice. It is only laid in and the canvas is in a bad state, but it is possible I might be able to work it up successfully either on this or another canvas and should like to do so if possible, as it was carefully begun. The picture was to

represent Beatrice falling asleep by a wall bearing a sundial, and I have pencil sketches for it as a half figure comprising the arms and hands.”<sup>44</sup> Aware that Heaton had already expressed an interest in acquiring a likeness of Siddal, this discovery presented the fortuitous possibility of hurriedly satisfying his patron. However, it was not to be and it would take another two and a half years before the Cowper-Temples took the painting off his hands for 300 guineas.

The painting is a portrait of Siddal as Beatrice. She sits facing the viewer at an angle, her eyes closed, her lips slightly parted, her jaw lifted slightly, her hands relaxed and cupped in her lap, “posed in an attitude of shadowy ecstasy ... as if she is about to receive Communion.”<sup>45</sup> A red bird drops a white poppy into the void between her arms. In the background, Dante on the right glances at the red-clad figure of Love on the left. A bridge separates the two figures while an enlarged sundial points ominously upwards towards Beatrice’s almost obscured left eye. The light radiates from her red hair. Touched by the Light, her spirit appears to be on the brink of leaving her body through the ephemeral delicacy of the illumination, moving from the body up towards the bridge – from one world to the next.

Rossetti is keen to point out that the painting was “not intended at all to *represent* death, but to render it under the semblance of a trance, in which Beatrice, seated at a balcony overlooking the city, is suddenly rapt from earth to heaven.”<sup>46</sup> This is the moment of transition from one existence to another: “She through her shut lids, is conscious of a new world”<sup>47</sup> as expressed in the last words of the *Vita Nuova*, translated by Rossetti himself as:

Wherefore if it be His pleasure through whom is the life of all things, that my life continue with me a few years, it is my hope that I shall yet write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman. After the which, may it seem good unto Him who is the Master of Grace that my spirit should go hence to behold the glory of the Lady to wit of that blessed Beatrice who now gazeth continually on His countenance qui est per omnia saecula Benedictus (who is blessed throughout the ages). Laus Deo.<sup>48</sup>

Strikingly, this new world where Beatrice is to be blessed for all eternity is symbolised by the sundial shadow resting on nine o'clock, reminding us of "the singular way in which Dante dwells on the number nine in connection with Beatrice in the *Vita Nuova*. He meets her at nine years of age, she dies at nine o'clock on the 9 June 1290. Of all this much is said, and he declares her to have been herself 'a nine' – the perfect number, or symbol of perfection."<sup>49</sup> However, just as the power of nine represents perfection, it also embodies the infinite power of the Creator, where the Creator is simultaneously three persons in one: the poet Dante, the artist Rossetti, and the divine creative force that connects them each to the other and to all of Nature. All three forces emanating from the past, the present, and the infinite combine to project a sense of displacement, of transience, of phantom-like "otherworldliness."

### The Spectral Symbol

At the heart of this, Rossetti's most spectral painting, is a phantom flower: a fragile, ephemeral, wisp of a poppy. Our twenty-first century symbolic association with the poppy is usually coloured blood red, rather than white.



The red poppy, allegedly “one of the seven principal flowers that have shaped our world,” was only adopted as a symbol of remembrance in 1921, three years after the ceasefire and nearly forty years after Rossetti’s death.<sup>50</sup> It was reputedly chosen because it had been a common sight in the fields of northern France and Belgium, scenes of some of the deadliest battles during the 1914-18 conflict. Its use was inspired by a poem entitled “In Flanders Fields”, written by a serving Commonwealth officer, John McCrae, which first appeared anonymously in *Punch* on 8 December 1915.

These poppies, so closely associated with the Royal British Legion’s red poppy campaign, far from being a reconciliatory symbol of commemoration, were, according to McCrae, to serve as a reminder of the scale of the sacrifice made and, crucially, to call new battalions of men to arms.<sup>51</sup> Poppies, though, or corn roses as some were also known, started life as attributes of Ceres the goddess of cereals on account of poppies and corn being seen so frequently together in the fields.<sup>52</sup> Poppy seeds were offered to the goddess in sacred rites in order to persuade her to bestow prosperity upon the crops.<sup>53</sup> Conversely, the gods Nyx, the god of night, Hypnos, the god of sleep, and his son Morpheus, the god of dreams, were also guardians of the flower, and it is anecdotally believed that the poppy contributed to the gall offered to the crucified Christ to ease His pain. These flowers with their “petals crumpled like silk in shades of pink, red and a gamut of ghostly purples” have, therefore, long been a symbol of sleep and by inference to death, the eternal sleep, as well as symbolising the exact opposite as harbingers of fruitful progeny.<sup>54</sup>

When Rossetti uses the poppy in other oil paintings, such as *Sibylla Palmifera* (fig. 86) and *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35) or in his watercolour, *Dante's Dream* (fig. 87), he chooses the red poppy, so here, is he making a different floral statement by selecting the white poppy? This flower did not gain prominence until 1933 when it was adopted by the Peace Pledge Union, the UK's longest established pacifist organisation. It was a symbol to recall that the Great War was The War to End All Wars. Ominously, its emergence coincided with Adolf Hitler's rise to Chancellor and the delicate white flower could do little to prevent the country from once more sliding into another bloody global conflict. It has since become the symbol to remember all the fallen from all wars. None of these allusions could have had any influence on Rossetti's choice, of course, and any contemporary associations should not influence our appreciation of Rossetti's flower.

For him, the indivisible relationship between the blood red and the unstained white is the most significant aspect. A combination Rossetti used in the 1850s and again in the 1860s and 70s, this chromatic duo was also favoured by Sandro Botticelli in *Mars and Venus* (fig. 88) and *Primavera (Spring)* (fig. 89), and Titian in *Venus Blindfolding Cupid* (fig. 90) and *The Rape of Europa* (fig. 91). The juxtaposition of red and white is in itself profoundly symbolic, not just from an art-historical point of view, but also from a theological and secular perspective. They are sacredly profane symbols, incorporating the body and blood of Christ, and simultaneously embodying the loss of virginity and the transition from girlhood to womanhood, with the white flower becoming red in the process of deflowering. Rossetti uses their ambiguity to great effect in his first oil

painting, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (fig. 10), as discussed earlier in this thesis. The white of the dove, the white shift of the angel, the white statute of temperance all contrast with the angel's red wings, the red cloth draped over the wall and the red base fabric of the embroidery being worked by Mary. Again, in his next oil painting, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (fig. 15), the limited palette emphasises the contrast between the angel and Mary's clothing, the light tones of the wall and floor, the lily and the bed, and the erect crimson embroidery with its three white lily flowers. In *Lady Lilith* (fig. 35) the white of the roses, the circlet of daisies, the pale candles, the white fur throw, and Lilith's diaphanous dress contrast with the red of the cord around her left wrist, the pink/red rosebuds, the deep pink of the foxglove and the scarlet poppy in the lower right of the painting.

The other principal white/red combination utilised by Rossetti is avian in nature and clearly has a role to play in determining the placement of the red/white poppy. Rossetti had previously used the white dove as the universally recognised symbol of peace in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* and in his watercolours *Mary Nazarene* (fig. 92) and *The Damsel of the Sanct Grael* (watercolour (fig. 93) and replica oil on canvas (fig. 94), one of the most recognisable symbols in Western culture. The white dove's genesis owes much to its biblical name-sake – *Genesis 8:11* – where, having been sent out by Noah after The Flood, “the dove came back to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf.” Although Rossetti was known to call Elizabeth Siddal his “meek unconscious dove,” her being a “*rara avis in terris*,” the bird accompanying her in *Beata*

*Beatrix* is quite different from the celestial dove portrayed in other paintings.<sup>55</sup> If we compare the red bird to the white dove in Rossetti's earlier paintings, we see that this crimson-toned mutant appears with a crest upon its head. Whenever the white dove appears in Rossetti's work, it has a smoother profile. Is it pure coincidence that around the same time as he was completing *Beata Beatrix*, Rossetti was drafting his poem "A Last Confession" (1869-70) with its Italian "pigeon-haunted pinnacles" or is it merely serendipitous that he owned a little-known James Smetham oil painting, "framed and glazed Pigeons, &c.," which could have been used for reference when painting his crested bird?<sup>56</sup> Although the dove and the pigeon belong to the same genus, *Columbidae*, they are miles apart symbolically. The Holy Spirit in Christian depictions traditionally descends as a pure white dove, not as a rosy coloured pigeon, and Mrs (Ann) Jameson, the nineteenth-century iconographic authority, does not know of any red dove precedents, although she does highlight the Dantean notion of the *Uccelli di Dio*, or birds of God, whose function is to carry souls to Purgatory.<sup>57</sup> In a note at the conclusion of a chapter exploring the symbolism of Angels and Archangels, she recalls:

... a picture by Gentile da Fabriano (Berlin Gallery), the Virgin and Child are enthroned, and on each side of the throne is a tree, on the branches of which are little red Seraphim winged and perched like birds, singing and making music.<sup>58</sup> (*fig. 95*)

Interestingly, we can appreciate that while Rossetti utilises the white dove in religious subjects, he sets another precedent in paintings relating to his Italian muses, Dante and Boccaccio. The red bird appears in two other

Rossetti oil paintings, first in another inspired by Dante's *Vita Nuova*: *Dante's Dream at the Time of the Death of Beatrice* (fig. 87). Rossetti introduces a similar red bird in the upper right of the canvas. The bird flies into the room, significantly, its colour mirroring the hue of Love's robes, while a plethora of red poppies litter the floor around the expiring Beatrice. The same red bird reappears in *A Vision of Fiammetta* (fig. 2), Rossetti's homage to Boccaccio. It hovers above the head of Fiammetta as an omen of her fast approaching transition:

Behold Fiammetta, shown in Vision here.

Gloom-girt 'mid Spring-flushed apple-growth she stands;  
And as she sways the branches with her hands,  
Along her arm the sundered bloom falls sheer,  
In separate petals shed, each like a tear;  
While from the quivering bough the bird expands  
His wings. And lo! thy spirit understands  
Life shaken and shower'd and flown, and Death drawn near.

All stirs with change. Her garments beat the air:

The angel circling round her aureole  
Shimmers in flight against the tree's grey bole:  
While she, with reassuring eyes most fair,  
A presage and a promise stands; as 'twere  
On Death's dark storm the rainbow of the Soul.<sup>59</sup>

Practically, the bird may be seen as a messenger of death, but even more subtly, it is the manifestation of a spectral embarkation towards another world. As it opens its wings, there is an instant realisation that Fiammetta's spirit is about to take flight, the bird's natural state mimicking the imminent

soaring of her soul, just as Beatrice's spirit is on the verge of transcendence as her red bird flies into the canvas with its spectral poppy in its mouth.

*Beata Beatrix* immerses us in a dream of a dream of a dream. We are drawn into Rossetti's own dream as he paints his dream of Dante dreaming of his beloved who is, herself, on the brink of yet another dream-like existence. Situated in this hazy product of the imagination – this Dantean garden, with what could conceivably be the Ponte Vecchio and the Duomo of Florence silhouetted behind Dante to the right and the red-clad allegory of Love to the left – we are on the threshold of any number of other dimensions. However, it would be wrong to assume that Rossetti's dreams are pure fantasy for they are planted firmly in reality: the stark reality of the moment of expiration and the eternal loss that ensues. That realisation, is however, mitigated by an intensely intimate moment of ecstatic communion with that indefinable spirit of that which makes us human.

While the white dove descends from the Heavens, the red bird ascends with the spirit of the departed, and where the white brings celestial purity down to earth, the red takes Love back to its source. Meanwhile, the white poppy is dropped into Beatrice's lap as a sign of her corporeal fragility. Wafer-thin, "its petals fall so quickly... and its texture is fragile and wanting in endurance".<sup>60</sup> The white poppy is a sign of the human condition: small, insignificant, and infinitely delicate, but as this physical manifestation of Nature is discarded into the cradle of the womb, Beatrice's spiritual transition is complete.

## Synonymous Spooks

As we began to appreciate in chapter three – Synonym – Rossetti’s flowers are not merely like his beautiful women. By mirroring and assuming their condition, they transcend normal boundaries, transforming into his women. *Beata Beatrix* is a complex pastiche of multiple spectral references, but at its simplest and most complex Beatrice and the white poppy appear to be synonymous. It is just possible to capture these ephemeral phantom-like associations, if only for a moment. The white fragility of the flower, soon to wither and die, reflects Beatrice’s corporeal ephemerality. Simultaneously, placed in the bird’s beak, the poppy foretells the imminent journey of Beatrice’s soul. Concurrently, its anticipated narcotic effect adds to the intensity of Beatrice’s dreamlike state. At the same time, as a white flower, it reminds us of Dante’s white rose of Paradise, encapsulating all that is good and pure in the world: Beatrice. Beyond these direct synonymous associations, however, there is also a wider perspective to consider.

Journalist, poet and art critic Théophile Gautier was much admired by Rossetti’s close friend Swinburne, so much so that Swinburne translated the French poet’s verses into English and contributed “one of the most extraordinary tributes ever paid by one poet to the memory of another.”<sup>61</sup> Swinburne, too, a great advocate of Rossetti, was the first to identify synergy between the two men, seamlessly conflating their names in correspondence, claiming that he had been too much under the morally identical influence of Gabriel Gautier and of Théophile Rossetti.<sup>62</sup> However, in contrast to Gautier, a fervent exponent of the Art for Art’s Sake edict, Rossetti, according to

William Sharp, “was too true a poet to indulge in the heresy underlying the doctrine of art for art’s sake; a doctrine that he accepted and carried out in so far as consistent with his instinctively or consciously apprehended ethics of artistic creation, so far and no farther.”<sup>63</sup> He was just as interested in delving into the subtleties of consciousness (and, let us not forget, in ensuring the maximum commercial value of his work) as he was in creating a painting to be admired purely for its aesthetic value.

Critically in this investigation, Gautier explored the hidden depths of the spectre of a flower in his poem “Le spectre de la Rose”, first published in the cycle, “La Comédie de la Mort” (1838).<sup>64</sup> This “parfait magician ès lettres françaises” to whom Baudelaire dedicated *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1857, had a vision of death where flowers transform into sentient beings, both separate from and simultaneously intimate with the central female protagonist:

Soulève ta paupière close  
Qu’effleure un songe virginal ;  
Je suis le spectre d’une rose  
Que tu portais hier au bal.  
Tu me pris encore emperlée  
Des pleurs d’argent de l’arrosoir,  
Et parmi la fête étoilée  
Tu me promenas tout le soir.

Ô toi qui de ma mort fus cause,  
Sans que tu puisses le chasser  
Toute la nuit mon spectre rose  
A ton chevet viendra danser.  
Mais ne crains rien, je ne réclame



Ni messe, ni De Profundis ;  
Ce léger parfum est mon âme  
Et j'arrive du paradis.

Mon destin fut digne d'envie :  
Pour avoir un trépas si beau,  
Plus d'un aurait donné sa vie,  
Car j'ai ta gorge pour tombeau,  
Et sur l'albâtre où je repose  
Un poète avec un baiser  
Ecrivit : Ci-gît une rose  
Que tous les rois vont jalouser

Open your eyelids,  
Brushed by a virginal dream;  
I am the spectre of a rose  
That yesterday you wore at the dance.  
You plucked me still sprinkled  
With silver tears of dew,  
And amid the glittering feast  
You wore me all evening long.

O you who brought about my death,  
You shall be powerless to banish me:  
The rosy spectre which every night  
Will come to dance at your bedside.  
But be not afraid – I demand  
Neither Mass nor De Profundis;  
This faint perfume is my soul,  
And I come from Paradise.

My destiny was worthy of envy;  
And for such a beautiful fate,  
Many would have given their lives –

For my tomb is on your breast,  
And on the alabaster where I lie,  
A poet with a kiss  
Has written: Here lies a rose  
Which every king will envy.<sup>65</sup>

Gautier's personified rose, "la fleur immortelle," rises as a phantom to haunt the dreams of the young woman who severed the flower from its branch the day before. Exemplifying Gautier's edict that the goal of art was not the exact reproduction of nature, but the concealment of its inadequacy, and the transformation of its poverty into richness, the rose is elevated by Gautier's personification of the flower. In the process, it undergoes a transition from natural to beyond natural, or more accurately to super-natural. Art, as the creative generative force behind this transformation, is, according to Gautier "more beautiful, truer, and more powerful than nature; nature is stupid, without consciousness of itself, lacking a mind or passions. It is something dull and insensible that needs us to breathe life and soul into it."<sup>66</sup>

Death becomes transformative, delivering the flower and the woman from the gruesome realities of physical corruption, and raising them both to a state of perfection. The rose's spectre becomes the incarnation of her deepest consciousness and the similarities with Rossetti's poppy in *Beata Beatrix* are hauntingly close. Firstly, the poppy can be seen as a painterly incarnation of Gautier's poetic spectre, sacrificed to immortalise Beatrice (both as an expression of artistic creativity, being cut literally from its stem, and, as an incarnation of the flower on the canvas, as a spectre of its original form). Secondly, it moves beyond its inherent symbolic value as a harbinger

of sleep to assume a displaced identity. It is neither... nor, neither a living nor a lifeless poppy, but somewhere in between both states. Thirdly, it has an intimate, dream-like relationship with the central female figure, where we cannot be sure where the barrier between the conscious, unconscious and sub-conscious begins and ends. William Sharp's view that "art in the abstract was a beautiful dream to Rossetti" seems particularly congruent, in so far as everything in this painting could be described as a sublime abstract dream made concrete in the realisation of the painting.<sup>67</sup> At the same time that realisation appears as a "spectacular," pulsating mirage.

Rossetti's poppy, like Gautier's rose, can enter a space beyond our comprehension: an "undead" space where it is possible for a flower to display human attributes. Both sensual blooms die to keep the woman's memory alive, and both flowers move from the purely symbolic to a place where they are able to become synonymous with their female benefactor. In the case of *Beata Beatrix*, the blanched fragility of the flower reflects the ashen features of the central protagonist. The life force in the poppy has been assimilated into the dove, almost by osmosis, just as Beatrice's spirit is being drawn away from her physical body to the light. Beatrice is being lulled into this transformative state for her transcendence is not a violent one; it is not anguished nor painful, but rather she is experiencing what Christianity might recognise as a state of Grace. The cadaverous poppy, as it drops, simulates the dead heavy feeling experienced by Beatrice on the point of death coinciding with the lightness of the release of her soul. The delicacy of Rossetti's observation and the tenderness of his depiction of the cut poppy poignantly heightens the sense of spiritual ecstasy experienced, and this "in

an age obsessed with public moralism ... that often proscribed the expression of intimate feelings and personal philosophy.”<sup>68</sup>

### Specimen Allusions

The specimen Rossetti elects to use in his paintings yields any number of allusory possibilities, as we have seen, but in this particular painting we return to the interminable question of why Rossetti chose a white poppy over a red. Interestingly, John Ruskin endorsed the crimson poppy’s many attributes in 1874:

I have in my hand a small red poppy ... It is an intensely simple, intensely floral, flower. All silk and flame, a scarlet cup, perfect-edged all round, seen among the wild grass far away, like a burning coal fallen from Heaven’s altars. You cannot have a more complete, a more stainless, type of flower absolute; inside and outside, all flower. No sparing of colour anywhere – no outside coarseness – no interior secrecies.<sup>69</sup>

Ruskin’s poppy is most likely to be, from its description, the corn rose or *Papaver rhoeas*, best appreciated for its colour of red flame “like burning coal fallen from Heaven’s altars.” Rossetti’s poppy in *Beata Beatrix* does not share, of course, this chromatic quality, being drained of its crimson colour. It does, however, possibly share another attribute described in Ruskin’s natural history meditations, *Proserpina*. Ruskin tells us that “some poppies have three sepals, and twice three petals”,<sup>70</sup> making a total of nine major component parts – nine, of course, being Dante’s mystical number and the

number most associated with Beatrice. Did Rossetti choose the poppy for this reason or was it for its chromatic qualities?

We are in the fortunate position of being able to compare Rossetti's finished *Beata Beatrix* oil painting in the Tate (white poppy and red bird) (*fig. 14*) with the unfinished version, later completed by Ford Madox Brown, now in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (red poppy, white dove) (*fig. 96*). It is immediately evident that the sense of the unfamiliar engendered in the Tate version is absent in the later replica. The Ford Madox Brown-completed rendition appears clichéd in comparison, with its plump white dove carrying two red poppies in its beak rather than one (possibly a reference to the reunion of Gabriel and Lizzie in Paradise?) There is no process of exchange in the Birmingham version, whereas in the Tate's the colours of the haloed bird and the flower appear to have blended and merged into one another – so crucial to the conveyance of the feeling of Beatrice's transitory change of consciousness. The question remains: can we determine if this is a red poppy painted white for effect or a white poppy painted from Nature? We may never be sure, but Gerard's *Herball*, Rossetti's go-to floral guide, may help us to get closer to the truth by grappling with the phantom resonances of the poppy in the Early Modern period.

According to Gerard's *Herball*, the garden poppy was red, bluish purple or white in colour or a mix of these colours. They were all capable of producing opium, the condensed juice of poppy heads.<sup>71</sup> The white garden poppy, a favourite in Early Modern gardens, was still widely available in the

1860s. According to John Ingram in his *Flora Symbolica* (1869) it was a sign of “Sleep” and/or “My Home” in floriographic terms, and it is listed alongside the red poppy (Consolation) and the scarlet poppy (Fantastic extravagance). Regardless of which colour Rossetti chose to adopt, therefore, the flower could have presented narcotic qualities. However, if Rossetti had already determined to use a red bird as one of the other principal symbols, as in *Dante’s Dream*, then being “a remarkable colourist,” with a keen eye for chromatic balance, he would not have used a single red poppy in such close proximity.<sup>72</sup> The red bird in the lower right of the painting is diagonally mirroring the red hues of Love in the top left of the canvas, establishing an intrinsic relationship between the two. Although he used dozens of red poppy flowers scattered on the floor in *Dante’s Dream*, the one poppy in *Beata Beatrix* has a much stronger resonance, being deliberately placed to be synonymous with Beatrice and, in particular, with the process of transcendence, her spirit leaving the physical realm just as the colour has abandoned the flower.

The poppy, a flower “mingled of good and evil,” was only acknowledged to be addictive in 1868 with the introduction of the Pharmacy Act.<sup>73</sup> Previously, it had been known as “one of the most noble remedies in the world,” and there were no restrictions placed on its acquisition nor was the taking of opium subject to moral censure.<sup>74</sup> The most popular opium derivative, laudanum, by which Siddal died, was an alcoholic herbal mixture containing approximately 10% opium usually mixed with wine or water. It was the nineteenth-century equivalent of aspirin, being widely available and

relatively inexpensive: sold over the counter for as little as a penny for twenty-five drops.

Although Rossetti is known in 1874 to have “swallowed a large quantity of laudanum with suicidal intent prompted by hallucinations, following which he was in a lethal trance for two days,”<sup>75</sup> his drug of choice was chloral or chloral hydrate.<sup>76</sup> This was the first synthetically produced sedative hypnotic drug, often taken as an analgesic, using it in the earliest application of it for a true medicinal and legitimate object, probably under medical direction. Rossetti had not encountered chloral at the time he commenced painting the original *Beata Beatrix* (1864), but he had taken it by the time he was completing the painting (1870), having been introduced to it by William J. Stillman as a soporific during the autumn of 1869.<sup>77</sup> Rossetti was undeniably under its influence when working on the most important of all the *Beatrix* replicas (three in oil, a watercolour and two in coloured chinks), the oil for William Graham, completed in 1872. Candidly, he admits to creating “at least a dozen works” while taking “the eternal drug,” including *Dis Manibus (Roman Widow)* (fig. 19), *La Bella Mano* (fig. 36), *A Sea-Spell* (fig. 20), and *Astarte Syriaca* (fig. 97).<sup>78</sup> Much, and perhaps some unjust significance, has been attached to the influence of the chloral addiction upon Rossetti’s physical and mental health. Rossetti himself recognised the seriousness of his dependency for “if an opinion were to get abroad that [his] works were subject to a derogatory influence which reduced their beauty and value it would be most injurious to [him].”<sup>79</sup>

Although on balance “there appears to be little doubt that Rossetti’s mental deterioration was due to his addiction,”<sup>80</sup> chloral was not recognised as a dangerous drug until close to the end of the century, and as “the most popular hypnotic,” it was also the one which most frequently gave rise to habit.<sup>81</sup> Rossetti’s inability to sleep, his failing vision, his emotional crises, dalliance in the occult, and his longstanding addiction to chloral washed down with a tumbler of neat whisky would have rendered him appreciative of the full implications of the nature of spectrality. Often his day to day existence was neither fully conscious nor fully unconscious with him keeping exceedingly irregular hours, leading eventually to a nervous breakdown in June 1872. Although hardly a walking spectre, towards the end of his life, Hall Caine recalled how he and Rossetti would share evenings where:

too soon the insatiable craving for the drug came with renewed force, and then all pleasant intercourse was banished. Night after night we sat up until eleven, twelve, and one o’clock, watching the long hours go by with heavy steps; waiting, waiting, waiting for the time at which he could take his first draught, and drop into his pillowed place and snatch a dreamless sleep of three or four hours’ duration.<sup>82</sup>

Plagued by sleep deprivation, Rossetti’s existence increasingly traversed the blurred edges of consciousness, and inevitably his creative vision followed suit.

### An Awful Smell or a Scentless Breath?

As we have already learned, scent and breath are intimately related. Beatrice in this painting, with her eyes closed, her mouth open, her nose tilted



upwards, is inhaling one final time before she expires. She is sensually ethereal, ghostly, weightless and radiant air, the final element to abandon the physical body at death. She is elusive and yet almost tangible, the effect of whatever she is breathing in magnified as it is ingested through the mouth and the nose simultaneously. The majority of the hundred or more species of poppy are scentless.<sup>83</sup> However, opium poppy seeds possess a scent, according to Rev. Hilderic Friend which is “anything but pleasant,”<sup>84</sup> and while “there be many variable colours, and of great beauty,” the opium poppy has an “evill smell” according to Gerard.<sup>85</sup> As Beatrice breathes in one final time, the bitter sweet aroma rises into her nostrils, mirroring the Greek belief of the soul rising as an ephemeral wisp of scented breath.

Moreover, the intimate synergy between the ephemeral scent and the fragile breath evokes a kind of metaphorical pseudesthesia. Usually a variation on the illusory tactile sensation without any physical basis from the Greek *pseudes* (false) and *aesthesis* (feeling),<sup>86</sup> most often experienced as the sensation of a phantom limb, or part of a limb, being still attached to the body after it has been amputated,<sup>87</sup> this sensation is momentary, attached to life, even as it ebbs away. Aware that pseudesthesia is experienced by almost all amputees, and the sensations include pain in the vast majority of cases,<sup>88</sup> the severing of Beatrice’s “phantom limb,” her attachment to life, is a sublimely painful experience, teetering on the edge of an unconscious and unknown world of dreams we can but yet only imagine.

Pre-empting Sigmund Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams* by three decades (1900), Rossetti is well ahead of his time in presenting an exposition

of the mind. It is interesting how Rossetti's personal motto, appearing on the stationery he commissioned when moving to "that house of dreams and shadows,"<sup>89</sup> Tudor House in Cheyne Walk (1862), *Frangas Non Flectas* (You break, you don't bend), has some commonality with Freud's dedication in *Interpretation of Dreams: Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo* (If the will of those above me cannot be moved, then I shall move the River Acheron). The latter quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book VII, 312) may well have influenced both Rossetti and Freud, with both intent on bringing a fresh perspective to an entrenched mindset. Rossetti's determination was to rise beyond 'going to Nature' to a state of Natural Supernaturalism, crossing the Acheron to dissolve accepted boundaries merging body and soul, the corporeal and the spiritual, creator and the creation.<sup>90</sup> Rossetti is particularly interested in what Helene Roberts calls "the imaginative evocation of the spirit" of Nature.<sup>91</sup> The supernatural may be like "water in the hand," inhabiting a realm the human mind cannot begin to conceive,<sup>92</sup> but Rossetti gives us spectral glimpses of it, ebbing and flowing as the blanched flower, the Love-impregnated bird, and the ghostly woman conjoin as a seamless entity.

The four pillars of Symbol, Synonym, Specimen and Scent have proven to be useful in approaching the notion of Spectre in this painting, *Beata Beatrix*. We have grown to appreciate that the phantom of a flower is a complex, elusive, and at times, contradictory concept, identified only when considered in a relationship with something else, and then only momentarily until it surfaces again. As Derrida wrote, "a ghost never dies", it remains always to come back time and time again.<sup>93</sup>

As the spectre of a rose demonstrates, a flower is capable of a refined sense of self as it faces death. It is immortal, at least in the world of dreams, and so, too, is Beatrice, despite her physical corruption. Rossetti is not using the poppy because it “means” sleep or to highlight the method of Elizabeth Siddal’s demise, wracked with guilt and haunted by her wandering spectre. On the contrary, from a symbolic point of view, although there is only one principal flower, there are unlimited floral phantoms inhabiting the painting, all demonstrating a different way of seeing. There is, in even the most conservative analysis: the phantom of red and white, the theological versus secular, the saintly versus the profane, the personal versus the literary, *Vita Nuova* versus the Biblical, the body versus the soul, death versus rebirth, descension versus ascension, reality versus the dream, loss versus gain, ephemerality versus eternity, and one individual experience against the human condition.

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<sup>1</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, “Youth and Lordship” (*Italian Street-Song*), in *Complete Works*, ed. William M. Rossetti (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886), 369, lines 35-40.

<sup>2</sup> Brian and Judy Dobbs, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Alien Victorian* (London: Macdonald and Jane’s, 1977), 172.

<sup>3</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Charles Augustus Howell, 16 September 1869. In William E. Fredeman ed., *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-2015), vol. 4, 280-81 (letter 69.157).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 13 October 1869. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 302-3 (letter 69.181).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Henry Hall Caine, *Recollections of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Elliot Stock, 1882), 48.

<sup>7</sup> Dobbs, *Alien Victorian*, 172.

<sup>8</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 13 October 1869. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 302-3 (letter 69.181).

<sup>9</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Algernon Charles Swinburne, 26 October 1869. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 4, 312 (letter 69.190).

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- <sup>10</sup> Jan Marsh, *The Legend of Elizabeth Siddal*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Quartet Books, 2010), 21.
- <sup>11</sup> Louis J. Bragman suggests that it is four years after Siddal's death that Rossetti becomes interested in spiritualism. See "The Case of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Psychological Study of a Chloral Addict," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 92 (1935-6): 1111-1121.
- <sup>12</sup> Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell eds., *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1.
- <sup>13</sup> Martin Stannard ed. *Evelyn Waugh: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1984), 78-80, 78.
- <sup>14</sup> Thomas Craven, *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 September 1928.
- <sup>15</sup> William Tirebuck, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: His Work and Influence* (London: Elliott Stock, 1882), 26.
- <sup>16</sup> Bown et al., *Victorian Supernatural*, 1.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Jen Cadwallader, *Spirits and Spirituality in Victorian Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 13.
- <sup>19</sup> Vanessa D. Dickerson, *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 28.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Marie Sinclair, Countess of Caithness, *A Midnight Visit to Holyrood* (C. L. H. Wallace, 1887), 38.
- <sup>22</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (Abingdon & New York: Routledge, 1994), 20-21.
- <sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Marx, c'est quelqu'un," in Jacques Derrida, Marc Guillaume and Jean-Pierre Vincent, *Marx en Jeu* (Paris: Descartes, 1997), 9-28.
- <sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters*, 161.
- <sup>25</sup> See Jacques Derrida, "The Ghost Dance: An interview with Jacques Derrida," trans. Jean-luc Svoboda (1989), 60-73 and Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002).
- <sup>26</sup> W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1945), 86-87.
- <sup>27</sup> Robertson, *Time Was*, 86-87
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Beata Beatrix," Tate, accessed 28 March 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-beata-beatrix-n01279>.
- <sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Prettejohn, "The Pre-Raphaelite Model," in *Model and Supermodel: The Artist's Model in British Art and Culture*, eds. Jane Desmarais, Martin Postle and William Vaughan (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2006), 26-47, 37.
- <sup>32</sup> J. B. Bullen, *Rossetti: Painter and Poet* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2011), 175.

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<sup>33</sup> Jan Marsh, "Did Rossetti Really Need to Exhume his Wife?" *The Times Literary Supplement*, 15 February 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Margaretta S. Frederick, "The Replication of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Beata Beatrix – Demand and Desire," *The Review of the Pre-Raphaelite Society*, 25<sup>th</sup> Year, XXI, no. 3 (Autumn, 2013): 27. Note: According to Virginia Surtees, along with the original (S168), there was a red chalk with some black and touches of white (S168 R1), a watercolour (S168 R2), and an oil with a predella (S168 R3) executed for William Graham; a coloured chalk version (S168 R4) and an oil (S168 R6) for L.R. Valpy; and an unfinished oil, subsequently given to William Michael's wife, Lucy, by the artist. (S168 R5).

<sup>35</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 11 August 1871. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 108-10 (letter 71.120).

<sup>36</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 31 August 1871. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol 5, 128-9 (71.132).

<sup>37</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 10 September 1871. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 143-6 (71.145).

<sup>38</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 7 September 1871. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 137-138 (letter 71.140). Rossetti writes: "I think I'd see painting d\_\_d if one could. That vile replica has plagued me here, but seems coming round again ... I can't be bothered to stick idle names on things now – a head is a head: and fools won't buy heads on that footing."

<sup>39</sup> H. C. Marillier, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: An Illustrated Memorial of his Art and Life*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1904), 37.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Campbell, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Three Papers Read to the Rossetti Society of Birchington* (Birchington: Beresford, 1993), paper 2, 16.

<sup>41</sup> See Angela Dunstan, "The Myth of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* as a Memorial Painting," *British Art Journal* XI, no.1 (2010): 89-92.

<sup>42</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 10 September 1871. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 143-6 (letter 71.145).

<sup>43</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ellen Heaton, 19 May 1863. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 51 (letter 63.54).

<sup>44</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ellen Heaton, 22 December 1863. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 98 (63.116).

<sup>45</sup> "Beata Beatrix," Tate, accessed 20 May 2019,

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rossetti-beata-beatrix-n01279>.

<sup>46</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Mrs William Cowper Temple, 26 March 1871. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 5, 41-2 (letter 71.43).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *The Early Italian Poets from Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300) in the Original Metres Together with Dante's Vita Nuova translated by D. G. Rossetti* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1861).

<sup>49</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ellen Heaton, 19 May 1863. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 51 (letter 63.54).

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- <sup>50</sup> Jennifer Potter, *Seven Flowers and How They Shaped Our World* (London: Atlantic Books, 2013), 99.
- <sup>51</sup> Today, the Royal British Legion is keen to ensure that the red poppy is no longer seen as a jingoistic call to arms, but rather as a sign of hope and gratitude, a stance reinforced when Frank-Walter Steinmeier, President of Germany, was finally invited to lay his nation's poppy wreath alongside the Queen's at the Cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday 2018.
- <sup>52</sup> Rev. Hilderic Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore* (London: W. Swan Sonnenschein, 1883), 513.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 611.
- <sup>54</sup> Potter, *Seven Flowers*, 99
- <sup>55</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Christina Rossetti, 4 August 1852. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 197-9 (letter 52.8).
- <sup>56</sup> Wharton (T. G.), Martin & Co, *Dante G. Rossetti, Deceased ... Catalogue of the Household & Decorative Furniture [&C.] ... Which will be sold by auction ... July, 1882*, 17.
- <sup>57</sup> Mrs Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art*, 2 vols. (Boston, Mass.; New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), vol. 1, note 1, 123.
- <sup>58</sup> Jameson, *Sacred Art*, vol. 1, 123.
- <sup>59</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Fiammetta (For a Picture.)," in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 362, lines 1-14.
- <sup>60</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 389.
- <sup>61</sup> Swinburne contributed to the volume of poetic requiems chanted by the French choir over the grave of Gautier in Greek, Latin, French and English: *Tombeau de Théophile Gautier* (1873).
- <sup>62</sup> Cecil Y. Lang ed. *The Swinburne Letters*, 6 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Oxford University Press, 1962), vol. 5, 207 (letter 1440).
- <sup>63</sup> William Sharp, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study*, 414.
- <sup>64</sup> Gautier's neighbour and friend, Hector Berlioz, set six of the poems, including "Le Spectre de la Mort" "to music, as part of his *Les Nuits d'Été* cycle and then orchestrated all six between 1843-56. The poem further inspired Berlioz's orchestration of Carl Maria von Weber's *Aufforderung zum Tanz*, which in its turn inspired a Michel Fokine choreographed ballet, starring Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky when it launched in 1911.
- <sup>65</sup> Théophile Gautier, "Le Spectre de la Rose" (1838) in *A French Song Companion*, Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- <sup>66</sup> Gautier, *La Presse*, 24 March 1837.
- <sup>67</sup> Sharp, *A Record and a Study*, 409.
- <sup>68</sup> Ronald W. Johnson, "Dante Rossetti's *Beata Beatrix* and the *New Life*," *Art Bulletin*, 57, no.4 (1 December 1975): 548.
- <sup>69</sup> John Ruskin, *Proserpina: Studies of Wayside Flowers, While the Air was Yet Pure*, 2 vols. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1888), vol. 1, 70.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 95.
- <sup>71</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 370.

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- <sup>72</sup> *Artist and Journal of Home Culture* (Rossetti's Obituary), 1 May 1882, 141.
- <sup>73</sup> Ruskin, *Proserpina*, 104.
- <sup>74</sup> Richard Mead, Royal College of Physicians, accessed 1 July 2018, <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/noble-remedy>.
- <sup>75</sup> See Louis J. Bragman, "The Case of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Psychological Study of a Chloral Addict," *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* (March 1937), 85(3): 346. Rossetti's reliance on the drug continued throughout the 1870s, only curtailed when his physician, Dr John Marshall, decided that in December 1881 "the time had come when the chloral must be decisively, instantly, and entirely cut off."
- <sup>77</sup> David I. Macht and Nellie L. Gessford, "The Unfortunate Drug Experiences of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Bulletin of the Institute of History* 6, no. 1 (January 1938): 34-61, 37-8.
- <sup>78</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frederic Shields, 21 October 1877. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 7, 427-8 (letter 77.119).
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>80</sup> Macht and Gessford, "Unfortunate Drug Experiences," 34.
- <sup>81</sup> Professor R. W. Wilcox, "The Use and Abuse of Chloral," *The Post Graduate, New York Times*, 5 December 1897, 22.
- <sup>82</sup> Hall Caine, *Recollections*, 284.
- <sup>83</sup> Genders, *Scented Flora*, 25.
- <sup>84</sup> Friend, *Flowers and Flower Lore*, 389.
- <sup>85</sup> Gerard, *Herball*, 370.
- <sup>86</sup> Elizabeth A. Martin and Tanya A. McFerran, *A Dictionary of Psychology*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>87</sup> Andrew M Colman, *A Dictionary of Nursing*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- <sup>88</sup> Martin et al., *A Dictionary of Psychology*.
- <sup>89</sup> W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was: The Reminiscences of W. Graham Robertson* (London: Hamish Hamilton), 1945, 209.
- <sup>90</sup> See Lucien L. Agosta, "Animate Images: The Later Poem-Paintings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 23, no.1. (Spring 1981): 78-101, 79.
- <sup>91</sup> Helen E. Roberts, "The Dream World of Dante Gabriel Rossetti," *Victorian Studies* 17, no. 4 (1 June 1974): 371-392, 375.
- <sup>92</sup> Bown et al., *Victorian Supernatural*, 9.
- <sup>93</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters*, 123.

## Conclusion

The former professor of social anthropology at Cambridge University, Jack Goody, explained that his research into the culture of flowers was deemed all too often to be nothing short of risible. He wrote that “most people actually laugh at me for carrying on research in these matters, and I am accused of busying myself with trifles.”<sup>1</sup> This propensity to dismiss the floral as inconsequential owes much to flowers’ intimate association with Woman: Woman as submissive muse, Woman as subservient model, Woman as decorative appendage. Yet, one of the founders of Pre-Raphaelitism, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, deemed them to be so indispensable that he included them in the majority of his major works. The significance of this inclusion has been overlooked until now, primarily because a methodology for assessing his relationship with flowers has proved to be elusive.

This dissertation seeks to provide this new methodology and to demonstrate, by example, how it is able to uncover previously veiled insight into Rossetti’s floral repertoire. Dante’s four layers of interpretation are helpful in assessing Rossetti’s work, but how applicable are they to other Pre-Raphaelite artists? It may be that adopting a schema of Specimen, Symbol, Synonym, Scent and Spectre may, instead, provide a way into re-assessing and re-evaluating their works, possibly breathing new life into formerly unchallenged interpretations.



Until now, floral enquiry surrounding Rossetti specifically, and Pre-Raphaelitism more generally, has been focused on distilling meaning “which can be read as clearly as a sonnet of the frame.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated that in Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s case, this quest for meaning is less than desirable, all too often subjective, and often prone to lead us all down blind alleys. We can become so fixated by our desire to attribute ‘meaning’ that inevitably we manipulate disparate ‘significant details’ to make them fit into a particular stream of thought, creating a narrative that is all too often based on layers of contrivance and fancy.

It is widely accepted that the Victorian language of flowers can be used to translate these floral hieroglyphics. However, its only relevance to the Symbol in Rossetti’s art is that it sometimes references Classical and Christian iconography, and although this idiom is “extremely pretty and pleasant,”<sup>3</sup> I have demonstrated that it is never a fixed language, may be inaccurate and, at times, manufactured.

It is further assumed that the eminent Victorian art critic, Walter Pater, is responsible for initiating the view that “the appreciation of Pre-Raphaelite art depended upon the viewer’s fluency in an esoteric language of symbols,”<sup>4</sup> but I have discovered that Pater was wholly unconnected with this statement.

Numerous art historians (including myself in the past) have extolled the likelihood of Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelites walking “with nature in all singleness of heart ... laboriously and trustingly, having no other thoughts

but how best to penetrate her meaning,”<sup>5</sup> without realising that Ruskin was, in fact, referring to not one, but two natures – with quite different connotations.<sup>6</sup>

Others (again, I include myself in this cohort) have been long perturbed by William Michael Rossetti’s apparent dismissal of his brother’s oeuvre, seemingly describing his creations as little more than beautiful women with floral accessories,<sup>7</sup> without realising that the nineteenth-century definition of his chosen word “adjunct” meant something subtly different to twenty-first century comprehension.<sup>8</sup>

This dissertation has been the first to consider the range of specimens appearing in Rossetti’s paintings, relating them to entries in Gerard’s *Herball*, calculating the space occupied by those flowers, and thinking about the profusion of colour, state of health and position of these flowers. This research has shown that Gerard’s *Herball* is a much more reliable source of information than any Victorian language of flowers text. Some flowers have been misidentified by critics from the beginning, or during in the intervening years, and these errors have gone unnoticed and have been repeated in good faith.

I can now say with some confidence that visual analysis combined with empirical reviews and Rossetti’s own correspondence prove that Rossetti’s language of flowers is a distinct language, in so far as it is a complex, ever-changing mixture of allusion and illusion. This review also

reveals five clear chronological floral trends which might prove useful in future research.

Rossetti owes a debt to past masters as in *The Blue Bower*,<sup>9</sup> and yet Rossetti may well have chosen flowers for their colour, as in *La Ghirlandata*,<sup>10</sup> or elected to use flowers for their effect on the compositional balance of the painting, as in *Veronica Veronese*.<sup>11</sup> He painted flowers because he knew that his subject identified with them, as in *Blanzifiore*,<sup>12</sup> or because he himself could associate his subject with them, as in *Bocca Baciata*.<sup>13</sup> Some flowers conjured comforting memories, as with *Sancta Liliis*,<sup>14</sup> others reminded him of his mother, whose “dear beautiful old face,” he would recall “reading or enjoying the garden prospect” at Kelmscott Manor.<sup>15</sup> He could choose a flower because he considered it to be the most appropriate for his subject, as in the rose in *Fair Rosamund* or the fleur de lis in *Joan of Arc (kissing the sword of deliverance)*, but would also consider using flowers growing in a friend’s garden at the time he needed them, for example, when painting *La Donna della Finestra (The Lady of Pity)*.<sup>16</sup> Sometimes, he was advised that a particular flower would be the most suitable,<sup>17</sup> and at other times, he would go out of his way to find just the right bloom.<sup>18</sup> Occasionally, he would forgo the flower altogether, for example in *Helen of Troy*, believing his subject to be a flower incarnate, with her “Parian face and mouth of ardent blossom, a keen red-flower-bud of fire.”<sup>19</sup>

This first layer of interpretation, relating to Dante’s Literal lens, although critical, is no more than a rudimentary alphabet. In Rossetti’s language of flowers, the sentence structure, or the Allegorical in the form of

Symbol, provides a further, much more detailed and contradictory layer of interpretation. At the very heart of Rossetti's symbolism is the idea that the sacred and the profane co-exist. The lily in *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* is both a sacred symbol of the Annunciation and a profane manifestation of the phallic; the marigold in *Bocca Baciata* is both a divine flower and a symbol of shared pleasure; the flower, having turned to fruit in *Proserpine*, is both a symbol of resurrection and an overt reference to the defiled sex. As the sacred and profane become blurred the result provides a space where there are no longer any divisions, rules, nor compulsion to conform.

It is, however, the grammar of Rossetti's language, relating to Dante's Moral sense, as revealed through Synonym, that adds context. It is this interpretative layer that promotes social, political and cultural substance. Where Dante's understanding of the Moral revolves around adherence to Biblical texts, Rossetti's Moral sense is more closely aligned to the conscience of the heart.<sup>20</sup> At a time when women were still chattels of fathers and husbands, rather than dissecting them into fetishistic body parts,<sup>21</sup> Rossetti dared to openly celebrate their womanliness, elevate their sex, and deify their gender. He personified women as resplendent roses, as tender lilies, as blushing anemone crowns, as magnificent marigolds, as poppies, paper-thin in their fragility in order to revel in their eternal life-creating, life-enhancing, life-fulfilling pulchritude. He is immersed in highlighting the hypocrisy of a culture that reveres the holy mother while simultaneously denigrating the natural act responsible for procreation. He cannot help but reveal the dichotomy of a culture where the Virgin Mary and her child can be worshipped while human mothers and their progeny, conceived, like the

Christ Child, out of wedlock, are forced to the very brink of annihilation. He, unlike his contemporaries, is courageous enough to demonstrate unequivocally that these torn flowers are incarcerated in the tautology of social convention “Like a rose shut in a book/In which pure women may not look,/For its base pages claim control/To crush the flower within the soul.”<sup>22</sup> None of Rossetti’s flowers are base, ripped or crushed. They are beautiful, eternal, mystical, natural and supernatural.

The presence of absence of a perfume provides a distinctive fragrant note to each painting: a fragrance recognised as individual memories, evoked unconsciously and involuntarily. This phantom air-borne ‘music’ enhances and confuses the senses, while spectral wisps of allusion float in and out of the frame, manifesting if only for a moment, and then disappearing just as swiftly, and equally mysteriously. Unlike most of his contemporaries, Rossetti uses flowers as intermediaries to a Mystical sphere, where nothing is ever quite as it seems, where anything is possible, and where flowers never die.

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Goody, *The Culture of Flowers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Preface.

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Phelps Smith, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s Lady Lilith and the Language of Flowers,” *Arts Magazine* 53 (February 1979): 142-145, 145.

<sup>3</sup> “Flora Symbolica: Or The Language and Sentiment of Flowers, including Floral Poetry, Original and Selected. By John Ingram. With Original Illustration, printed in Colours (Warne & Co.). Book Review, *Athenaeum*, 2198 (11 December 1869): 770.

<sup>4</sup> Debra Mancoff, *The Pre-Raphaelite Language of Flowers* (Munich, New York, and London: Prestel 2012), 6.

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<sup>5</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters I*. In *Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols., ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London and New York: George Allen and Longmans, Green and Co., 1993), vol. 3., 624.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter One, Specimen, 77.

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Three, Synonym, 173.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Three, Synonym, 175.

<sup>9</sup> In *The Blue Bower*, Rossetti may have used the cornflower to mimic Leonardo's use of juniper in his *Ginevra de' Benci* portrait. Juniper, or *ginepro* in Italian is a cognate of Ginevra's name representing chastity.<sup>9</sup> The cornflower in *The Blue Bower* is clearly a pun on Rossetti's model, Fanny Cornforth's name. Its symbolic meaning of 'delicacy' is surely Rossetti's idea of an ironic allusion: Cornforth being anything but delicate.

<sup>10</sup> In *La Ghirlandata*, Rossetti again refers back to a renowned Pre-Raphael artist, this time Ghirlandaio (the garland maker), and here he may well have been inclined to use larkspur for its colour rather than its symbolic value. an alteration."

<sup>11</sup> Figure 37.

<sup>12</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Jane Morris, 18 March 1880. In *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, 10 vols., ed. William E. Fredeman and others (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2002-2015), vol. 9, 99 (letter 80.94).

80.94, Letter to Jane Morris, 18 March 1880, vol. 9, 99.

<sup>13</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 5 September 1859. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 2, 269-70 (letter 59.35).

<sup>14</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 23 May 1854. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 1, 353 (letter 54.49).

<sup>15</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti, 23 February 1874. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 6, 404-5. (letter 74.36).

<sup>16</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Mrs William Cowper-Temple, 1 August 1878. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 8, 125 (letter 78.153).

<sup>17</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Catherine Howell, 18 June 1865. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 301 (letter 65.94).

<sup>18</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 9 August 1864. In Fredeman, *Correspondence*, vol. 3, 179-180 (letter 64.110).

<sup>19</sup> Rossetti's inscription from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, appears on verso of painting.

<sup>20</sup> See Introduction, 48-49.

<sup>21</sup> Griselda Pollock, "Woman as Sign: Psychoanalytic Readings," in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1991), 120-54.

<sup>22</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, "Jenny," in *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William M. Rossetti, 2 vols. (London: Ellis and Scrutton, 1886), vol.1, 83, lines 253-256.

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