The Sense of Suspension as Ironic Pleasure: Aestheticism and the Critique of Romanticism in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti

(Received November 30, 2015)

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Introduction

Just as his paintings transform beautiful women into beautiful and mysterious images or art objects, Rossetti's poetry often expresses the yearning for the ideal, transcendent woman, of a type resembling figures in the works of Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley. Although it is true that Rossetti's poetry is self-centred and idealistic, is this trait of the same type found in Romantics? This is the question I would like to pose in investigating the sense of fantasy/reality in Rossetti's love poems. I will argue that his poetry deflects rather than embraces Romantic idealistic love, which converges with the perfection of the complete self at the far end of time. Rossetti's attitude, in this sense, might be regarded as similar to that of other Victorians, but it defiantly confronts the disconcerting unreliability of love relationship which some Victorians (like Tennyson) evaded by half relying on religious faith. In this context, David Riede's definition of Rossetti's art, for example, should be reconsidered: "In the best sense, his finest painting, like his finest poetry, is narcissistic – the portrait of his own epipsyche, the vision of love that is the soul within his soul" (Riede 262). Rossetti's agnostic attitude towards love, which I would like to argue to be a manifestation of the agony he experienced in recognizing the impossibility of Romantic idealism, seems to anticipate something of modern poetry.

Rossetti considers love as an epitome of the mystery of life; he believes that an intense experience of love can leave an exquisite impression on one's mind. In

his poetry, the atmosphere created by beautiful objects reflects the lover's state of mind, and the rhetoric develops in such a way as to represent the poet's complex psychological reaction; these suggest Rossetti's effort to capture and frame love and its effects in the condensed form of art. Rossetti's imagination works to reproduce the minute details of the inner impression rather than to be satisfied with the act of offhand reproduction. Unlike some Romantic poets, he does not use beautiful women as a lens to see through to the absolute ideal. Concentrating on the observation of the actual, he seems to be satisfied with commemorating the love experience with an artistic form. But this implies that he did not have any means to console his inquiries into love with resolute confirmation about something absolute about it.[1)] Naturally, craving for the ultimate image of love on earth but always baffled with its actual circumstances, his poetry inevitably portended a psychology of suspension; of anxiety, unreliability and uncertainty. However, he never tries to go beyond the enigmatic bewilderment caused by love, but accepts love as turmoil, aesthetically appreciating its troublesome features as part of the lovers' reward. This paper focuses on this ironic affirmation of love as aesthetic experience, demonstrating how love is depicted as psychology of timeless suspension and how this renders Rossetti's poetry idiosyncratic in relation to the influence from Romanticism.

I

Eschewing the world of outer nature,[2)] Rossetti's poetry centres on the microcosmic world of the personal sphere in love relationships. Unlike the love poems of the seventeenth century like Marvell's or Donne's, Rossetti's poetry seeks neither to symbolise women as an epitome of the world nor to devise a metaphysical system for understanding it. So, when he describes nature, he finds it in women and in the self which perceives them; for example he suggests the omnipotence and all-inclusiveness ascribed to a lover in "Heart's Compass:"

> Sometimes thou seem'st not as thyself alone,

But as the meaning of all things that are;
A breathless wonder, shadowing forth afar
Some heavenly solstice hushed and halcyon;
Whose unstirred lips are music's visible tone;
Whose eyes the sun-gate of the soul unbar,
Being of its furthest lines oracular; –
The evident heart of all life sown and mown. ("Heart's Compass" 1-8)[3)]

Whatever represents nature is included in the richness of the beloved's figure. He regards the woman as the centre of the universe, that is, the centre of the perceived, real world; that is, his emphasis lies on the actuality of his attention. There seems to be no need for him to refer her to outer nature or to relate her to any systems in order to appreciate her fullness. (This differs, for example, from Donne's "Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" in which the poet sets the relationship with the beloved as a miniature model of the order of the universe and a complete moral system.) Women are the centre of his heart as well as of his world; spiritually and physically, they represent in their whole being a reward for one's existence.[4)] Naturally, he describes how overwhelming and dominating the love passion is for the lover; it is his life, his world, and everything. But, while following the tradition of Italian love poems, especially in the Middle Ages, as well as Dante's *La Vita Nuova*,[5)] his preoccupation with love sharply differs from Romantics: such as Wordsworth's mystification of Lucy as emanation of nature or natural spirits, or Shelley's neoplatonic idealization of women in *Epipsychidion*. Although Rossetti was influenced by Romantics, especially by Keats, in representing the contradictory aspects of women – women perceived as both innocent and femmes fatales – Rossetti concentrates more on the observer's perception of them and his own unique experience while Keats emphasizes and typifies the aesthetic, outer aspects of women. Rossetti contemplates the self which contemplates women as the central object of the universe. As Spector has suggested, the situation of Rossetti's lover is one of isolation, and Rossetti's love poetry is certainly about a self eternally severed from the beloved. I would characterise such

a state as one of suspension, a condition in which the lover must bear all in the course of his relationship with the beloved: "However, the lover never enters into the beloved's consciousness; indeed, the beloved exists, not as another mind, but as a beautiful object. The relationship between the lover and the beloved is not a relationship between subject and subject, rather, it is a relationship between subject and object. […] Her deadly attractiveness is due to the fact that she seems not to be at all interested in relating to anything outside of herself, and as she makes men even more aware of their own isolation, an isolation that they must attempt to overcome . . ." (Spector 93).

Defining love as the most dramatic of all experiences, Rossetti transforms the surrounding physical objects into attributes of the memory of love; he deliberately tells the reader how the experience has totally changed the perceived world of the lover and the beloved. In "Rose Mary," for example, the dramatic plot of tragic love is embellished with references to jewel stones, costumes and stained glasses, as if they were aspects of Mary's charmed mind and passion's mystery: "To the north, a fountain glittering free; / To the south, there glowed a red fruit-tree, / To the east, a lamp flamed high and fair; / To the west, a crystal casket rare / Held fast a cloud of the fields of air" ("Rose Mary" 3. 76-80). "The Bride's Prelude" also provides many objects as embellishment to highlight the scene in which Amelotte shuts her eyes listening to her sister's (Alöyse's) complicated, unfortunate love story; the decorated room, the beautiful wedding costumes, and the fact that Amelotte, the confidant, does not see the surroundings prepare an effective background for the narration of her past misfortune. In associating the women with many different images, their identities are blurred and the poem succeeds in mystifying them and the meaning of love. Under such aesthetic surroundings and in such aesthetic moments, women's nature can display totally different aspect, or newly provoke observer's interest. Then, women as objets d'art bewilder and confuse the observer's senses even to let him overlap his own imaginings onto their figures and surrounding objects. Women's beauty is not presented as absolute like Keats's poetry, but always as relative and subject to their surroundings and the observer's reaction to them. Rossetti is more than happy to be

indulged in the unstableness of relativity.

"Jenny" typically scrutinizes how the impression made by a woman's appearance works profoundly but relatively. Jenny functions as an objet d'art which allows the narrator to speculate about her thoughts and feelings, which are derived from his impression from her. The narrator scrutinizes her in detail, assimilating her features to create his own final impression. He never succeeds, however, in understanding her mind or achieving true sympathy because he prefers his own imaginings, which are projected onto her, to her actual personality. As a detached observer, he is satisfied with the aesthetic pleasure he could cull from the impression her appearance has made on him. Therefore, his love/desire is not only purely aesthetic but self-centred and morally indifferent.[6] He compares her to a book arbitrarily interpreted, as she was a Galatea, waiting to be alive only by imagination.

> Why, as a volume seldom read
> Being opened halfway shuts again,
> So might the pages of her brain
> Be parted at such words, and thence
> Close back upon the dusty sense. ("Jenny" 158-162)

Failing to understand her feelings empathetically, the narrator continues to admire the book cover, her appearance. Despite the comparison of her to a book, he is not really interested in what the printed letters mean, or what inner-world her appearance vaguely conveys. Like the simile of the half-open book, her personality has to be concealed so as to make her appearance enigmatic and inspirational.[7] The objet d'art must allow him to receive from it more of what he himself projects onto it than what its actual features reveal. So, for the narrator, her moral significance is not worth consideration: "the dusty sense." Rossetti here rejects the Romantic idea in exploring the deep secret of nature, which promises the key to any kind of spiritual correspondence with the human. McGowan is right to emphasize the importance of reality for Rossetti: "He longs for the correspondences between thought and world

found by the Romantics. But those correspondences elude him . . . .[…] He still believes in a reality which exists independent of thought, and which is also stronger than thought" (McGowan 117). And that reality is always supplemented by the observer's imagination. There is nothing to be revealed about women; rather, their mystery derives from our ability to find significance in their appearance, not their personality.

The metaphor of a book subtly undermines the act of reading itself too; it asks if we really understand the contents of a book (or even this poem itself) or believe that we have understood it by culling selected information and filling in the rest with our own imaginings. With this kind of reading as an example, Rossetti seems to imply that, when gathering our impression from the outer worlds, we are almost happily discarding unnecessary information which may spoil our aesthetic pleasure. (Again he tacitly defends his own making or mystifying women as aesthetic centres as justifiable.) When Rossetti's interpretation is once again interpreted by the reader metafictionally, the poem starts functioning as a device to test the reader's reaction to Rossetti's aesthetics.[8] As might be expected, some contemporary critics were caught in this test and they criticized the poem for its immorality and indulgence in sensuality.[9]

Contrary to Romantic (neo)platonism, which tries to identify the outer look with the inner moral quality and tends to represent a beautiful woman as morally inviolable, Rossetti refuses to integrate Jenny's beautiful appearance with her possible inner fullness, asserting that she has "desecrated mind" ("Jenny" 164).[10] As Pater's "The School of Giorgione" implies, the form only matters for artistic appraisal and sensation; the form is all that one can appreciate: "this form, this mode of handling, should become an end in itself, should penetrate every part of the matter: this is what all art constantly strives after, and achieves in different degrees" (Pater 86). When this applied in a personal relationship with women, aesthetic pleasure rises from their appearance formed and enhanced by impression, though the physical ideal lies only skin deep. So when the narrator continues to depict Jenney's beauty with "aureole" as heavenly, it is quite ironic with respect to Romantic idealistic thoughts, for he declares a new way of evaluating and representing beauty as seen here and

now:

> Fair shines the gilded aureole
> In which our highest painters place
> Some living woman's simple face.
> And the stilled features thus descried
> As Jenny's long throat droops aside, –
> The shadows where the cheeks are thin,
> And pure wide curve from ear to chin, –
> With Raffael's, Leonardo's hand
> To show them to men's souls, might stand,
> Whole ages long, the whole world through,
> For preachings of what God can do.
> What has man done here? How atone,
> Great God, for this which man has done? ("Jenny" 230-42)

Jenny, who, as the exquisite creation of god, should live a blessed existence, drudges at a base profession. This ironic stance towards Romantic (neo)platonic thought about love professes amoral aestheticism; one should be satisfied with the sensation of beauty, and should not bother with the rest. The contrast between the actual circumstance and bodily beauty serves to confirm Rossetti's belief in the form, the apparent and the actual (both in view and imagination). If beauty's significance lies in the fact that it can superficially arouse an artist's imagination, it is for the eye to find the extraordinary in the ordinary for its fullest effect. Jenny's presence turns the ordinary world into the extraordinary. In deciphering/encoding her appearance as a coded book, according to his own arbitary criteria, the narrator unknowingly approaches the serious question of the self. Suspended between outer impressions and inner thoughts, it is only the poet himself who can interpret and express the interaction in his own idiosyncratic and unique terms, representing the woman as a mystery and extension of his own self. Art, or the act of finding the aesthetic, depends

completely on the appreciation of such a bewildering encounter with the unexpected, and on rendering it into a form (of poetry).

> Yet, Jenny, looking long at you,
> The woman almost fades from view.
> A cipher of man's changeless sum
> Of lust, past, present, and to come,
> Is left. ("Jenny" 276-80)

These lines typically show that Rossetti's aestheticism cannot but conclude with a subjectivism; everything depends on the imaginative faculty of the interpreter, and objects only serve to build up his impression. Rossetti adopts artistic forms and representation appropriate to the filter of his imagination to best express his impression. Potolsky is acute in pointing out how Rossetti valued art more than an ideal which art can suggest: "Rossetti reminds his audience that art is irreducibly material and real, not the insubstantial shadow of the truth that Platonic tradition imagines" (Potolsky 182). Rossetti is ready to be satisfied with the actual world and with his own art which has its own limits. Women do not have to be an epitome of an ideal transcending this world, but they can serve as inspiration. In conclusion, "Jenny" stands as an ingenious attempt to subvert the stereotype of woman's beauty not just because the poem emphasizes the discrepancy between the beauty of appearance and the debased reality, but also because it discloses the truth about the observer's responsibility in creating art from the object. (Had it been appropriate for poets and artists to identify the moral and formal ideal in woman without interrogating their own intention in looking at the woman, without suspecting the contradiction in their own desire and belief?) As the narrator of the poem is fascinated by the contrast between Jenny's inviolable beauty and her violated life, Rossetti always explores the possibility of mystery in women emphasizing how his attention is paid to the observer's impression, interpretation and imagination.

"A Last Confession" is a case in which the protagonist's interpretation of the girl's

deeds and attitudes dominates its plot. The protagonist confesses his bewilderment at the girl, the fidelity of whom he suspects, and whom he finally kills on a sudden impulse. But the real motive of his crime does not lie in her infidelity but in his puzzlement, even to desperation, with her mysterious expression and personality, which can be interpreted in multiple ways.[11] Through his observation, her eyes, for example, are compared with the evanescent mood accidentally created by natural objects in motion.

> Her great eyes,
> That sometimes turned half dizzily beneath
> The passionate lids, as faint, when she would speak,
> Had also in them hidden springs of mirth,
> Which under the dark lashes evermore
> Shook to her laugh, as when a bird flies low
> Between the water and the willow-leaves,
> And the shade quivers till he wins the light. (“A Last Confession” 244-251)

The passage reveals more the narrator’s inner state than her outer looks: his diffidence, when he is confronted with her incomprehensible nature and his curiosity towards her personality, remains for him as an enigma. Their relationship, firmly established before, changes not because the girl has grown into a woman as the narrator alleges, but mainly because he starts regarding her not as his ward but as his object of contemplation and of desire. He does not understand her because now he is not able to grasp her nature, which transmutes itself every second like the dynamic, outer nature. Here, using his favourite metaphor of birds in woods,[12] Rossetti transmutes Romantic wonder about nature into a bewildering encounter with personal mystery. In fact, the narrator cannot understand her because he does not understand his own nature and bewilderment in front of her; his desire and his self. It is not that her nature metamorphoses, but that his inner state is undulating and constantly changing. This unstable psychology finally results in his suspicion about her, which

is only aggravated by her apostasy and her relationship with another man. As in "Jenny," the mystery of woman reflects that of the observer's self, so his words of confession are only vague remnants of his confused impression, of his bewilderment with the mystery of the girl, which nevertheless represents the mystery of his own self seduced by her appearance without reason. Unlike Wittgenstein's resignation about the inexpressible, Rossetti aims to utilize this limited function of the signifier (language) to create powerful poetry, and tries to be contented with the result as art. His content with language, which is imperfect at representing his own psychology, again suggests Rossetti's un-Romantic compromise with what is expressible. (On the contrary, Shelley bewails the flaw of language as a means of expression in *Epipsychidion*: "Woe is me! / The winged words on which my soul would pierce / Into the height of love's rare Universe, / Are chains of lead around its flight of fire" (*Epipsychidion* 587-590).) Rossetti's attitude towards language seems to be connected with a masochistically aesthetic pleasure in hoping to be united with the signified (the beloved) without hope. The hopeless love is paralleled with the hopeless act in literal reproduction of one's thinking and feelings. But ironically, when unlimited impression is combined with limited expression and relies on symbolism and implication, art succeeds in fully exerting its power to present the mysterious nature of life. Opposing the Romantic idea that poetry contributes to the representation of undivulged truth, Rossetti believes the truth is always supposed or hypothesized from the observer's side; therefore, the truth can only exist in a suspended one. Rossetti concentrates on the here and now, especially on how the mystery is created in the observer's mind under the stream of incessant impressions. Riede is quite right to comment that "it was only when Rossetti entirely abandoned the visionary mode that he could write confidently and entirely successfully" (Riede 57). Riede continues, noting that "The agnostic cannot, of course, be certain that he is contemplating truth . . . , but he can become enamored of his own contemplation and assert that 'Beauty is Truth' – or the closest he can come to it" (Riede 116). Since women as objets d'art remain forever detached from him, Rossetti cannot but indulge more in contemplation on the dynamism of human emotions. It is thus inevitable that he is interested in treating

unreliable and uncontrollable passion.

II

As seen in "A Last Confession," passion depicted in Rossetti's poetry often renders his protagonists and settings as beautiful and spellbinding but unstable. Rossetti's poetry emphasizes the significance of the psychological projected onto or penetrating the physical surroundings. In "Sister Helen" and "Eden Bower," the protagonists' passion is expressed in their endless raving. "Eden Bower" describes Lilith's jealousy and deity-defying hatred: "Is not the foe-God weak as the foeman / When love grows hate in the heart of a woman?" ("Eden Bower" 71-72) Her hate is so strong that it results in her strange, sensual love with the snake (Satan): "How shall we mingle our love's caresses, / I in thy coils, and thou in my tresses!" ("Eden Bower" 151-52) The importance of the physical is stressed in beautifying one's momentary emotions; simultaneously, that physical significance is affected by the psychological. The object of her hate, Eve, functions a figurative fuel for her further passion/desire, and for the artistic completion of her figure in the poem: "O how then shall my heart desire / All her blood as food to its fire!" ("Eden Bower" 99-100) This represents a case of terrible beauty, in which hate, inverted love, dramatizes the whole scene. As in the painting of the same theme, Rossetti presents an extreme case of passion – both love and hate as embodied in the beautiful figure of Lilith; her bodily features epitomise the exceedingly tense emotions and culminate an aesthetic epiphany.[13)] Although her actual words and deeds are morally questionable, her very poetic entity sensuously bewilders and disturbs the reader's expectation, perhaps because such inner congeniality may be found within him. "Sister Helen" also builds up the ominous atmosphere created from her hate, with the vague explanation about the whole event: "'Hate, born of Love, is blind as he, / Little brother!'" ("Sister Helen" 165-66) Explaining "Sister Helen," Rossetti himself admits passion as a beautifier in defending these poems in "The Stealthy School of Criticism."

> What more inspiring for poetic effort than that terrible Love turned to Hate, – perhaps the deadliest of all passion-woven complexities, -- which is the theme of "Sister Helen," and, in a more fantastic form, of "Eden Bower," – the surroundings of both poems being the mere machinery of a central universal meaning? ("The Stealthy School of Criticism" 339)

Indeed, the "central universal meaning" ironically indicates, in one's receiving and relishing such overwhelming passions and sensibilities, Rossetti's confirmation of personal response as the only truth, however relative it may be. For Rossetti, this relative truth is the fact universally shared, again a view debunking Romantic belief in discovering "universal meaning" in subjective view and experience. That readers recreate the poems' scenes of love and hate in their own minds is anticipated by Rossetti because the relative truth in personal impression is guaranteed only when it is repeatedly and commonly shared by others. Rossetti believes that the likes of the passion of Lilith and Helen wait within the reader for the moment to reverberate to the poems' inspiring tone and to quicken to life with his renewed recognition. Therefore, his "central universal meaning" suggests that one never knows how rich one's impression and one's imaginative capacity are until one expresses it by a certain, provocative artistic formula: a striking theme accompanied by an appropriate poetic form. Rossetti describes how love theme can be such a theme, especially when he presents the kind of love which mystifies and binds one's soul eternally at once and forever: preoccupying, haunting love.

Since the protagonists/narrators in Rossetti's love poetry are preoccupied with their love once experienced, they would persist in relishing it even in subsequent circumstances. When they ponder on their future, their hope lies in its resurrection, not new love;[14] either they yearn for the recurrence of their past love or wish for the continuity of their present love, with all its aspects relished now. The former pattern appears in many of his sonnets and narratives in pensive mood, like "The Stream's Secret" and "The Portrait." The latter can be observed in the poems with more imaginative settings like "The Staff and the Script," "Stratton Water" and "The

Blessed Damozel." "The Staff and the Script" tells of the pilgrim's platonic love for the lady which, in indefinite future, should be acknowledged through his faith in heaven, but there is no expectation of the afterlife except the reproduction of the same love experience. The same pattern can be seen in "The Blessed Damozel" which indirectly denies heaven as the supreme state for human happiness and which consecrates regenerated earthly love to replace heaven. The Damozel wishes her lover's death because she wishes to be reunited with him in heaven. Her feelings and emotions which she once shared with him on earth are reaffirmed:

> "Only to live as once on earth
> With Love, – only to be,
> As then awhile, for ever now
> Together, I and he." ("The Blessed Damozel" 129-132)

"Stratton Water" is dominated by the shadow of death and disaster, but, at the ritual of wedding with the dead lady and of the birth of the dead son, his anticipated reincarnation is defined as only derivable from the protagonist's love at the present; that is, as long as his love is everlasting, it transcends time and physical change.[15)]

> Now make the white bed warm and soft
> And greet the merry morn.
> The night the mother should have died,
> The young son shall be born. ("Stratton Water" 171-74)

For Rossetti, death is powerless before love, but such a love is actual and empirical, even if ephemeral. He describes eternal love in its very earthly passions because they are renderable so through art. So the protagonists/narrators as artists care for the past, and the future becomes significant only when they can use it to regain and consolidate their love in their imagination. The essential impression of love at the particular moment in the past remains the same in their minds, which is so

perfect and self-complete that they do not have to seek the transcendent. Even love's melancholy helps this love to achieve fulfillment. A similar pattern can be observed in Rossetti's meditative love poems.

In "The Stream's Secret," the narrator anticipates that his love will be revived, and compares its development to that of the stream. Identifying the source of the stream with the cause of his love, he addresses it to reveal the secret of his love as its cause and, perhaps, its result. Not unexpectedly, the narrator cannot but suffer from the past memories since they still exist with him like ghosts:

> Name the dead hours? I mind them well:
> Their ghosts in many darkened doorways dwell
> With desolate eyes to know them by. ("The Stream's Secret" 26-28)

Subsequently, since his beloved has departed, when he imagines the resurrection of their love, he compares her to a ghost-like figure:[16)]

> With bodiless form and unapparent feet
> That cast no shadow yet before,
> Though round its head the dawn begins to pour
> The breath that makes day sweet? ("The Stream's Secret" 165-68)

In these two passages, the narrator hopes that love will continue even if it amounts to something like a haunting; he is ready to embrace ghosts. He does not crave for any state of perfection or betterment in their regained love; rather, he seems to wish to revert time to the very beginning of love or to the very spring of the stream where he believes "Love's self with high All-hail / Yield up the love-secret" ("The Stream's Secret" 149-150).[17)] To ponder upon the love's memories or ghosts seems to be a pleasant form of suffering since only they confirm his experience. In fact, the only consolation that he can now have is to assume that the beloved (or the spirit of the beloved) also watches at and listens to the stream so as to share his feelings

about the lost love or the blessed past: "As with mine eyes, is it not with hers?" ("The Stream's Secret" 231) The correspondence between the couple in imagination is parallel with a similar distant association between the past and the present. The past is a ghost, and to expect it to be resurrected is to be ready to be content with the same (sad) experience repeated, though the past is considered as unattainable: "Even as thine eddy's rippling race / Would blur the perfect image of his face. / I will have none thereof" ("The Stream's Secret" 46-48). In this way, the conversing stream is only a projection of the narrator's own troubled mind and his own wishes about love. Naturally, it never replies to him. But Rossetti's aim is again to display the beauty of such a troubled and suffering mind.[18)]

"The Portrait" emphasizes this tendency in even stronger terms; looking at the lover's portrait, the narrator becomes convinced that the only possible communication with the dead beloved is to make believe that he is sensitive enough and imaginative enough to feel her ghost. Walking around in the night, he feels it:

> For now doth daylight disavow
> Those days, – nought left to see or hear.
> Only in solemn whispers now
> At night-time these things reach mine ear . . . . ("The Portrait" 73-76)

Although he imagines the afterlife moment when he goes to heaven and meets her soul, what he is most concerned about is how he could treasure the memory of the lost past; he senses that his life will never develop beyond the blissful impression in which he once indulged himself. Henderson uses the term "framing" to describe this act and implies that it is metaphorically represented by the "portrait" itself as an emblem: "Instead, the narrator deals in reflections, echoes, and frames of his own making: the shrine the speaker makes his beloved is a more palpable presence than the woman herself, and later, in describing the scene of painting, he talks not of the woman but of the artifice used to frame her . . ." (Henderson 927). In this poem, Rossetti confesses his view that one cannot escape from one's own memory of overwhelming passion.

He also professes his belief that the only question for the artist is that of how to articulate such a state of mind as something beautiful in the form of art.

Another example is "Willowwood I." Like "The Stream's Secret" and "The Portrait," the poem describes the lover's troubled mind as reflected on the well's surface, which first shows Love's face finally transforming into the face of his beloved: "Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair, / And as I stooped, her own lips rising there / Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth" ("Willowwood I." 12-14). This transformation reconfirms Rossetti's belief in how beautiful appearance is primally impressed on the mind; as long as he persists with love through senses and feelings, the supreme moment of love in the past must continue to dominate his aesthetic senses, enriching the images of the beloved. But in reflecting on his stored impressions in the past, the narrator cannot but choose the suitable image arbitrarily. This arbitrariness in recalling a particular mood or a mental state is represented by the protean image of the water or the surface of the well. The poem's symbolism remains enigmatic because it relies on the narrator's unreliable self in depicting his love; this happens because Rossetti understands the artistic significance of presenting the inexplicable experience of love as it is (and not because his autobiographical background is unknown to the reader.)[19)]

While the poem implicitly shows the aporia of believing in one's untrustworthy senses and emotions, Rossetti seems to present such a state of mind as a universal truth about love. Having transformed his select impression into an inviolable image, the narrator identifies the beloved more with the aesthetic image than her actual figure, which separately exists from it. In associating love with beauty, Rossetti seems to think that the inevitable discrepancy between imagination and reality always culminates in a preference for the former. Imagination, according to Rossetti, works to maintain the first and last imprint within the mind, and has no significance in other realms of being. An epiphany in love can only be perpetuated and consecrated by imagination, and that is all art is about for Rossetti. Rossetti's idea of everlasting love shows a curious amalgam of idealism and realism; one is dominated by one's imaginings, but ironically one can only create them from actual experience (memory).

In his psychoanalytic account, Riede summarizes Rossetti's adoration of images even as he persists in his adherence to the actual.

> Rather he should be regarded as one who attempted to fathom the mysteries of his innermost self and to isolate what was best in him in his art – to mold and transform the chaotic impulses of the self into order and beauty. […] Rossetti's obsession with surfaces, then, is an obsession with the meaning of life itself. […] But the value he placed on surfaces suggests that they can never be, for him, merely decorative – rather they covered the abyss behind the dark glass with the projected soul of the artist. (Riede 159-163)

Rossetti believes in soul, but only in the form of physical contact and sensual impulses; soul and body prove the indispensable elements of his love poetry, the former working to transform the latter into beauty. The same theme repeats itself in *The House of Life*, with various metaphors, similes, and symbols; he identifies love with the principle of universe ("Heart's Hope"), compares love with other powers like hope and youth ("Love Enthroned"), regards the essence of love as carpe diem ("Love and Hope"), and sees love as the primordial ("The Dark Glass" and "True Woman").

For Rossetti, poetry is the means for revealing life's significance as refined impression, and the supreme impression is that derived from the love experience. He translated Dante's *La Vita Nuova* because he was interested in Dante's way of aestheticizing love experience, not in his religious belief.[20] When Dante is asked how to express his love towards Beatrice in "The New Life," he answers: "In those words that do praise my lady" ("The New Life" 264). This answer implies that the ideal Beatrice always exists within him and her real person only verifies its existence, and that his literary expression reconfirms such a love. Only by praising her or properly rendering her impression in art, can Dante appreciate his love experience towards her in the truest sense: "the end and aim of my Love was but the salutation of that lady of whom I conceive that ye are speaking; wherein alone I found that beatitude which is the goal of desire" ("The New Life" 264).[21] This is the essential theme of

Dante's as well as Rossetti's love poems.

Rossetti's idea of love is inseparable from the mystery of self, and this is also expressed in his prose. "Hand and Soul" represents the protagonist painter's self-love as identified with his object of love. The image of the painter's soul appears as a beautiful woman advising him how to proceed with his art.[22] (But the painter, Chiaro, never falls in love with his own soul as in Shelley's *Alastor* or Browning's *Pauline*, but clearly paints her on the basis of his impression.) Such self-conscious conflation of love and impression is a constant in Rossetti's prose writings; the protagonist is expected to accept the ideal image he created, and to embrace his destiny in such an act of love/self-love, even if the result is tragic. In a similar manner to "Eden Bower" and "Sister Helen," "The Orchard Pit" and "The Doom of the Sirens" describe the protagonists' deliberate acceptance of self-destructive love as a reward. Though the beautiful girl in the orchard looks fearful, once the narrator has become fascinated by her and recognizes her as the object of his love, he approaches his own death willingly: "I know that I must go there and hear the song and take the apple" ("The Orchard Pit" 363). The image of the girl (as a symbol of destructive desire/drive) is imprinted on him as irresistible destiny, and it will dominate his life course. Rossetti presents it as a mystery which is intrinsically embedded with the nature of human mind; the desire for love surpasses death because it is actually the drive towards the mystery which lies beyond death. Even the fatal love is rewarding for him because it serves as a revelation of the esoteric knowledge of self; in other words, something of the primordial self, or something to do with the essence of life, flickers and entices in love experience.

Conclusion

Rossetti acknowledges love as the wonder of life and self, of which the impression is imprinted on one's memories all through life. The problem for him as a poet is how to sustain and express this intense moment. When he is separated from the

object of love and has to rely solely on his memory and imagination, he remains suspended between the dubious remnants of an image of love in the past, and the fancies about its possible but uncertain resurrection in the future. The love image, in time, clouds its detail and transforms itself into something uncanny and ghost-like. Especially when Rossetti treats his love for a deceased beloved, his preoccupation with it almost begins to assume a form of haunting. This is partly why Rossetti's love poems are dark, melancholic and sometimes depressing. Riede explains the relation between the melancholic mood of Rossetti's poetry and his interest in "liminal areas": "Because he was interested in the liminal areas where sharp distinctions such as that between matter and spirit become meaningless, Rossetti's images frequently describe the transitional points in a day or year – moments which are neither light nor dark, days which are neither of the autumn nor of the winter" (Riede 152). This seems to be further explained as follows. Rossetti's interest lies in the images/impression of objects stored in his mind, and they often become obscure either because they are mentally transfigured or forgotten. This is again his ironical retort to Romanticism. Wordsworth treasured impression as recollection "revived," while Rossetti finds delight in its being half altered, mystified and sometimes in a state of ruination like Gothic remains.

Since Rossetti associates love with the secret of self, his anxiety about love reflects that about his self, and the ghostly aspect of love shows that his existence itself is ghost-like without any vivid exhilarations towards the absolute. Still Rossetti solely depends on the power of his will without any expectation from other sources beyond.[23)] Rather, Rossetti is willing to embrace the unhealthy state of mind caused by the anxiety of love and by the uncertainty of art created only by his purely secular imagination. He repeatedly places the narrator or the protagonist in a state of uncertainty or suspension, and he seems to fully accept such a state as the destiny of aesthetes. Here we might find a similarity in attitude with the French symbolists who did not demand any salvation at expense of their artistic discoveries, and we might also consider his idea as his own interpretation and practice of Keats's "negative capability" especially when he does not try to solve his uncertainty or suspension:

"*Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats 43).[24] It might be still possible to see his poetry as derived from Romantics but it was also the seedbed of modern sensibilities. Deeply engaging with the uncertainty in the here and now, Rossetti finds aesthetic pleasure in psychologically suspended state. We might see him suspended between the Romantic and the modern.

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1) As Roger Drew argues, love may be a centre of the universe for Rossetti, but, against his confirmation, the centre itself has not centripetal force at all and, if love moves everything, it drives itself to nowhere since it never fulfills the lover's desire/hope: "Love's meaning, I think, is that in the circular model of the universe, in which the circumference surrounds the central point of the Godhead, it is Love which moves all things. Where the circumference represents diversity, the centre is unity. The circle with a dot at its centre is both astrologically and alchemically the symbol for the sun" (Drew 124).

2) The exceptions are cases like "The Woodspurge" or "The Honeysuckle." Even in these poems, his focus is on the narrator's mind rather than on the surroundings or the natural objects.

3) All quotations from Rossetti's writings are from the following with the title and the page/line numbers in parentheses: Jerome McGann, ed., *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003).

4) Riede is right in pointing out that Rossetti's idea of woman remains with herself, not with her ideal self. However, her soul is always unknown to the narrator/poet, and, therefore, love is far from reassuring as Riede argues: ". . . he is not merely resting content with sublunary passion – here, as nearly always, the woman represents *both* a physical reality of the flesh, and the soul or epipsyche; and love stands for the desire to defeat the terrors of mortality" (Riede 133).

5) Cronin's observation is acute in detecting the tragic nature of Rossetti's love poetry in his interest in Italian poetry: ". . . Rossetti, as his translations of *The Early Italian Poets* (1861, revised and reissued as *Dante and his Circle* in 1874) indicate, had more interest in the philosophy of courtly love than his contemporaries. He also had more interest than most of them in adulterous liaisons (Cronin 99).

6) Therefore, Bentley's interpretation of the narrator as a crusader for moral seems to miss the point of the poem's essential interest in the self: "'Jenny' is Rossetti's attempt to stage a process by which 'a young and thoughtful man of the world' might come to understand the causes and consequences of prostitution and, as a result, become a 'moral agent' in the crusade against it that was gaining momentum throughout the eighteen fifties and 'sixties" (Bentley 713).

7) Maxwell shows a similar analysis about "Threefold Homage": "The ambition of the speaker seems to be that one day he will be able to translate 'That inner most image all unseen' into his art, yet at the same time the achievement of this sonnet seems to lie in that visionary unseen image which becomes precious in proportion to the extent that it is held back, kept private, not given to our view" (Maxwell 66-67). Rossetti does not try to unravel the secret of an aesthetic object, but he is happy to remain blind to it, not unlike Ruskin, who is happy to have clouds below the eternal light.

8) McGann also describes "the inner standing-point" as denoting both the poet/narrator's and the reader's view on the poetic subject like Jenny: "A poem like 'Jenny' is a dangerous critical mirror that turns the reader's eye back upon himself" (McGann, "Inner Standing-Point" 178).

9) Rossetti defends "Jenny" as the truest documentation of a soul observing her miserable case, against the critical attack on his sensualism in "The Stealthy School of Criticism": "The heart of such a mystery as this must be plucked from the very world in which it beats or bleeds; and the beauty and pity, the self-questionings and all-questionings which it brings with it, can come with full force only from the mouth of one alive to its whole appeal, such as the speaker put forward in the poem, – that is, of a young and thoughtful man of the world. To such a speaker, many half-cynical revulsions of feeling and reverie, and a recurrent presence of the impressions of beauty (however artificial) which first brought him within such a circle of influence, would be inevitable

features of the dramatic relation portrayed" (337-338).

10) Although there are some critics who tend to associate some of Rossetti's poems with Platonism (see Doughty 153, Drew 40), it seems, as I am arguing, that Rossetti's interest does not lie in reaching for the ideal, but in being content with the acquired vision and senses about longed-for women or objects.

11) It is certainly true that the girl's seeming betrayal is associated with the political background coming from the Austrian occupation of Italy. But Rossetti's concern is not political but psychological and aesthetic, so Howard's interpretation seems to be off-target at the heart of the matter: "The speaker kills the girl almost as much because of jealousy for his country as because of personal, erotic jealousy" (Howard 100).

12) As Rees says, Rossetti seems to have obtained the idea for this metaphor in translating Guido Guinicelli's "Of the Gentle Heart," which goes "Within the gentle heart Love shelters him, / As birds within the green shade of the grove" ("Of the Gentle Heart" 1-2). Rees understands this image as denoting "the most sensitive area of inner personal life" with "many features and landmarks" (Rees 80). In Rossetti's poetry, a recess or a bower in the woods symbolizes the most inner part of his mind, which is often represented as impenetrable and inviolable. For example, we can compare these lines with the following in "The Portrait": "A deep dim wood; and there she stands / As in that wood that day: for so / Was the still movement of her hands / And such the pure line's gracious flow" ("The Portrait" 28-31). His refusal to reveal and his intention to conceal the inmost feelings are crucial to establish the mysterious uncertainty in his poems, which attracts but frustrates the reader.

13) As Maxwell points out about *The House of Life*, Rossetti concentrates on describing the physical to represent the mental all through his poetry: "Throughout the sonnets of *The House of Life*, there is particular emphasis on the woman's hands, lips, eyes, and voice as magnetic conductors of her saving and inspiring presence, even when they are represented in painting . . ." (Maxwell 59-60).

14) Doughty summarizes this tendency in Rossetti's love poetry as follows: "Emotionally, intellectually, physically exhausted, imprisoned within the narrow cage of his own passionate experience, for him there was no escape, and as before he merely continued to repeat the old, ever-revolving cycle of thoughts and moods – past happiness, present misery and decay, a tremulous, intermittent hope of love's final, perfect consummation beyond death. These themes, so long labored, endlessly repeated as the kindred themes of his paintings were repeated, were his inspiration to the end" (Doughty 645).

15) So Howard's comment seems to miss the main theme, i.e. love, of the poem: "The feeling which animates the poem and arises in us is the feeling of satisfaction in seeing the triumph of life, right, and purpose over death, injustice, and circumstance" (Howard 67).

16) Critics have differently interpreted the poem's dark atmosphere associated with death, in autobiographical contexts. Howard believes that the poem describes Rossetti's wish to be reunited with the dead wife: "Reunion will be death" (Howard 129). O'Donnell denies Howard's interpretation, claiming that the poem follows the conventions of epithalamia: "This is not, as is 'The Blessed Damozel,' or 'The Portrait,' a poem about separation caused by death; it is about separation caused by marriage, and the reference to the epithalamic tradition helps to reinforce the irony of that fact" (O'Donnell 190). Doughty identifies the beloved in the poem as Jane Morris: "The theme of the poem – hitherto misinterpreted as the poet's sorrow for the loss of his dead wife and desire for reunion with her – is surely his unhappiness in the absence of the woman he now loves and his longing for her return . . ." (Doughty 403). Critics who are interested in the

autobiographical aspects of Rossetti's poetry seem to be amiss in understanding his insistent message about the art: however the actual love relationship develops, its expression as poetry self-completes as the universal truth about passion and it emphasizes general acceptance rather than personal, therapeutic writing.

17) Doughty's interpretation of the poem as an escape does not seem to cover Rossetti's masochistic pleasure about his tragic love. Doughty considers its theme as a "flight": "It is in fact the record of a neurotic flight from the frustrations of the world of reality into that of erotic illusion and exaltation, followed by a descent into reality again, which in turn produces an hysterical, tearful revolt against it, and a flight to death as the only refuge and consummation of love" (Doughty 408). But since Rossetti never sets any realm to escape to, the situation of the poem seems to afford the poet bittersweet indulgence in the actual situation which is artistically rendered as acceptable.

18) Riede describes this as a disparity between the purport of the river as a metaphor and its physical, functional entity: "The poem's melancholy ending is partly due to the disparity between tenor and vehicle – the stream must necessarily flow on to an imageless future, but the memory, more consolingly, can draw images from a past in which the ideal love still exists and ideal union can still be envisioned" (Riede 141). Rossetti is interested in the melancholy which the disparity raises and in how completely the melancholic mood completes the beauty of the sad love.

19) Doughty argues that the whole enigmatic aspect in *The House of Life* derives from the reader's ignorance of Rossetti's personal affairs in detail: "From this arise both the biographical significance and general obscurity of *The House of Life* which for the most part expresses thoughts and feelings aroused and conditioned in Rossetti by personal experiences of which the reader is left wholly or partly ignorant" (Doughty 383). As I discuss, the mysterious mood is not the result of Rossetti's concealment of his autobiographical background, but the very aim of his poetic art.

20) It is true, as Rees says, that love takes place of religion for Rossetti: "When old habits of thought and old modes of belief broke down under the new intellectual pressures of the nineteenth century, a great burden of responsibility fell on human love" (Rees 124). However, while religion gives comfort and reassurance, Rossetti's love does nothing like this but increases all sorts of troubles with which religion should cope. So Holme's view seems to be more precious about the function of love: "Rossetti is not seeking to establish a religion with doctrines and dogmas of its own. Instead he draws on a wide range of spiritual and poetic sources, incorporating ideas and metaphors which embody the significance of love into his poetry without prescribing specific definitional limits to that significance" (Holmes 27).

21) Waldman understands that Rossetti's poetry aims to preserve the ideal object for the self: "Also like Dante . . . the Rossettian speaker learns how to use language to . . . give his self stability in the symbolic order. [...] Instead, it is a stability . . . which presents a compensating advantage of allowing the speaker to preserve a personal and living relationship with his adored other" (Waldman 95). Like Dante, Rossetti prefers his own image of the beloved to herself, but, his ideal unstably baffles his desire while Dante can eventually expect to achieve the final goal of his spiritual journey in Beatrice's heavenly realm.

22) The image of his own soul exhorts him in the manner of Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*: "I am an image, Chiaro, of thine own soul within thee. See me, and know me as I am. Thou sayest that fame has failed thee, and faith failed thee; but because at least thou hast not laid thy life unto riches, therefore, though thus late, I am suffered to come into thy knowledge. Fame sufficed not, for that thou didst seek fame: seek thine own conscience (not thy mind's conscience, but thine heart's), and all shall approve and suffice" (314).

23) As McGann appreciates Rossetti's secular worship of love, his independence from Romantics in love thoughts must be understood as the beginning to the establishment of modernist sensibilities: "But to see human sexual love as one of man's highest ideals, the value equivalent of a 'supermundane' experience within a wholly non-transcendental frame of reference, does not seem to me either vague or trivial. The fact that Rossetti's Eros-Love must by its nature avoid any absolute fulfillments does not make it any less sublime (or actual) an experience nor his artistic rendering of it necessarily 'confused'" (McGann, "Details" 87).

24) McGann, too, points out the similarity: "Rossetti's '*inner* standing-point' is thus a Victorian explanation of what Keats called 'negative capability,' or the process by which the author's conscious separation from his subject – the typical structure of a poem by, say, Rochester or Pope – is canceled in a process of deep sympathetic engagement. In Rossetti's case, however, as in Browning's, the chameleonic turn involves a transfer of sympathy from the poet to some figure or character who is concretely imagined in the poem" (McGann, "Betrayal" 179). "Some figure or character" is eventually revealed to be another self, as I have been arguing.