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OUTSIDERS LOOKING IN: THE ROSSETTIS THEN AND NOW

edited by
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and
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DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S
 POETIC DAUGHTERS:
FIN DE SIÈCLE WOMEN POETS
 AND THE SONNET

Florence S Boos

'On or about 1910', Virginia Woolf once remarked wryly, 'human character changed'¹ – a whimsical view which seemed at times to have become a kind of received wisdom about 'modernist' literature and its 'postmodern' reception. Temporal distance eventually enabled critics to discern some continuities in this alleged paradigm shift, however – in echoes of Morris's and Swinburne's poetry in the work of Hilda Doolittle, for example, or of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's art and criticism in the work of Yeats.² In this essay, I will explore a little-studied relationship between Rossetti's sonnet sequence *The House of Life* and two successive generations of work by British women poets,³ among them Mathilde Blind, Augusta Webster, Catherine Dawson, Amy Levy, Olive Custance, 'Michael Field' and Rosa Newmarch. Further confirmatory instances might be found in the poetic work of Constance Naden, Edith Nesbit, Mary Coleridge, Annie Matheson, Katherine Tynan, Bessie Craigmyle, Margaret Woods and Rachel Annand Taylor, and I have gathered together a small sample of them in an appendix.

Such Rossettian filiations carry with them certain historical and ideological ironies, which can readily be appreciated by women in my generation, many of whom believed (or hoped) that on or about 1970, the 'situation of women' in Europe and North America changed in comparably deep ways. In *The Poetry of Dante Rossetti* (1976), for example, I commented on a number of sexist aspects of Rossetti's attitudes toward women, and subsequent criticism more or less confirmed this view. By contrast, many of the women poets mentioned in the last paragraph were committed feminists, some were lesbians, one or two were political radicals, and almost all could be described as 'new women'

– rather than exemplars of the ‘True Woman’ Rossetti invoked in sonnets 56–58 in *The House of Life*. What then did these poets find to respect or emulate in the work of Rossetti, in particular in his sonnets, whose images, patterns and preoccupations reverberated for more than a generation?

In ‘Victorian Renaissance: The Amatory Sonnet Sequence in the Late Nineteenth Century’, Arline Golden notes that eight sonnet sequences appeared in the eighteenth century and thirteen between 1800 and 1830, but more than 147 between 1830 and 1900,⁴ among them Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘Sonnets from the Portuguese’ (1850), Christina Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata* (1881), and Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *The House of Life* (1881). Many critics and anthologists of the 1880s considered the latter one of the noblest examples of its genre, and Dante Gabriel’s personal preferences guided many of his friend Hall Caine’s choices in *Sonnets of Three Centuries* (1882), which included five sonnets by Christina Rossetti, eight each by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and John Milton, nine by Keats, eleven by Wordsworth and seventeen by Shakespeare.

In 1886 William Sharp prefaced his sumptuously printed anthology *Sonnets of This Century* (which contained twelve sonnets by Rossetti and thirteen by Wordsworth) with two dedicatory poems ‘To D. G. R.’, and his introduction asserted that Rossetti, ‘the greatest master of sonnet-music posterior to the ‘starre of poets’ [Shakespeare]’,⁵

... holds a remarkable place in the literary and artistic history of the second Victorian period, and no critic of his work will have any true grasp of it who does not recognise that ‘Rossetti’ signifies something of far greater import even than the fascinating work of, personally, the most dominant and fascinating man of his time.⁶

Not a few among the best judges [...] consider [...] [Rossetti] the greatest sonneteer of our language, his sonnets having the fundamental brain-work of Shakespeare’s, the beauty of Mrs. Browning’s, the dignity and, occasionally, the sunlit transparency of Wordsworth’s, with a more startling and impressive vehemence, a greater voluminousness of urgent music.⁷

Such effusions pose natural critical questions about the attributes that elicited them. Rossetti arranged *The House of Life* in a progression of pointillist meditations which blurred or abstracted from plot or character, and refined individual sonnets’ taut contrasts between octave and sestet through an alembic of unusually ornate polysyllabic imagery and Latinate diction. Allegorical figures – ‘Life,’ ‘Love,’ ‘Death,’ ‘Passion,’ ‘Worship,’ ‘Past Selves’ – offered ready-made higher-order representatives for lower-order personal experiences, periodic pointed questions to the reader formed a kind of vatic

counterpoint to the poems’ elevated diction, and a composite sense of haunting regret seemed to transcend defining details in a blend of private interiority and universal self-expression.

Two brief illustrations may represent something of the mannered chiaroscuro of Rossetti’s meditations on time and disembodied evanescent presences. Consider, for example, the rhetorical question with which he began ‘Lovesight’:

When do I see thee most, beloved one?
 When in the light the spirits of mine eyes
 Before thy face, their altar, solemnize
 The worship of that Love through thee made known?
 Or when in the dusk hours, (we two alone),
 Close-kissed and eloquent of still replies
 Thy twilight-hidden glimmering visage lies,
 And my soul only sees thy soul its own?

O love, my love! if I no more should see
 Thyself, nor on the earth the shadow of thee,
 Nor image of thine eyes in any spring, –
 How then should sound upon Life’s darkening slope
 The ground-whirl of the perished leaves of Hope,
 The wind of Death’s imperishable wing?

Not only did Rossetti’s poem decline to ‘answer’ in the sestet the octave’s ‘question’ (What if *both* memory *and* presence of the beloved were lost?), it elevated that unanswerability to an emblem of the inscrutable silence of death, the poem’s real underlying subject.

A few *House of Life* sonnets celebrated ostensible forms of sexual fulfilment, but quickly sublated (or sublimated) them in a kind of dialectical realm east of thwarted desire and anticipation, and west of resigned guilt and regret. ‘The One Hope,’ *The House of Life*’s last sonnet, expresses something of this unstable poetic equilibration between oscillating states of ‘Hope’, desire, anxiety and irredeemable regret:

When vain desire at last and vain regret
 Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,
 What shall assuage the unforgotten pain
 And teach the unforgetful to forget?
 Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet, –
 Or may the soul at once in a green plain
 Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain
 And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet?

Ah! when the wan soul in that golden air
 Between the scripted petals softly blown
 Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown, –
 Ah! let none other alien spell soe'er
 But only the one Hope's one name be there, –
 Not less nor more, but even that word alone.

Few readers of *The House of Life*'s sonnets have failed to observe their solemn cadences, brocaded visual images, formally allusive and highly generalized diction, suspensive contrasts between octave and sestet, and adumbrations of religious doubt in gravely melancholic disclosures of ineffable despair. I wish to suggest that the women whose poems I will consider felt an affinity with Rossetti's sensuous ambivalence and conflict-ridden states of erotic contemplation, and that his 'feminine' preoccupations with personal grief and transience resonated with forms of loss and disillusionment in the inner lives of 'new women,' who negotiated 'aberrant' friendships, lesbian romances and unreciprocated passions in search of transcendence and inner peace. In support of such assimilations, I will consider the work (in roughly chronological order) of Mathilde Blind, Amy Levy, Catherine A Dawson and Augusta Webster, whose sonnets employed a Rossettian brush on different canvasses in the 1880s and 90s; and of Olive Custance, Rosa Newmarch, Edith Cooper and Katherine Bradley, whose sonnets a decade later evoked Rossetti's sense of numinous allegory, assimilation of different art forms, and preoccupation with liminal identities and passions.

The First Generation

Mathilde Blind (1841–96) wrote 'Rossettian' sonnets whose moral fervour, social conscience and assertive independence emancipated them from their prototypes. The daughter and stepdaughter of radical-democratic exiles, a childhood admirer of Mazzini and long-time friend and associate of Ford Madox Brown, Blind had close ties to William Michael Rossetti and other members of the Pre-Raphaelite circle, and cultivated Romantic and aesthetic sensibilities in the service of anti-clerical and reformist social views. She vigorously attacked Christian religious bigotry in *The Prophecy of Saint Oran and Other Poems* (1881); denounced the 'ethnic cleansing' of western Scotland in *The Heather on Fire: A Tale of the Highland Clearances* (1886); and published an extended poetic meditation on notions of evolution and the pervasiveness of natural and human violence in *The Ascent of Man* (1891).

She devoted the thirty-three sonnets of her *Songs and Sonnets* (1893), however, to more personal subjects of frustrated passion, the search for transcend-



Figure 9. Mathilde Blind

ence and the ache of irremediable loss. The very titles of Blind's sonnets suggest themes of *The House of Life* ('Hope,' 'The Dead,' 'Time's Shadow,' 'A Symbol,' 'Suffering,' 'Ananke' ['Necessity'], 'Despair,' 'The After-Glow,' 'Beauty,' and 'Heart's Ease'), and she arranged them in *House of Life*-like recessions and progressions, from initial stages of remembered hope, through

despair, loss and bereavement, to evocations of seasonal rebirth, renewed memory and immersion in wider forms of cosmic consciousness. 'Nirvana,' for example, the sequence's last sonnet, appealed to the reader to 'enter thy soul's vast realm as Sovereign Lord,' and like 'a ripple rounded by the sea,/ In rapture lost be lapped within the All' (compare, for example, the end of 'Astrophel and Stella').

Along similar lines, one might compare Blind's 'Beauty' with Rossetti's 'Portrait'; the bleak landscapes of 'To Memory' with those of Rossetti's 'Winged Hours', 'Ardour and Memory', or 'Barren Spring'; or the shrouded regret of 'Dead Love' with Rossetti's 'Lost on Both Sides':⁸

Mother of the unfortunate, mystic form,
Who calm, immutable, like oldest fate,
Sittest, where through the sombre swinging gate
Moans immemorial life's encircling storm.
My heart, sore stricken by grief's leaden arm,
Lags like a weary pilgrim knocking late,
And sigheth – toward thee staggering with its weight –
Behold Love conquered by thy son, the worm!

He stung him mid the roses' purple bloom,
The Rose of roses, yea, a thing so sweet,
Haply to stay blind Change's flying feet,
And stir with pity the un pitying tomb.
Here, take him, cold, cold, heavy and void of breath!
Nor me refuse, O Mother almighty, death.⁹

Here, Blind's Rossettian imagery (shrouded form, knocking pilgrim, tomb of dead love) expresses distinctly *un*Rossettian forms of acceptance and resignation, and her evocation of a powerful mother-figure as an emblem of fate is a distinctive alternative to Rossetti's countless images of obscurely eroticized femininity.

The latter contrast was no accident, for Blind was an ardent feminist, who willed her possessions to Newnham College. She had no children, but one of her other sonnets offered a more hopeful tribute to the literal matrix of human evolution:

From out the font of being, undefiled,
A life hath been upheaved with struggle and pain;
Safe in her arms a mother holds again
That dearest miracle – a new-born child.

To moans of anguish terrible and wild –
As shrieks the night-wind through an ill-shut pane –
Pure heaven succeeds; and after fiery strain
Victorious woman smiles serenely mild.

Yea, shall she not rejoice, shall not her frame
Thrill with a mystic rapture! At this birth,
The soul now kindled by her vital flame
May it not prove a gift of priceless worth?
Some saviour of his kind whose starry fame
Shall bring a brightness to the darkened earth.¹⁰

Blind's secularization of a traditionally religious subject and skilful uses of astral and generative imagery also suggested Rossettian sacralizations of *eros* and regeneration, but her central focus in the poem was quite remote from his erotic preoccupations in *The House of Life*. Compare, for example, her focus on the pain and triumph of a mother's gift of birth to her child with Rossetti's use of the image of a child as an emblem of lost love:

Lo! Love, the child once ours; and Song, whose hair
Blew like a flame and blossomed like a wreath;
And Art, whose eyes were worlds by God found fair;
These o'er the book of Nature mixed their breath
With neck-twined arms, as oft we watched them there:
And did these die that thou mightst bear me Death?¹¹

Still another well-known Rossettian (and Shelleyan) motif appeared in Blind's 'To the Obelisk: During the Great Frost, 1881,' an empathetic variation of Rossetti's address to the Assyrian bull, in which Blind expressed her own idiosyncratic sympathy for the plight of exiled, alienated and displaced statuary.

Thou sign-post of the Desert! Obelisk,
Once fronting in thy monumental pride
Egypt's fierce sun, that blazing far and wide,
Sheared her of tree and herb, till like a disk
Her waste stretched shawdowless, and fraught with risk
To those who with their beasts of burden hied
Across the seas of sand until they spied
Thy pillar, and their flagging hearts grew brisk:

Now reared beside our Thames so wintry grey,
Where blocks of ice drift with the drifting stream,
Thou risest o'er the alien prospect! Say,
Yon dull, bleak, rayless orb whose lurid gleam
Tinges the snow-draped ships and writhing steam,
Is this the sun which fired thine orient day?

Rossetti's poem on a displaced Assyrian divinity had offered a vague but sweeping indictment of the verities of Victorian imperialist culture and its self-interested hegemonic greed. Blind's poem expressed wry but kindly empathy for an emblem of the Egyptian desert, forced to endure the physical and psychological chill of a wintry day by a remote river under an etiolated northern sun.

A similar image of wan crepuscular light appeared in 'The Red Sunsets, 1883', in which Blind exploited the contrasts of the Petrarchan form to refine and deepen Rossetti's fitful attention to oppression and social blight.¹² In Blind's poem, beneath the 'strange Apocalyptic glow/ On the black fringes of the wintry night',

...three factory hands begrimed with soot,
Aflame with the red splendour, marvelling stand,
And gaze with lifted faces awed and mute.
Starved of earth's beauty by Man's grudging hand...¹³

Amy Levy (1861–89), the first Jewish student admitted to Newnham College (in 1879), studied there for only two years, and published three novels and three volumes of verse (*Xantippe and Other Verse*, 1881; *A Minor Poet and Other Verse*, 1884; and *A London Plane Tree and Other Verse*, 1889) before she committed suicide at twenty-seven.

Best remembered now for her dramatic monologues 'Xantippe' and 'A Minor Poet,' Levy also experimented with a variety of lyric forms and published four sonnets. Her markedly introspective 'Sonnet' (1881) explicitly invoked Rossetti's initial and concluding personifications in *The House of Life*:

Two terrors fright my soul by night and day:
The first is Life, and with her come the years;
A weary, winding train of maidens they,
With forward-fronting eyes, too sad for tears;
Upon whose kindred faces, blank and grey,
The shadow of a kindred woe appears.
Death is the second terror; who shall say
What form beneath the shrouding mantle nears?



Figure 10. Amy Levy

Which way she turn, my soul finds no relief,
My smitten soul may not be comforted;
Alternately she swings from grief to grief,
And, poised between them, sways from dread to dread.
For there she dreads because she knows; and here,
Because she knows not inly faints with fear.¹⁴

Her final lines might be compared with the concluding tercet of 'Autumn Idleness':¹⁵

And here the lost hours the lost hours renew
While I still lead my shadow o'er the grass,
Nor know, for longing, that which I should do.

Similar 'waves of passion and of pain' in another early 'Sonnet' could only be assuaged by '... a kind of feeling.../ Which half a hope and half is a despair.'¹⁶

Levy's friends in her short life included activists and writers Vernon Lee, Olive Schreiner, Ada Radford Wallas and Clementina Black, and Levy also mocked orthodox religion, bourgeois marriage, and sexual double standards in her work. In 'Simphonia Eroica' (dedicated 'To Sylvia'), she also created an original variant of the sensuous descriptions of Rossetti's 'The Choice':¹⁷

Then back you lean'd your head, and I could note
The upward outline of your perfect throat;
And ever, as the music smote the air,
Mine eyes from far held fast your body fair.
And in that wondrous moment seem'd to fade
My life's great woe, and grow an empty shade
Which had not been, nor was not.
 And I knew
Not which was sound, and which, O Love, was you.

Compare this poem's last lines with the conclusion to the octave of 'Heart's Hope':¹⁸

Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor
Thee from myself, neither our love from God.

Shortly before her death, Levy corrected the proofs of *A London Plane Tree and Other Poems* (1889), which contained a sonnet 'To Vernon Lee.' The octave of this stark evocation of companionship with a more favoured friend evoked the sublime horizons of 'The Choice, III',¹⁹ and its sestet recalled Rossetti's angst-laden 'Woodspurge'.

A snowy blackthorn flowered beyond my reach;
You broke a branch and gave it to me there;
I found for you a scarlet blossom rare.
Thereby ran on of Art and Life our speech;
And of the gifts the gods had given to each –
Hope unto you, and unto me Despair.²⁰

Less predictable echoes of Rossetti might be found in the work of Catherine Amy Dawson Scott (1865–1934), a novelist, short-story writer, and poet who was also the founder of PEN. *Sappho* (1889), her first published work, was a two-hundred-page blank verse epic in four books whose eponymous hero founds a woman's college, is immolated by enraged sexist priests and other coryphants, and dies in the sustaining hope that those of future centuries will

resurrect and build on her ideals. Dawson prefaced this pointed rejoinder to Tennyson's hostility toward a woman's college in *The Princess* with an allegorical homage to female solidarity, in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet which she dedicated to 'L. J.:'

The lily bells were chiming reveries
In the life-garden, and each swaying flower
Deep-shadowed in the dusk of branchy bower
Burgeoned into a maiden. Such as these –
A sunrise vision under leafing trees –
Have been those women of a parted hour
Whose sorrows urged my song – a dim love-power
Stretching from twilight of dead centuries,
To thrill the hush of noon with echoes sweet.

Oh thou! to me the noblest of that throng
That ever passes with unceasing beat
Of tireless footsteps – thou, white life and strong, –
Receivest of love, now learning at thy feet,
And mistress of none other speech – a song.

Such transparently 'Rossettian' echoes ('deep-shadowed,' 'dim love-power,' 'none other speech') in a feminist dedicatory sonnet may serve to underscore the wider resonance of poetic devices and mannerisms Rossetti had employed to quite different ends in *The House of Life*.

Similar feminist reverberations appeared in the work of Augusta Webster (1837–94), more precisely in the posthumously published *Mother and Child* (1895), the century's only extended sonnet-celebration of maternal love.

To present-day readers Webster's best known work is probably the dramatic monologue 'The Castaway' (1870), a pointed reply to DG Rossetti's 'Jenny.' William Michael Rossetti wrote the introduction to *Mother and Child*, and Webster, who knew the Rossetti family well, also served as an early member of the London School Board, worked as an activist for women's suffrage and education, and wrote two novels, six dramas and five volumes of verse in all.²¹

She subtitled *Mother and Child's* twenty-seven sonnets 'An Uncompleted Sonnet-Sequence,' bound them with seven other sonnets arranged in small clusters after the manner of 'True Woman' or 'The Choice,' marked some of them with dates that ranged from 'Rome, November 1881' to 1882 and 1886, and arranged them (with a subsequence which focused on the exclusive depth of a mother's love for an only child) in a rough progression from celebrations



Figure 11. Augusta Webster

of her daughter's unqualified trust to expressions of sympathy and solidarity with mothers whose children have died, regret that the simplicity and immediacy of the parental bond must diminish with age, and bleak reflections on ultimate death.

An oblique but interesting comparison might be drawn between Webster's apprehensions about the inevitability of separation with age and the passage of time and analogous reflections in Shakespeare's sonnets to the beautiful young man and the dark lady. But Webster's 'Rossettian' images of vain regret, echoing footsteps and spectral traces of vanished hopes focused here on very different sorts of love and gradual estrangement.

A little child she, half defiant came
Reasoning her case – 'twas not so long ago –
'I cannot mind your scolding, for I know
However bad I were you'd love the same.'
And I, what countering answer could I frame?
'Twas true, and true, and God's self told her so.
One does but ask one's child to smile and grow,
And each rebuke has love for its right name.

And yet, methinks, sad mothers who for years,
Watching the child pass forth that was their boast,
Have counted all the footsteps by new fears
Till even lost fears seem hopes whereof they're reft
And of all mother's good love sole is left –
Is their Love, Love, or some remembered ghost?

Sonnet eleven, 'Love's Mourner,' deconstructed conventional ideals of 'womanly patience', and the cumulative tolls of abuse and neglect they imposed (and impose):

'Tis men who say that through all hurt and pain
The woman's love, wife's, mother's still will hold,
And breathes the sweeter and will more unfold
For winds that tear it, and the sorrowful rain.
So in a thousand voices has the strain
Of this dear patient madness been retold,
That men call woman's love. Ah! they are bold,
Naming for love that grief which does remain.

Love faints that looks on baseness face to face:
Love pardons all; but by the pardonings dies,
With a fresh wound of each pierced through the breast.
And there stand pityingly in Love's void place
Kindness of household wont familiar-wise,
And faith to Love – faith to our dead at rest.

The poem's brief examination of a dutifully 'loving' woman's inner alienation was unique in its genre and time, and utterly foreign to Rossetti's preoccupations. Given this, it may be interesting as well as ironic that Webster's bitter evocations of love's 'void space' and 'death' formally paralleled the arid disillusion which concluded Rossetti's sonnet 'The Sun's Shame'.²²

I have argued in this section that young women such as Blind, Dawson and Levy found it useful to revalue Rossettian imagery of anxiety, memory and attachment in service to un-Rossettian aims. Webster's more experimental sonnet sequence reflected an idiosyncratic personal mixture of scepticism and ardent attachment, as well as careful study of Shakespeare, Barrett Browning's 'Sonnets from the Portuguese' and Rossetti's *The House of Life*. But she too drew on a common store of elegiac images for her more heterodox and independent meditations on broken attachments and generational loss.

The Second Generation

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's formal mannerisms gradually became part of a wider and more attenuated template of Pre-Raphaelite and 'decadent' antecedents as the turn of the century approached and passed, and a later generation of women modulated them in more 'imagist', 'symbolist' and proto-modernist directions. Extended sonnet-sequences became rarer, and capital-letter allegorical figurations faded away almost altogether as sensibilities evolved. But Pre-Raphaelite and Rossettian images of deliquescence and dissolution survived.

Olive Custance (1874–1944) married her 'Fairy Prince', Lord Alfred 'Bosie' Douglas, in 1902, and he published his own Rossettian sonnet sequence as a tribute *To Olive* in 1907. Custance herself wrote *Rainbows* (1902), *The Blue Bird* (1905) and two more volumes of verse before she fell silent in 1911, the year in which her father obtained control of her only child. A Rossettian undertow of intractable sadness sometimes modulated the scintillating surfaces of her eclectic poems, whose qualities also anticipated counterparts in the work of very different poets such as Angelina Grimke and May Cowdery in the Harlem Renaissance:

In gorgeous plumage, azure, gold and green,
They trample the pale flowers, and their shrill cry
Troubles the garden's bright tranquillity!
Proud birds of Beauty, splendid and serene,
Spreading their brilliant fans, screen after screen
Of burnished sapphire, gemmed with mimic suns –
Strange magic eyes that, so the legend runs,
Will bring misfortune to their fair demesne...

And my gay youth, that, vain and debonair,
Sits in the sunshine – tired at last of play
(A child, that finds the morning all too long),

Tempts with its beauty that disastrous day
When in the gathering darkness of despair
Death shall strike dumb the laughing mouth of song.²³

The sestet's 'darkness of despair' also recalled Rossetti's 'Lost Days',²⁴ and complemented the octave's more Keatsian and Shelleyan echoes.

Quite different and oddly arresting transmutations of Rossettian mannerisms and preoccupations with sexual transgression appeared in 'St. Sebastian' (*The Blue Bird*).

So beautiful in all thine agony!
So radiant in thine infinite despair...
Oh, delicate mouth, brave eyes, and curled bright hair...
Oh, lovely body lashed to the rough tree:
What brutal fools were those that gave to thee
Red roses of thine outraged blood to wear,
Laughed at thy bitter pain and loathed the fair
Bruised flower of thy victorious purity?

Marvellous Beauty... target of the world,
How all Love's arrows seek thy joy, Oh Sweet!
And wound the white perfection of thy youth!
How all the poisoned spears of hate are hurled
Against thy sorrow when thou darest to meet
With martyrdom men's mockery of the truth!

Among other things, St Sebastian's images recall counterparts in Rossetti's sonnets, such as 'Astarte Syriaca (For a Picture)', but Custance's celebrations of pain and androgyny are more 'decadent' than Rossetti's veiled references to adultery, and its sanguinary imagery ('red roses of thine outraged blood') more baroquely extravagant than Rossetti's carefully veiled metaphorical emblems of passion and loss.²⁵

A music critic and translator who introduced Russian and Czech composers to the British public, Rosa Harriet Jeaffreson Newmarch (1857–1940) published seventeen other books in addition to *Horae Amoris: Songs and Sonnets* (1903) and *Songs to a Singer and Other Verses* (1906). *Mary Wakefield, A Memoir* (1912), for example, paid tribute to the founder of the Competition Festival movement, 'a noble worker and a dear friend'.²⁶ In *Horae Amoris*'s thirty-four sonnets, Newmarch, who had married in 1883, expressed her love and sympathy for an abused and deserted wife. The work's Latin title may have echoed references to assorted 'hours of love' in *The House of Life* (e.g. sonnet

19, 'This close-companioned inarticulate hour/ When twofold silence was the song of love'), and Rossettian titles for individual sonnets included 'Love Among the Ruins', 'The Vision', 'Men's Justice', 'Then and Now' and 'The New Iseult.'

In proper Rossettian fashion, the sequence's implicit metanarrative flowed from its initial premise that love for a fellow-woman 'dearer than all else beside' had been ill-fated, 'the child of bitterness and rue,/ Born in the wreckage of a fallen shrine' (I, 'Love Among the Ruins'). Newmarch followed this opening motive with expressions of anxious sympathy for a woman in flight from her abusive husband (VII, 'Men's Justice'), frustration with unreciprocated physical desire (XXV), pain at the loved one's indifference (XXXIII, 'The Problem') and resigned self-awareness mingled with stoic integrity (fidelity to 'a care/ I'd not have changed for all the world holds fair,' XXXIII).

The speaker of sonnet XXIII, for example, broods on the transience of her love:

Should that day come – as come it surely must –
When from her presence with sad steps and slow,
Like a discharged steward I must go;
Who, ere he quits, yields up each urgent trust,
The deeds, the books, the keys he kept from rust,
To one who in his place will sit and know
All secrets of his mistress' weal and woe,
And hear her wishes and her cares discussed: –

When that dread day shall come, O let the grace
And dignity of service keep me mute
From bitter words; and let my unmoved face
Conceal the inward wound that burns so sore;
One parting blessing, and one grave salute:
Then from her life I pass for evermore.

Likewise in 'God's Justice' Newmarch echoes *The House of Life's* brooding sense of bereavement and poses counterparts of Rossetti's open questions in 'Michelangelo's Kiss' and 'Newborn Death'.²⁷

Her concluding title-sonnet offered a small but accomplished and rather comprehensive cadaster of 'Rossettian' imagery:

The day and night make up Love's book of Hours.
Dawn comes, and with the shivering breeze that sighs,
And with the weeping dews and paling skies,
Returns the grief which bore this love of ours.

Noon-tide; the sun in all his solstice powers
Has kissed the parched and amorous earth that lies
In rapture throbbing, and with lifted eyes
My passion wakes and blooms like Clytie's flowers.

Sunset; and while I watch the rosy stain
Fade into starless dusk, a cold unrest
Warns me no sunrise rings her back again.
Midnight: long since I saw the tired moon climb
Down by a fleecy pathway to the West.
Good-night to Love for now, and for all time.²⁸

In 'Men's Justice',²⁹ however, she abandoned this *ambiance* of music, shrines, chimes, chants, chalices and festal robes for grimmer empyrean imagery:

Men's Justice

That day she came to me the sun went down
In a strong glare of wide, unbroken red,
Save at the eastern limit, where outspread
One straight black bar, as though the Heavens must frown
On men's harsh justice, who had overthrown
Her home, by right of law, of roof and bed
Bereaving her; while on her guiltless head
They set shame's stigma, worse than martyr's crown.

O fool, to dream that God traced in the sky
A sign of wrath because a woman crept
Heartbroken to your arms! That night on high
The stars swerved not from their accustomed course,
And men and women loved, or calmly slept,
Or revelled till the dawn, without remorse.

The mordant bitterness of 'Men's Justice' offered, in effect, another feminist variant of 'The Sun's Shame', and Newmarch, like Rossetti, did not hesitate to write large the flaming letters of indignation as well as sublimated personal sorrow. In part perhaps because she was primarily a music historian, Newmarch's sonnet sequence has vanished from the footnotes of literary history, but *Hora Amoris's* precision and haunting honesty deserve a better fate.

'Michael Field' was the pseudonym of Katherine Bradley (1846–1914) and Edith Cooper (1862–1913), an aunt and niece who together published twenty-eight plays and eight volumes of 'aesthetic' poetry in a spirit of what Angela



Figures 12 and 13. Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper

Leighton once called 'baroque unorthodox'. Bradley and Cooper were vigorous antivivisectionists and supporters of women's suffrage whose works celebrated their lesbian partnership, and they found various of their poetic antecedents in Sappho's lyrics, Browning's monologues, Rossetti's sonnets on paintings and the poetic narratives of Swinburne and Morris.

Most scholars prefer their early work to the volumes they published after the turn of the century, and especially after their conversion to Catholicism in 1907. But there are poignant and arresting qualities in later poems such as the

following, an uncannily 'decadent' (and posthumously published) evocation of love beyond the grave.

Let not a star suspect the mystery!
 A cave that haunts thee in the dreams of night
 Keep me as treasure hidden from thy sight,
 And only thine while thou doest covet me!
 As the Asmonaeon queen perpetually
 Embalmed in honey, cold to thy delight,
 Cold to thy touch, a sleeping eremite,
 Beside thee never sleeping I would be.

Or thou might'st lay me in a sepulchre,
 And every line of life will keep its bloom,
 Long as thou seal'st me from the common air.
 Speak not, reveal not... There will be
 In the unchallenged dark a mystery,
 And golden hair sprung rapid in a tomb.

The last line's image clearly echoed Rossetti's possible allusion to his wife's disinterment at the end of 'Life-in-Love':³⁰

Mid change the changeless night environeth,
 Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death.

The preternatural 'imagist' clarity of this poem's declaration of eternal solidarity subserved distinctly Victorian emotional aims.

One of the Fields' most innovative works was 'Whym Chow, Flame of Love', a sequence of thirty lyrics in a variety of verse forms composed to commemorate their dog's death in 1906, and published privately in 1914. This idiosyncratic work blended fond evocations of Whym's fervour with unapologetically epic seriousness, and some of its passages explicitly recall the tone and diction of *The House of Life*:

I did not love him for myself alone:
 I loved him that he loved my dearest love...
 So I possess this creature of Love's flame,
 So loving what I love he lives from me;
 O symbol of our perfect union, strange
 Unconscious Bearer of Love's interchange.³¹

'Wym Chow's best passages echoed the Anglican memorial service as well as Blake's 'Tyger' and Barrett Browning's 'Sonnets from the Portuguese.' But the desire to portray deep love through idealized ritual was also deeply Pre-Raphaelite, and Rossetti had likewise invoked a third mediating presence between two lovers – variously called 'Love,' 'Life' and 'Death' – so much so that Robert Browning once complained that 'Love' was a 'lubberly fellow' whose presence marred the poem.³² (One instance of such mediation appeared in the lines 'Sometimes thou seem'st not as thy self alone,/ But as the meaning of all things that are...', from 'Heart's Compass'.³³)

The Fields may well have been the most original and arresting of the eclectic modernists I have mentioned, but other women of the period devoted sonnet sequences to cognate topics. Rachel Annand Taylor, for example, framed the sixty-one sonnets of *The Hours of Fiammetta: A Sonnet Sequence* (1910), with a prologue and epilogue in the voice of a 'dreaming woman,' and Grace Constant Lounsbury arranged *Love's Testament: A Sonnet Sequence* (1906) in twelve sections ('Of Love', 'Of Absence', 'Of Passion', 'Of Doubt', 'Of Philosophy', 'Of Content', 'Of Separation', 'Of Solitude', 'Of Reconciliation', 'Of Jealousy', and 'Retrospect').³⁴

In Taylor's 'Soul and Body' (no. XXII of the *Hours of Fiammetta*), for example, Rossetti's recurrent preoccupation with soul and body reappeared (cf. 'The Heart's Compass' and 'The Soul's Sphere'):

Sometimes the Soul in pure hieratic rule
 Is throned (as on some high Abbatial chair
 Of moon-pearl and rose-rubies beautiful)
 Within the body grown serene and fair:
 Sometimes it weds her like a lifted rood;
 But she endures, and wills no anodyne,
 For then she flowers within the mystic Wood,
 And hath her lot with gods – and seems divine:
 Sometimes it is her lonely oubliet,
 Sometimes a marriage-chamber sweet with spice:
 It is her triumph-car with flutes beset,
 The altar where she lies a sacrifice. –
 Cold images! The truth is not in these.
 Both are alive, both quick with rhapsodies.

Similarly, number twelve of one of Lounsbury's 'Absence'-sonnets (XII) echoed Rossetti's 'Lovesight' and 'Winged Hours',³⁵ though its cadences and prosody were more clearly Shakespearean:

If no night gave thee to mine arms again,
 If no day lent its taper to thy face,
 If the oblivion of thy deep embrace
 Were but a memory invoked in vain;
 If in the murmured melancholy rain,
 And in the spring I found of thee no trace,
 Banished thy love's sweet secret dwelling place,
 Thy joys, thy sorrows, thy delight, thy pain:

If in the twilight of the wilted day,
 When each sheep nears its fold, each bird its nest,
 My weary head in vain should seek thy breast,
 Thine answering hand, thy voice to soothe my way,
 Life could not prison me, for each man hath
 The right to pluck the ready grape of death.³⁶

Conclusion

Dante Gabriel Rossetti was not the only poet whose crafted imagery and depressive introspection offered models for the writers whose work I have sketched. But the 'House of Life' was the paradigm love-sequence of its time, Rossetti's sonnets served as models for introspective lyrics on the frustration of desire, and many of these writers seemed to find a language or tonality in his forms, rhythms, diction and choices of imagery which helped them express elegiac and lucid resignation (Blind, Levy and Newmarch); liminal intimations of mortality (Levy, Custance and Field); and agapic or amorous solidarity with other women (Levy, Dawson, Newmarch and Field).

The boldness of Rossetti's celebration of a frankly erotic heterosexual love and desire, by contrast, quickly gave way in the hands of the women I have discussed to other, more varied and heterodox expressions of such love – for a daughter; for humanity; for a married person of the same sex; for a beloved dog; for a mouldering mummy; or for one's own elusive or half-fragmented identity.

Arline Golden, by contrast, has put rather bleakly the case against Rossetti's more conventional male imitators:

For although Rossetti's followers employ the devices of conventional symbolism and tropes to universalise their themes, they fail, for the most part, to achieve more than a narrowly personal expression. And although Blunt and Symons expand their sequences to represent modern love and even the perennial aspirations of youth, they, too, fail

to attain the all-encompassing, transcendent vision of Meredith or Rossetti.³⁷

None of Rossetti's female successors, not even the Fields, created from the precedents of Rossetti's sonnets a radically new language or poetic diction. But several gave new *substance* to these forms, and employed sonnet conventions in distinctive, original, revisionist, feminist and ingeniously parodic and 'deconstructive' ways. Surely, therefore, such successful efforts to decant new wine into old formal bottles manifested the 'fundamental brainwork' Rossetti once considered was essential to the sonnet – and presumably to its continued survival as a distinctive mode of creative poetic expression.³⁸

In life, moreover, Rossetti was rigorously possessive in his claims to poetic and artistic originality, and often dismissive of the aspirations of 'new women' and other nineteenth-century feminists. In an afterlife of poetic collective memory, however, he might have been pleased as well as surprised to see some of the more haunting and creative aspects of 'his' forms and sensibility flourish in such paradoxically transmuted forms. If so, he might have learned to his pleasure that the 'gift[s] of grace unknown' had entered another century 'between the sculptured petals softly blown.'

Appendix: Ten More Rossettian Sonnets

Constance Naden

The Pessimist's Vision

I dreamed, and saw a modern Hell, more dread
Than Dante's pageant; not with gloom and glare,
But all new forms of madness and despair
Filled it with complex tortures, some Earth-bred,
Some born in Hell: eternally full-fed
Ghosts of all foul disease-germs thronged the air:
And as with trembling feet I entered there,
A Demon barred the way, and mocking said –

Through our dim vales and gulfs thou need'st not rove;
From thine own Earth and from its happiest lot
Thy lust for pain may draw full nourishment,
With poignant spice of passion; knowest thou not
Fiends wed for hate as mortals wed for love,
Yet find not much more anguish? Be content.'

Poet and Botanist

Fair are the bells of this bright-flowering weed;
Nectar and pollen treasures, where grope
Innocent thieves; the Poet lets them ope
And bloom, and wither, leaving fruit and seed
To ripen; but the Botanist will speed
To win the secret of the blossom's hope,
And with his cruel knife and microscope
Reveal the embryo life, too early freed.

Yet the mild Poet can be ruthless too,
Crushing the tender leaves to work a spell
Of love or fame; the record of the bud
He will not seek, but only bids it tell
His thoughts, and render up its deepest hue
To tinge his verse as with his own heart's blood.

from *Songs and Sonnets of Springtime*, 1881

Edith Nesbit

Pessimism

Not Spring – too lavish of her bud and leaf –
But Autumn, with sad eyes and brow austere,
When fields are bare, and woods are brown and sere,
And leaden skies weep their exhaustless grief:
Spring is so much too bright, since Spring is brief.
And in our hearts is autumn all the year,
Least sad when the wild pastures are most drear,
And fields grieve most robbed of the last gold sheaf.

For when the plough goes down the brown wet field,
A delicate doubtful throb of hope is ours –
What if this coming Spring at last should yield
Joy, with her too profuse unasked-for flowers?
Not all our Springs of commonplace and pain
Have taught us now that autumn hope is vain.

from *Lays and Legends*, 1887

Knowledge, I

I saw a people trampled on, oppressed,
 With helpless hands, and eyes of light afraid,
 With aching shoulders whereon burdens laid
 By day and night choked hope and murdered rest;
 A people sordid, sad, unloved, unblessed,
 Whose shroud by their own hands was ever made,
 Whose never-ending toil was only paid
 By death-in-life – or death, of life's gifts best.

'What help,' I cried, 'for these whose hands are weak –
 Too weak to hold the weapons they should wield;
 Too weak to grasp a helping hand, or seek
 With armed battalions to dispute the field,
 And on the oppressors just revenge to wreak?'
 Then – as I cried – the helper was revealed.

from *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism*, 1908

Bessie Craigmyle*A Wasted Day*

Here in the dusky garden-plot I sit,
 Laid in my lap are globed chrysanthemums,
 Round which the gold-barred bee incessant hums,
 And purple-winged butterflies still flit.
 The night is near, the evening lamp is lit,
 I have let day go by in dreamy thought,
 But holding one poor day as less than nought
 Have let it pass, taking no count of it.
 But soon shall come a time, I know not when,
 I shall go forth alone into the dark,
 When my strained eyes no more on earth shall see
 The face of lover or of friend; and then
 At the bed-foot where I lie, stiff and stark,
 This wasted Day shall stand, and laugh at me.

from *Poems and Translations*, 1886

Annie Matheson*The Ideal Wife*
(Without Distinction of Nationality)

A wife whose love has vanquished doubt and fear,
 In faith and courage man's eternal mate,
 Of reason and of will commensurate!
 A loveliness that time will but endear,
 Whereof the flower, enfolding, year by year,
 A soul more beautiful, with light eleate,
 Steals sweetness from the winds of adverse fate –
 Like snowy lilies fed with radiance clear!
 Man's Home and Comrade, – passionate, pure and strong,
 Among the merry, gay with quip and jest,
 To all the sad and lonely, motherhood! –
 The heart of him she loves, to war with wrong!
 He is her Strength and she to Him is Rest,
 Revealing, each to each, Truth, Beauty, Good.

from *Love Triumphant and Other New Poems*, 1898

Katherine Tynan*Fra Angelico at Fiesole, I*

Home through the pleasant olive woods at even
 He sees the patient mild-white oxen go;
 Without his lattice doves wheel to and fro,
 A great moon climbs the wan green fields of heaven
 An hour since, the sun-vein whereon are graven
 Gold bells and pomegranates in scarlet show
 Parted, and lo! the city's spires of snow
 Flushed like an opal, and the streets gold paven!
 Then the night's purple fell and hid the rest,
 And this monk's eyes filled with happy tears
 That come to him beholding all things fair:
 A bird's flight over wan skies to the nest;
 The great sad eyes of beasts, the silk wheat ears,
 Flowers, or the gold dust on a baby's hair.

from *Louise de la Valliere, and Other Poems*, 1885

Mary Coleridge*Companionship*

The men and women round thee, what are they?
 Frail as the flowers, less lasting than the snow.
 If there be angels flitting in the day,
 Who knows those angels? Who shall ever know?
 Let them alone and go thou on thy way!
 They came like dreams; like dreams they come and go.

Nay, the companions of thy timeless hours
 Are dreams dreamt first for thee by them of old,
 That thou might'st dream them after! These are powers
 Unending and unaging – never cold –
 White as the driven snow, fair as the flowers.
 These be thy verities, to have, to hold!

Imagination

I called you, fiery spirits, and ye came!
 Earth was the earth no more; the solid ground
 Was as a maze of cloud-like glories found,
 The sun was music and the wind was flame.
 A rainbow shone about the sacred name
 Of all the virtues. Thought in rapture drowned,
 Wild ecstasy it was to hear the sound,
 The fluttering of the wings of Love and Fame.
 I called you, fiery spirits! When your task
 Was over, faint, weary, and short of breath,
 I would have driven you hence. I did but ask
 The old life that I led, the life beneath.
 In vain! The world henceforward seems a masque
 Fit for the haunted rooms of dreamy death.

from *Poems*, 1908

Margaret Woods*The Earth Angel
(To a Child.)*

Beloved spirit, whom the angels miss
 While those heaven-wandering wings thou foldest here,
 Love musing on thee, Love whose shadow is fear,
 Divines thee born of fairer worlds than this,
 And fain ere long to re-assume their bliss.
 Stay, winged soul! For earth, this human sphere,
 Claims thee her own, her light that storms swept clear,
 Her Righteousness that Love, not Peace, shall kiss.

'Twas out of Time thou camest to be ours,
 And dead men made thee in the darkling years,
 Thy tenderness they bought for thee with tears,
 Pity with pain that nothing could requite,
 And all thy sweetness springs like later flow'rs
 Thick on the field of some forgotten fight.

from *Collected Poems*, 1914

Notes

- 1 'Characters in Fiction', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Harcourt Brace, 1988), vol. 3, p. 421.
- 2 Recent studies of the relationship between Victorian poets and their successors have included Carol Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics* (University of Chicago Press, 1984); and Cassandra Laity, *Hilda Doolittle and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 3 Anthologies which have made the work of Victorian women poets more widely available include Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds, *Victorian Women Poets* (Blackwell, 1995); Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow, *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets* (Oxford University Press, 1996) and Linda Hughes, *New Women Poets* (1890s Society, 2001).
- 4 Diss. Indiana University, 1970, p. 32.
- 5 *Sonnets of the Century* (London: Walter Scott, 1886), p. xlvi. The sonnets provide a pastiche of Rossetian imagery – compare 'The One Hope' with the sestet of 'To D. G. R., I':

Hope dwelt with thee, not Fear; Faith, not Despair;
 But little heed thou hadst of the grave's gloom.
 What though thy body lies so deeply there
 Where the land throbs with tidal surge and boom,
 Thy soul doeth breathe some Paradisal air
 And Rest long sought thou hast where amaranths bloom.

- 6 Op. cit., p. lvi.

7 Op. cit., p. 316. If later commentators were less partial, most recognized Dante Gabriel Rossetti's importance to the sonnet tradition. Arthur T Quiller Couch's 1897 *English Sonnets* included five of his sonnets, more than from any other nineteenth-century poets except Wordsworth, Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. A reflection of the sonnet's contemporary prestige may be seen in the fact that Evelyn Sharp's *Women's Voices* (1887), the first anthology of Victorian women poets, included no fewer than 38 sonnets by women. For comparison, *Great Sonnets*, ed. Paul Negri (NY: Dover, 1994), included four each by DG Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, George Meredith and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

8 Nos 10, 25, 64, 83, 91.

9 'Dead Love'.

10 'Motherhood'.

11 No. 100.

12 cf. 'The Sun's Shame' (92) and 'Czar Alexander the Second (13th March 1881)'.

13 Her most anthologized poem is 'The Dead':

The dead abide with us! Though stark and cold
 Earth seems to grip them, they are with us still:
 They have forged our chains of being for good or ill;
 And their invisible hands these hands yet hold.
 Our perishable bodies are the mould
 In which their strong imperishable will –
 Mortality's deep yearning to fulfil –
 Hath grown incorporate thorough dim time untold.

Vibrations infinite of life in death,
 As a star's travelling light survives its star!
 So may we hold our lives, that when we are
 The fate of those who then will draw this breath,
 They shall not drag us to their judgment-bar,
 And curse the heritage which we bequeath.

14 *Xantippe and Other Poems*, 1881.

15 No. 69.

16 *A Minor Poet* (London, 1891), 2nd ed., p. 89.

17 No. 71.

18 No. 5.

19 No. 71.

20 'To Vernon Lee'.

21 The most extensive study of Webster's work is Christine Sutphin, ed., *Augusta Webster: Portraits and Other Poems*, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2000. See also my 'Augusta Webster', *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. William E Fredeman and Ira Nadel, vol. 35 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1985).

22 No. 92.

23 'Peacocks: A Mood,' *Rainbows*.

24 No. 86.

25 Another trace of Rossetti's influence might be found in 'Beauty,' also in the 1905 volume:

I saw the face of Beauty – a pale rose
 In the gold dusk of her abundant hair...

A silken web of dreams and joys – a snare...
 A bright temptation for gay youth that goes
 Laughing upon his way without a care!
 A shield of light for conquering Love to bear
 Stronger than all the swords of all his foes.

O face of Beauty – O white dawn enshrined
 In sunrise veils of splendid hair – O star!
 Shine on those weary men who sadly wise
 But guess thy glory faintly from afar –
 Missing the marvel of thy smile – and blind
 To the imperial passion in thine eyes!

26 *Mary Walsfield: A Memoir*, p. 120.

27 Nos 94, 99, 100.

28 'Horae Amoris,' 34.

29 No. 7.

30 No. 36.

31 V. Trinity.

32 *The Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. Th. H Hood (London, 1933), p. 137.

33 'Heart's Compass,' *The House of Life*, 27.

34 Rachel Annand Taylor, *The Hours of Fiammeta: A Sonnet Sequence* (London: Elkin Matthews, 1910). Other Rossettian sonnets in the sequence included XIII, 'The Voice of Love' and XXII, 'Soul and Body'. G Constant Lounsbery, *Love's Testament: A Sonnet Sequence* (London: The Bodley Head, 1906). Gertrude Witherby's *The Heart of Love: A Sonnet Sequence* (London, 1915), bears no apparent trace of Rossetti's influence, and I have tried without success to locate Edith Ellen Trusted's *Sonnet and Song* (London 1913).

35 Nos 4 and 25 respectively.

36 Other parallels may be found, e.g. in X, XVI, XVII, XXIV, XXXIV, XXXIX, XLIV, LX and LXIV.

37 Golden, p. 172.

38 Sharp, *Sonnets of the Century*, p. xlvi.