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Remembering Christina Rossetti: Dead Women and the Afterlife of Lyric

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I. Give me the lowest place: brevity, memory, and the parodic poetess

As the nineteenth century progressed, the rise of the novel made poetry appear increasingly trivial and irrelevant. With poets confining themselves to smaller forms and less-didactic themes, versifying itself began to seem like women's work. All the same, female writers found it difficult to achieve recognition as serious artists. Dorothy Mermin wryly observes that "the association of poetry and femininity . . . excluded women poets" (67). This paradox is captured in the figure of the poetess. Victorian poetesses were thought to be musically facile, overflowing with personal emotion, and unambitious in scope. In other words, they were lyricists *par excellence*. Yet despite embodying poetry, they were not considered true poets; they were classed below both their male Romantic predecessors and their male contemporaries, barred from the highest literary aspirations.

One can understand why Christina Rossetti has been associated with the poetess tradition. Many of her poems are devotional; others portray lifeless women and ruined romance,

relying on a version of femininity that is apparently centered in loss and deferred desire. And with her conscious investment in brevity, Rossetti is almost parodically lyrical. Rather disingenuously, she reflects that “the nearest approach to a ‘method’ I can lay claim to was a distinct aim at conciseness” (Troxell 179). She favors short poems over discursive narratives, rhyming stanzas over blank verse, and the meditative or descriptive over the overtly topical or political. She recycles a set of typically-feminine sentiments and themes: love, sorrow, death, God, flowers. Perversely withholding even the subject matter of some poems (such as “Winter: My Secret”), she amplifies the intimate impersonality of the lyric voice. Rossetti shrank from the idea that she might be named Poet Laureate after Tennyson’s death; devoted to her mother, she never married; she opposed female suffrage; she seemed more interested in remaining a virtuous Christian woman than in becoming an outspoken public intellectual. In short, as she creates an aesthetic of restraint and self-silencing, she appears to deal in the quintessence of lyric.¹

For some critics, lyrical littleness makes Rossetti’s work narrow and monotonous. Stuart Curran disparages Rossetti, maintaining that “Her stock of images is small. . . . Her aims were small and her gifts were small” (291, 299). Iterative diction and a limited range of unintellectual womanly concerns prevent her from being considered a major poet. Edmund Gosse, asserting that female poets “must be brief, personal, and concentrated,” describes Rossetti as “one of the most perfect poets of the age—not one of the most

¹ Rossetti’s biographer Jan Marsh believes that the poet’s lyrics show her “keeping to the female gardens of religion and fantasy rather than straying into larger political and philosophical fields” (284). Lionel Stevenson writes that “Christina Rossetti’s poetry comes closer to the pure lyric mode than that of any other Victorian . . . for the obvious reason that it contains a minimum of intellectual substance” (88).

powerful, of course" (211-12). Even the word "perfect" is a backhanded compliment, implying mere polished delicacy. This damning with faint praise encapsulates the dilemma of the poetess, who ironically can only hope to rival the epic ambitions of her male counterparts by pursuing lyric miniaturization and thus *not* challenging men on their own terms.

But Gosse does hint that Rossetti's circumscriptions are also strengths. For Dolores Rosenblum, the poet's distinctive voice originates in her "restricted lexicon [and] repetitive formulations" ("Religious Poetry" 34-35).² Prefabricated language both effaces and creates idiosyncrasy. What is sometimes taken as ultra-feminine febleness is instead a compellingly crafted grammar of rearrangeable images, metaphors, and Biblical quotations. Repetition—in stanzas, rhymes, meters—is a fundamental feature of lyric form. Brevity and repetition, both patterns of disciplined control, can also exceed their own constraints; Rossetti's linguistic restrictions build a series of striking leitmotifs. "The Lowest Place," which is engraved on Rossetti's tombstone, illustrates both self-abnegation and powerful smallness. "Give me the lowest place: not that I dare / Ask for that lowest place" (lines 1-2): ostentatiously denying that it asks for salvation, this not-so-humble poem does so twice over. Formal and conceptual self-lessening, reflected in iterative language, provides the poet with an ambitious pattern of redemption.

Rossetti critics have divided into several schools of thought as they consider her small lyrics and unassuming demeanor. Some

² In a similar vein, W. David Shaw remarks that Rossetti "manages to generate a sense of mystery out of commonplace refrains and repetitions, out of a bare depleted diction, and out of austere simple stanzaic forms and metres" (35). And Isobel Armstrong, confirming my point below, concludes that Rossetti's poetry is "locked in repetition . . . [between] boundaries and the transgression of boundaries" (352).

view her as a saintly figure. Some call her the victim of a repressive society. And some see her as a subversive writer who smirks beneath her mask of conformity.³ My sympathies are largely with this last group, but with several important differences. First, I approach Rossetti's ironies through form as well as through gender politics; without classing her as a zealous crusader for women's rights, I relate her understatedly proto-feminist dissidence to the lyric itself. Second –partly because the formal characteristics of brief, repetitive poems make them particularly mnemonic—I view Rossetti's work through the lens of memory and memorability. (Critics have, in a sense, long debated whether her verse cries “Forget me!” or “Remember me!”) I focus on three poems that depict dead or dying women: “Song [When I am dead, my dearest],” “Remember,” and (as an introduction to these) “Rest.”⁴ Rather than emphasizing the pathos of the female corpse, as all three schools frequently do, I compare its adamant self-reduction to the smallness of Rossetti's lyrics. I argue that death and brevity make both speakers and poems strikingly memorable. Confinement in compactly mnemonic verses is reiterated in the pose of a passive corpse; both grant the writer an opaque, laconic persona that simultaneously mimics and renounces the poetess's depleted yearnings.⁵ Rossetti inhabits and transcends the

³ Curran, for example, calls Rossetti “a simple and a pious woma. . . . Humble and submissive: entirely unpretentious” (298). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar depict a repressed Rossetti, arguing that she internalizes patriarchal strictures and speculating about “what kind of verse Rossetti would have written if she had not defined her own artistic pride as wicked ‘vanity’” (558). Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbott claim that Rossetti protests “women's invisibility in the urban marketplace and their sexual and social vulnerabilities” (119). They consider her, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to be an activist poet.

⁴ I will refer to “Song [When I am dead, my dearest]” simply as “When I am dead.” My source for Rossetti's texts is R. W. Crump's *Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems* (2001).

⁵ Rossetti's tombstone, inscribed with lines from “The Lowest Place,” provides a

deceptively-simple lyric, the grave, and the poetess tradition alike. Subtly removing her speakers from narrative progression and from societal expectations, she makes them dynamic in their static enclosure. She creates haunting women who insist on being remembered, even as they expire and urge the world to forget them.

Rossetti's speakers revel in self-silencing and miniaturization. God will favor them not *despite* but *because of* their inarticulate smallness. "Soon to lie dumb before Thee . . . Forget not my life, O my Lord, forget not my death"; "Ah, always less and less, even while I press / Forward . . . Even me, O Lord my Lord, remember me."⁶ In these appeals, Rossetti relies on the language of memory—and on the fact that brevity is an effective mnemonic aid. God will remember her, and so will the reader; like an unassuming Christian, a brief poem is unforgettable. Its formal refinement demands that it be known as a whole, not paraphrased. As Jonathan Culler says, lyrics "retain an irreducible otherness: to remember them at all is to remember at least some of their words; they ask . . . to be learned by heart" (46-47). A lyric's narrow confines, which evoke the grave, also represent the secure space of the reader's memory. I do not claim that Rossetti's verses are more mnemonic than those of other lyricists—but Rossetti does self-consciously thematize this quality.

Rossetti's poems appear timeless due to their attention: rarely anchored to a specific place or temporality or speaker, they seem

literalized version of her burial in small poems. Margaret Reynolds uses a relevant quotation from Rossetti's 1850 *Maude* as an epigraph: "Small though not positively short, she might easily be overlooked but would not easily be forgotten" (3).

⁶ "A chill blank world. Yet over the utmost sea" (8, 10); *Later Life*, Sonnet 4 (7-8, 14). While God presumably does not suffer from amnesia, Biblical "remembering" implies "favoring": "And God remembered Rachel, and God hearkened to her, and opened her womb. And she conceived, and bare a son; and said, God hath taken away my reproach" (Genesis 30.22-3).

unusually portable and anthologizable. Readers must speculate about such details, and in so doing must draw on their remembrance of lyrics past and of lyrical conventions. These poems thus locate themselves in the memory even before they have been read. They make the small and transient into the permanent and perpetual, adhering to Keats's precept that poetry should "appear almost a remembrance" to the reader (66). Rossetti removes her lyrics from immediacy; in the same way, as I will demonstrate, she locates the creative act in distancing nostalgia rather than direct emotion.

Ironically, addressing the theme of memory often causes Rossetti to rehearse self-effacement and self-forgetting. Various addressees are asked to remember that remembering is not important: "When I am dead" advises "And if thou wilt, remember, / And if thou wilt, forget," while "Remember" concludes with "Better by far you should forget and smile / Than that you should remember and be sad." But repeated instructions to forget, especially when couched in mnemonic forms, imply that there is something important to remember. Obsessive repetitions of the forgettable counteract its forgettability—just as a speaker's stubborn inscrutability invites scrutiny.⁷

Yet the brief and mnemonic nature of these verses, paradoxically, also means that they take on a family resemblance and blend together. Rewriting the maudlin sentiment of the poetess, Rossetti mutes and objectifies her own lyric interiority with terse variations on the same emotional climaxes; the resulting profusion of seemingly-interchangeable poems suspends her between memorability

⁷ Rossetti's self-masking hints at a carefully-guarded subjectivity behind the mask; the withheld secret is a figure for the self-concealing female subject, who speaks without using a confessional voice. For McGann, Rossetti "employs the symbol of the personal secret as a sign of the presence of individuality" (247).

and its opposite. Virginia Woolf, who memorizes some of Rossetti's verses, admits that there are many she has never read (242). If you've seen one Rossetti dead-lady poem, it is easy to believe that you've seen them all. Both memories and anthologies tend to let one poem metonymically signify a large group of similar ones. "When I am dead" represents post-mortem verse, "The Lowest Place" stands in for religious verse, "Winter: My Secret" epitomizes the secular and playful. Knowing-by-heart can prevent understanding. In much the same way, Victorian over-familiarity with popular female poets reinforces the restrictions of the "poetess" category. Remembering and forgetting are intimately bound up in each other.

II. The golden threshold: post-mortem remembrance

Many of Rossetti's poems inhabit a threshold state, suspending their subjects between life and death. These verses, as I discuss below, parody both feminine passivity and the lovelorn poetess; the very excess of their self-renunciations marks them as transgressively solipsistic. As she does with lyrical smallness, the poet embraces and transcends cultural conventions and death itself.⁸ Angela Leighton, proposing that Rossetti both relies on and shrewdly mocks the "sentimental suicidalism" of the poetess tradition, spots a "hidden smile in this over-rehearsed morbidity" (119, 291). Leighton also notes Rossetti's retrospective or even "anachronistic" post-mortem point of view (148). Rossetti thus rejects

⁸Kathryn Burlinson believes that Rossetti places her speakers in autonomous "liminal or atemporal spaces" in order to critique societal marginalization and to employ "an aesthetic strategy that exaggerates the culturally circumscribed experience" (27).

the poetess's direct, overwhelming emotionality by choosing to remember rather than to experience; I argue that the liminal, moribund realm is also the realm of memory. Her muse seeks out missed opportunities and belated realizations. Rarely does she speak from the visionary present. She will sing of love, but only once it is safely in the past. She will describe bodily sensations, but only once she has been disembodied. The pervasive feeling of passivity and estrangement in her work is based not only in femininity but also in remembrance. Katherine Mayberry observes that poetry and memory are both redemptive forces in Rossetti's aesthetic: like verse itself, memory "selectively reshapes experience and renders timeless what is otherwise subject to change and corruption" (60). It makes the transient knowable.

Memory, then, is at the basis of the creative act for Rossetti. For her, poems of emotional distance are all a form of remembering. She writes through recollection and nostalgia rather than presence and immediacy. Projecting herself into the future, she claims the right to revise the world as she recalls it; like loquacious corpses, her resurrected memories take on new life. This approach echoes Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquillity," which for him is the source of poetry. Yet Rossetti is more concerned with creating an atmosphere of numbed detachment than with pleasurably re-creating powerful feelings. She allows her dead women to exercise control over the distanced objects of their remembrance.

No one can faithfully memorize experience. All human remembering is distortion, is misremembering; memory is again inextricable from its dark double, forgetting. In the second sonnet of her 1881 *Monna Innominata* sequence, Rossetti muses, "I wish I could remember that first day, / First hour, first moment of your meeting me . . . So unrecorded did it slip away" (1-2, 5). Her poetry relies not

only on recollection but also on its collapse.⁹ Remembering a *failure* or *refusal* to remember, emphasizing yet emptying out the process of memory by half-recapturing an event, places the poet at another remove from earnest confession. The heart becomes “not an ultimate touchstone of truth and sincerity, but a place of indecipherable secrets and strategies” (Leighton 134). Gesturing at the poetess tradition, Rossetti deliberately misremembers it and reconstructs it on her own terms.

“Rest,” “When I am dead,” and “Remember” speak for or describe a woman who has died—or who imagines dying. Before I examine these poems, I will contextualize them, further clarifying their position in Rossetti’s aesthetics and cultural milieu. I will begin with their place in the public memory, as reflected in their popularity as anthology pieces. Rossetti is frequently yet selectively anthologized; she is the only woman poet in the second edition of Houghton and Stange’s influential *Victorian Poetry and Poetics* (1968), although these editors select only 17 of her poems (including “When I am dead”). Constance Hassett writes that “Rest” and “Remember” are “conspicuous in Rossetti’s legacy” (156), and Rossetti’s brother William Michael reports eleven musical settings of “When I am dead” by 1904 (qtd. in Crump 898). In an 1870 letter, Rossetti dryly observes that “A human being wanting to set one of my things to music has at last not fixed on ‘When I am dead’” (*Family Letters* 31). Curran notes that “When I am dead” is Rossetti’s most-anthologized lyric (288)—Woolf, too, says that “Our remote posterity will be

⁹Dinah Roe says of this *Monna Innominata* sonnet that Rossetti, “instead of being paralyzed by the failure of memory, writes around the problem by describing instead what it is like to forget” (72). And Constance Hassett proposes that “Rossetti’s sequence is conceived of as a book of memory manqué” (171); rejecting the Petrarchan fetishization of the first meeting with a beloved, it both laments and accepts the inevitability of forgetfulness.

singing: ‘When I am dead, my dearest’” (244)—while Germaine Greer claims the most-anthologized title for “Rest” (388). Margaret Reynolds cites “Remember” as a popular anthology piece (6), while Eleanor Thomas puts “Rest,” “Remember,” and “When I am dead” among Rossetti’s “best loved pieces” (46). Mackenzie Bell predicts that “the critic of the far future” will treasure “When I am dead” (356-57). In a 1958 *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, W. W. Robson features “Remember” in his section on Rossetti. And Ellen Proctor places “When I am dead” at the end of her memoir on the poet, as a summation or epitaph. Again, a few favorite poems come to represent Rossetti’s work metonymically, to the exclusion of many others; her lyrics are so mnemonic as to encourage forgetfulness.¹⁰

In 1914, Macmillan published a three-part *Children’s Rossetti* for classroom use. Students were intended to learn these poems by heart, and the reprinting itself signals post-Victorian nostalgia; Rossetti, even as she is restricted to a schoolbook, is marked as particularly memorable. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra concludes that Rossetti is a “resilient commodity” (249) where anthologies are concerned, noting that the Souvenir Press published an illustrated 1989 edition of “Remember.” This popular sonnet is easily recontextualized, made portable and available for resale. Its title becomes ironic, because the book-length reprinting misremembers Rossetti as a tract-writer rather than a serious devotional poet—and

¹⁰It is not unusual for poets to be represented by a few well-known pieces, but the contrast between Rossetti’s popularity and the small number of her poems that are consistently anthologized is particularly striking. Since she wrote a great many verses with similar titles and themes and imagery, selective critical forgetting is especially relevant to her. Even this article inevitably indulges in such metonymy, using certain works to stand in for large subclasses of Rossetti’s *oeuvre*. Due to what he considers her monotony, Bell groups Rossetti with writers “who are content if a *portion* of their work is read, dwells in the memory, or is looked at again in quiet hours” (371-72, my emphasis).

misremembers her poem as a commercialized keepsake. Kooistra also argues that twentieth-century anthology practices (such as excerpting and illustrating poems) mistakenly portray Rossetti as a children's writer. For example, the 1969 children's collection *Doves and Pomegranates* reduces Rossetti's masterpiece *Goblin Market* to 31 lines, retitling it "Come Buy, Come Buy" (Kooistra 172, 193-97). This reveals a dangerous critical consequence of Rossetti's self-effacing conciseness. Such publication infantilizes her, turning the anthology into a prison, confining the poet within miniaturized nursery poetics. Rossetti has been resurrected (since about the 1970s) as a complex artist who wrote for adults; my article closes with a consideration of the poet as a biographical subject. I show how she and her poems are linked to memory and forgetting, on formal and cultural levels. I ask how we can recall her as a historical figure without contributing to critical misremembering—without trapping her in the persona of a saintly poetess, a victim, or an activist. But I begin by reading her lyrics.

Many of Rossetti's poems declare that mortal life is worthwhile only insofar as it symbolizes divinity, warning that nature's temporal cycles will be replaced by the eternal reality of heaven. Both the world and the sinful self, says Rossetti, will inevitably pass away.¹¹ Yet she also complicates her dualistic tendencies by attempting to arrest flying time. Adapting a ballad trope, she often gives voice to a stunned or moribund or dead woman, permitting her to speak only from a liminal place between earth and heaven: "lingering on the golden threshold," "between the night and day," such a woman "doth not see, but knows: she doth not feel, /

¹¹ "An 'Immurata' Sister," for example, begins "Life flows down to death; we cannot bind / That current that it should not flee" (1-2).

And yet is sensible.”¹² These poems create not a direct path to paradisiacal bliss but an in-between space and time, which I have already identified as a memorial realm central to Rossetti’s poetics. In this middle place, a speaker can safely gaze at the world’s dangerous beauties because she has already died to them. She remembers them, and remembers to forget them. She escapes both natural cycles and heavenly teleology, redirecting sensual attachment to the pleasures of poetic craft itself. Rossetti solves the problem of corporeality through numbed and detached self-mortification. Adopting an amnesiac pose, her lyrics can deliberately only half-recall the world (“Haply I may remember / And haply may forget”) while still appealing to its memory.

The space of the memorizable poem—like the twilight threshold realm—provides a special haven for female speakers, in which they can make claims on the reader’s remembrance while embracing the humble smallness their gender requires. Their impersonal half-presence makes them, like Rossetti herself, consummate lyricists; they are caught between self-assertion and self-effacement, speaking to no one, overheard rather than heard.¹³ Rossetti stages textual death in order to dramatize the plight (and the stubborn survivals) of women writers, who are locked into a mode of compliant melodiousness. By lingering ascetically over what is *not* sensed (“When I am dead” asserts that “I shall not see the shadows, / I shall not feel the rain”), Rossetti strikes a balance between solipsistic first-person perception and absorption into a non-sensual divine order that will both annihilate and affirm a speaking subject. Reserve and even apparent depletion—the pressure of lyric brevity, the refusal to

¹² “To the end” (69), “Ye have forgotten the exhortation” (2), “Life hidden” (9-10).

¹³ As J.S. Mill famously said, “eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard” (“What is Poetry?,” 1833).

bare her heart even through an “I”—provide Rossetti with expressive power. Her verses, with their iterative evasions, exaggerate and reclaim female silence and marginalization.

Male poets fetishize and kill off their female beloveds; for Poe, the death of a beautiful woman is “the most poetical topic in the world” (535). Rossetti mimics this submissive pose in her deathbed verses—a corpse is ideally docile—but turns abject sexual exposure into self-satisfied patience. Dead women assume a subdued posture that denies or delays the fulfillment of earthly and heavenly love.¹⁴ And so Rossetti’s fixation on female corpses, while not simply morbid, also does not generate visions of Paradise. As Rossetti associates her poems with distancing remembrance rather than immediacy, so she associates her women with quasi-animation rather than vigorous energy. Using the lyric to perform female objectification and forgettability, she makes them unforgettable.

Empowering confinement in small verses thus mirrors confinement in the grave. Graves and lyrics are both memorial spaces; yet poetic memorizability can prevent comprehension, and so it is fitting that Rossettian corpses reject straightforwardly confessional subjectivity. Cut off in their prime, speakers and poems become both memorable and elusive. The simple surface of a mnemonic lyric, like the visage of a dead woman, conceals troubling depths. I show that sweet-sounding anthology pieces have a bitter,

¹⁴ Rosenblum documents Rossetti’s ability to make death into an empowering and transformative experience, calling it “a vehicle for expressing not only profound alienation but self-possession” (*Endurance* 127). Since Rossetti implicitly launches an attack on her society by withdrawing from it, deathbed poems can grant their speakers political authority as well. See also David A. Kent’s “Christina Rossetti’s Dying.”

accusatory side that belies their apparent complicity with patriarchal conventions.¹⁵

III. Her rest shall not begin nor end: mnemonic atemporality

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar connect Rossetti's ritualized amnesia with the "intellectual incapacity patriarchal culture has traditionally required of women" (58); they claim that nineteenth-century female writers are afraid of forgetting their literary foremothers. However, I counter that Rossetti deliberately misremembers certain oppressive matrilineal figures. She rewrites the poetess-themes of love and death. She does not forget the world in her lover's eyes; she forgets the romantic encounter itself. She does not weep over a dead body; she *is* a dead body. She does not lament "I perish!"; she calmly recounts that she has perished or intends to perish.

The 1849 sonnet "Rest" challenges matrilineal authority as it revises the poetess's sentimental voice. It is spoken not by, but about, a dead woman; the absence of an "I" underscores its impersonality. This detached tone also allows "Rest" to pursue a state of static simultaneity. Time will end when the post-apocalyptic earth is redeemed; in a brief poem that lets time run out, Rossetti rehearses the end of days by freezing chronological progression. Divine atemporality, echoed in a dead woman's timeless self-sufficiency, is also reflected in the synchronic propensities of a mnemonic lyric.

¹⁵For more on the dark side of Rossetti's popular poems, see Susan Conley's "Rossetti's Cold Women." Conley sees in Rossetti "a fantasy of power that subverts the otherwise disempowering ideological conjunction of woman and death" (280). In her eyes, both the dead speaker and the female poet manage to "speak from the traditional position of silence and radical otherness" (266).

This poem concludes with “Until the morning of Eternity / Her rest shall not begin nor end, but be; / And when she wakes she will not think it long.” The first of these lines contains three polysyllabic words, the second only one, and the third none. This transition into monosyllables creates an effect of emphatic slowing. On a first reading, we may read the polysyllabic “Eternity” line too quickly to highlight its rhyme with “be”; on a second and third reading, as we begin to internalize “Rest,” we probably draw out the word “Eternity” in order to place a slight accent on its final syllable. Re-experiencing the poem instead of experiencing it, knowing it all at once, leads to temporal deceleration and undermines the onward-marching impulse of iambic beats—thus confirming the link between consecrated immobility and poetic memorizability.

“Rest,” then, aspires to the state of a memorized poem. It attempts to avoid marking out the passage of time. There is no logical shift at the sestet; the poem presents a unified surface. Just as the deceased escape time’s constraints, so we cease to discern poetic duration. Knowing a poem by heart makes a reader equally aware of textual past and present and future—a near-divine point of view. One who reads this poem “will not think it long,” and may destabilize its orderly movement through time by committing it to memory. And so the poem “Rest,” like the corpse’s repose, “shall not begin nor end, but be.”¹⁶

¹⁶ The opening chiasmus of “Rest” is also an emblem of static enclosure. Yet no poem, even a memorized poem, can completely cut its ties to temporality. A sonnet known by heart cannot truly achieve the total simultaneity of a line or phrase known by heart, or of a poem seen on the page. Sharon Cameron traces lyric poetry’s embattled attempts to stop time. She unwittingly echoes the language of “Rest” when she asserts that lyric is “[c]oncerned neither with *ends* nor with *beginnings*” (70, my emphasis). And she concludes that, despite the unavoidable temporality of any poem, a lyric’s “resistance to temporal extension creates the illusion of temporal wholeness, as well as of the temporal

“Even her very heart has ceased to stir.” Like Wordsworth’s “And all that mighty heart is lying still!,” which Rossetti remembers in “Rest,” this line denies the presence of regular rhythms, but does so through a series of near-perfect iambs. Like a musical “rest,” a silence in the midst of song, Rossetti’s line both suspends and relies on an underlying time signature. It hesitates between pulsing vitality and numb insensibility, between enduring selfhood and the annihilation of personality, thus making this woman’s heart into a troubled mnemonic device. Erased from the world as her pulse stops, she is made memorable through the persistent yet troubled beats of her poetic setting. The “Rest” speaker simultaneously emphasizes the dead woman’s disconnection from earthly existence and insists that she will be remembered, that she will be known and recognized until “the morning of Eternity.” Her stilled and self-forgetting heart, with its haunting throbs that appeal to memory, can now be known by heart. She is an unforgettable vestige. Like her creator’s lyrics, she revels in being reduced and confined. Here is Rossetti writing against the heart, replacing the poetess’s rush of emotion with a stance of powerfully detached remembrance.

Greer sees “Rest” as an unconscious heterodoxy, because Rossetti’s praise of the sleeper’s liminal world threatens to disrupt Christian teleology (388-89); a true believer should emphasize the ineluctable movement from imperfect earthly existence to perfected afterlife, but Rossetti here dallies in a threshold realm and—in a darker version of her dead subject’s peaceful forgetfulness— indefinitely postpones this woman’s entrance into heaven. “With stillness that is almost Paradise” provides an off-rhyme in the smooth

simultaneity of its moments” (196); for Cameron, the lyric vainly attempts to absorb even death into poetic synchrony.

“eyes / sighs / replies” sequence, reflecting its jarring claim that frozen stasis rivals divine transfiguration. Incongruously, this mnemonic poem both pursues redeemed temporality and favors oblivion over salvation. It suffers from disruptive amnesia as it fails to recall religious narrative progression.

IV. Only remember me: insistent indifference in two lyrics

The 1848 “When I am dead” also associates memory with a space of moribund between-ness. As it portrays a dead woman’s striking atemporality, it emphasizes her urgent desire to be remembered. This desire, however, is not immediately apparent. Though the poem addresses a beloved, its tone is impersonal. With its pared-down diction and modified ballad meter, it is more a laconic set of declarations than an earnest *cri du coeur*. The choice between memory and amnesia (“Haply I may remember / And haply may forget”) seems arbitrary. While “Rest” tactfully mentions a “blessèd *dearth*” instead of naming *death* outright, this poem has “dead” in its first line. Such unhistrionic language elides the first word of “When I am dead”; it is hard to remember that this speaker is actually alive and well. Though speaking about the future, she embodies Rossetti’s nostalgic poetics and eagerness to turn the present into the elegized past. She aligns herself with dimmed recollections, not with the immediacy of personal emotion. Even her nightingale only sings “*as if* in pain.” Images and sentiments are divorced from each other, effectively uncoupling the objective correlative. Naming suffering, the speaker does not seem to feel it.¹⁷

¹⁷ Hassett notes the “displaced precision” of Rossetti’s non-particular

She inhabits an indeterminate realm of eternal “twilight”; this poem, in fact, describes Rossetti’s signature space of poetic composition.

Revising the poetess’s mournful sweetness, “When I am dead” defies matrilineal authority. Lady poets are expected to write about lovely death and deathly love; within the confining space of a gravelike lyric, Rossetti turns the derivative pathos of the passion-slain poetess into calculated indifference. She mouths the conventional topics of devotion and demise, adorning them with roses and cypress, but also ironically recombines them (love turns out to be quite mortal, and it can only be discussed from the retrospective grave). She numbs her senses, refusing to hear the “sad songs” of male writers who silence women.¹⁸ Failing to recall the sentimental poetess tradition, this insouciant speaker seems to accept that she too may be forgotten—and may forget both her lover and the world. “I shall not see the shadows, / I shall not feel the rain; / I shall not hear the nightingale”: her anaphora is both emphatic and blasé.

But this offhand resignation to being forgotten rings false. Crucially, “When I am dead” treasures its memorability. It flirts with silence but continues to speak, and flirts with amnesia while maintaining a grip on memory. Despite its calm and lilting surface, it is not a poem of peaceful resignation. As she echoes Shakespeare’s Sonnet 71 (“No longer mourn for me when I am dead”), Rossetti performs not a subversive misremembering but a cannily perfect remembering. Shaking off matrilineal claims, she chooses a poetic father. Shakespeare protests too much in his humbleness: “if you

descriptions. The poet “[has] emotions without actually having them” — a formulation that gestures at the impersonal intimacy, the self-forgetting subjectivity, of lyric itself (55-57, 35).

¹⁸ Mermin makes a similar point about blocking out “sad songs,” citing Rossetti’s poem as “a response to the long tradition of songs in celebration of women who are dead and silent” (73).

read this line, remember not / The hand that writ it" only serves to memorialize that hand. Likewise, Rossetti emphasizes forgetting—but leaves little doubt that she insists on being remembered.

"When I am dead, my dearest, / Sing no sad songs for me." Unassuming though they sound, these lines are the first in a series of commands: "Sing . . . Plant . . . Be . . . remember . . . forget." The poem's trimeter is lulling, and so are the assonance and alliteration ("Be the green grass above me") that make it resemble a love-ditty. But these very features—ballad meter, sonic iteration—also make the poem strikingly memorable and counteract its message of unselfish deference. One cannot un-imagine shadows and rain once they have been named; as these images persist despite their negation, so this voice persists despite its self-abnegation. The "I shall not" lines become a stubborn assertion of "I, I, I." Obsessive self-denial, which implies self-interest, becomes an evocative mnemonic device. "I shall not hear the nightingale / Sing on, as if in pain," the most conspicuous enjambment in the poem, allows the unheard bird to sing on past the end of its line. Just so, this speaker sings on.

In emphasizing the continuance of her voice, the speaker of "When I am dead" erases the "dearest" she addresses. "Thou" appears three times in the first stanza, but not at all in the second; by the end, this speaker is effectively talking to herself. The poem could easily conclude with "And if thou wilt, forget." But the "I" of "I shall not" breaks the silence of the pause between stanzas, reasserting itself and displacing "thou." If we readers begin to forget the woman after she gives us permission to do so, she upbraids us for it. Repetitive stanzaic patterning allows for crucial self-revision—and formal re-animation. Dictating yet turning away from her lover's reaction, the speaker is a quintessential overheard lyric voice.

What of the twin declarations on memory and amnesia that close each stanza? "And if thou wilt, remember, / And if thou wilt, forget"; "Haply I may remember, / And haply may forget." Their terse equilibrium does sound noncommittal. Sharon Smulders hears "two perfectly balanced stanzas" that weigh remembering and forgetting equally (52). But Smulders fails to note that these options are also exaggeratedly memorable, replicating almost every word except "remember" and "forget," providing a satisfying click of closure as they wrap up the last unresolved rhymes. Rossetti's iterative symmetry, casual as it appears, privileges remembering over forgetting. Their self-enclosed nature also means that these lines can be easily recontextualized; when William Michael's young son passed away, the inscription on his grave read "And—if thou wilt—remember" (Bell 207). Removed from its syntactical context, this memorable line becomes an unambiguous directive.

The suspended stasis of "Rest" does not "begin nor end," and the speaker of "When I am dead" remains "dreaming through the twilight / That doth not rise nor set." There is no plot arc, there are no beginnings or ends, in this lyrical aesthetic of infinite delay. Synchrony and vague nostalgia overshadow narrative progression and fervent immediacy. The self-sustaining poetic imagination, through twilight loitering, forgets that it should be aspiring to heavenly beatitude; persistent memory again leads to amnesia in the form of religious unorthodoxy. Relishing a dilatory limbo-state and forgoing the desire for a risen afterlife, Rossetti fails to recall her own sincere piety. Thus memory, at the root of Rossetti's anti-poetess aesthetics, is subtly transgressive. The feminized lyric weighs down the patriarchal narrative of Christian teleology. Forbidding paraphrase, lyrics demand to be lingered over and remembered in their own words.

The ersatz nonchalance of “When I am dead” shifts into understated self-assertion.¹⁹ And the equally-popular 1849 “Remember” opens with an unequivocal decree: “Remember me when I am gone away.” As in “When I am dead,” this speaker is proleptically deceased. Though meditating on the future, she enters a realm where she can recall and be recalled; Rossetti’s elegiac lyrics again rely on the distancing effects of memory. “Remember” eventually takes back its initial command, but (like “When I am dead”) it asks to be forgotten in a distinctly memorable fashion. This anti-sentimental lyric is, despite its impassive tone, anything but indifferent to the continuance of its voice. Yet our familiarity with this text—a familiarity bred by its mnemonically repetitive form, by its frequent anthologization, and by the keepsake editions that Kooistra mentions—threatens to occlude a true understanding of its complexities.

Beginning with a directive given twice over (“Remember me” repeated in the first and fifth lines), the poem slowly softens (“Only remember me” gives way to “if you should forget me for a while / And afterwards remember”) before it finally reverses itself (“Better by far you should forget and smile / Than that you should remember

¹⁹ Diane D’Amico is surely mistaken in describing “When I am dead” as “playful, even lighthearted.” She also downplays its importance as a commentary on the place of the female poet, noting that nothing in the poem prevents us from seeing the speaker as a man (33-35). I would respond, however, that Rossetti’s many poems indisputably featuring dead women (“Rest,” for example) lead us to identify her potentially-androgynous speakers as female. Perhaps Rossetti forces us to confront both our assumptions about women’s place in verse and our habit of gendering poetic utterance; Reynolds points out that the “Remember” speaker’s apparent passivity cues the assumption that she is a woman (13). In her essay “Sexual Politics of the (Victorian) Closet,” Virginia Blain argues that, although lyric expression produces “an effacement . . . of sexual difference in the subject or speaker,” this very effacement “promotes the desire of the reader to attribute signs of such difference to the discourse of the poem” (156).

and be sad"). But the initial, agonized determination to be remembered, to sustain the force of the opening imperatives, never dissipates. If we read the title aloud, we begin this poem by saying "Remember. Remember," and this same word appears within the sonnet five times. The first two times, it is the first word in a line. The third time, it is the second word; the fourth time, it is the third word; finally, in the last line, it is the fifth word. This image of slow diffusion, of the word "remember" creeping along Rossetti's lines, dramatizes its steady infiltration of a reader's or a listener's mind. Often set off by monosyllables in order to increase its prominence, it leaps out of the poem's texture and overcomes its merely syntactical negations. As the second stanza of "When I am dead" chides readers for forgetting the speaker, so the line break of "forget me for a while / And afterwards remember" refuses to condone such forgetting. Resignation to oblivion is hauntingly memorable. Even the last two lines, which should let the speaker's voice fade gently away, are markedly satisfying because they resolve two hanging rhymes—particularly "while," which appears in line 9 and is not rhymed until line 13.²⁰ The speaker's iterations of "remember" suspend her between humble sweetness and barely-concealed resentment. Rossetti's poem is less the plaint of a wistful ghost than the insistence of a passive-aggressive one.

It is easy to recognize the self-effacements of this poem, along with its apparent consideration for a lover's feelings. But few critics have noticed the darker side of "Remember," its contradictory

²⁰ Conley points out that these two widely-spaced rhymes are the only lines in the poem containing the word "forget." For her, this means that forgetting is inevitable, since a "smile" will appear after a long "while" (268). But she does not notice the ironically mnemonic nature of the reasserted rhyme.

message and its embittered passive aggression.²¹ This menacing undercurrent comes out explicitly in the last few lines, which explain *why* it is better not to remember:

For if the darkness and corruption leave
 A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
 Better by far you should forget and smile
 Than that you should remember and be sad.

In other words: "Forget me, because you would be distressed if you knew what I thought in life." "The thoughts that once I had," infected with the tomb's "darkness and corruption," are sinister in their vagueness. But surely such vagueness arouses curiosity about these thoughts, counteracting any forgetting a listener might be tempted to do; this speaker wants her lover to recall her mysterious feelings, yet she will not explain them. "Remember," far from expressing affectionate forgiveness, is obstinately withholding. Like the enjambment of "nightingale / Sing on," that of "leave / A vestige" signals that this perverse voice will continue. It survives the grave, becoming more memorable (like those shadowy thoughts) in its understated attenuation. Reducing herself to a ghostly vestige, the speaker both obeys and defies pressure to be small and silent.

²¹ Reynolds does see the more accusatory aspects of "Remember." For her, "Better by far you should forget" becomes "a curse, a threat, a bitter promise" (15). Hassett, too, notes that this poem's final emphatic phrase is "you should remember and be sad" (31-32). My position contradicts that of Shaw and that of Rosenblum; he writes that "[t]actful concern for the lover now displaces any self-centered desire to live on in his memory" (34-35), while she places "When I am dead" and "Remember" in a sweeter and more pious "valedictory mode" than the stoic poetry of endurance (*Endurance* 211). Yet the piety of "Remember" is troubled, because the heterodox amnesia of "Rest" and "When I am dead" also applies to the liminal "silent land."

Controlled but hardly serene, “Remember” does not forbid mourning. Rather, it encourages remembrance—even while asking to be forgotten—both in its formal effects and by drawing a tantalizing veil over its speaker’s consciousness (thus endowing the silent Petrarchan woman with dark secrets). Highlighted by a trochaic inversion, “only remember me” also reflects the speaker’s troubled relationship to the sonnet tradition’s emphasis on male yearnings. She wants to be remembered by her lover, but she *only* wants to be remembered; the energy of recollection—driven, like erotic longing, by titillating distance—displaces the energy of lust. For Smulders, she is “the object of memory rather than desire” (125). Once she is dead, the speaker’s lover will be *obliged* to remember her and will *only* be able to remember her.

Mayberry, who detects the resentful turn of the sestet, proposes that this speaker longs for death because she cannot reject her suitor outright; moreover, when she is gone, he will inevitably fail to recall her strongly-hinted dislike for him (64-65). She therefore asks not to be forgotten but to be misremembered, confirming the basis of Rossetti’s poetics both in memory and in the memorial failures that revise the earnest sentiment of matrilineal predecessors. Filtering her through an unperceptive lover’s recollections, this speaker’s mnemonic poem causes her to be reimagined and misconstrued.²² Knowing a lyric necessitates getting it by heart and forbids paraphrase. But since memorization requires little understanding, since it leads us to be as falsely confident in our

²² “Remembering depends for its meaning on, and is only kept alive by, the possibility of forgetting” (Conley 268). Conley, who comments on this poem’s bitter desire for death, maintains (contra my position) that the word “remember” is drained rather than intensified through its many repetitions.

knowledge as the unobservant suitor, it is a kind of distortion or forgetting.

“Everyone knows, or feels as if they know, this poem. It’s in all the anthologies . . . [and] it’s short, neat, and has no difficult words in it” (Reynolds 12). Reynolds shows that, like the speaker herself, this lyric is both known and unknown. Because it is brief, repetitive, and portable—and, I would add, because it seems to contain a familiar melancholy woman—“Remember” is easy to remember. And so we often absorb the sonnet without noting its subtleties; the speaker’s “thoughts that once I had,” for example, are strangely easy to miss. Memorization is an impediment to comprehension. A poetess’s angry side, like a resentful dead mistress speaking from a heretically unredeemed “silent land,” is conveniently forgotten. This is a dark consequence of the already-known quality of Rossetti’s verses.

V. A greater than I: biography and the forgetting of Christina Rossetti

If we selectively forget Rossetti’s work, how ought we to recall her life? Though her speakers demand to be remembered, their poems are so mnemonic as to be misconstrued; in the same way, I propose, Rossetti herself is caricatured—is in effect forgotten—by critics who confirm the too-familiar association between her lyrics and her life story. Constricted in brief poems, in the poetess tradition, and in the grave, Rossetti is also constricted by her own biography.

Like "Remember," she is so thoroughly known that she becomes forgettable.²³

An ongoing debate in feminist criticism centers on the uses of biography. Leighton asks that we grant female writers subjectivities before erasing their life stories in the name of deconstruction; we should account for the historical circumstances in which women composed (4). But Yopie Prins calls instead for "the transfer of personhood to rhetorical entities" (21). On one side lies the danger of ignoring important details of Rossetti's life, or of denying the cultural importance of gender; on the other lies the danger of becoming Rossetti's psychoanalyst rather than her critic.

Indeed, critics have traditionally hobbled Rossetti with her own biography, pigeonholing her as an unintellectual spinster who writes mawkish "confessional" verses inspired by heartbreak. These commentators struggle to reconcile her stubbornly uneventful life story with her powerful poetry, recapitulating the disjunction between her limited subject matter and her compelling lyrics. Lona Mosk Packer, for example, premises her biographical approach on a "close organic connection between Christina's life and her poetry" (114), furnishing Rossetti with a secret love for painter William Bell Scott that inspires "Rest" and "When I am dead" and "Remember."

²³ Victorian critics, who consider lyrics feminine, often figure the poetess herself as lyrical: she is diminutive and modest, simple and limited, delicate and musical. She deals in the personal, the introspective, the expressive. She is timeless, linked in an ahistorical bond to others of her kind. Pouring her heart onto the page, she is more like a poem than a poet. In 1931, for example, Fredegond Shove writes of "When I am dead" that "a thing so perfect in form . . . bearing no trace of any flaw or effort, is as rare as a beautiful face with an unchangingly lovely expression" (51). Mermin observes that "Victorian poems like Victorian women were expected to be morally and spiritually uplifting, to stay mostly in the private sphere, and to provide emotional stimulus and release for overtasked men of affairs" (69).

The “explanation” for a poem lies in its creator’s emotional life, and the lyrical “I” is autobiographical.

More recent feminist assessments of Rossetti—such as Gilbert and Gubar’s landmark study—also tend to lean heavily on biography. Rossetti’s devotional texts are linked to self-repression, translated into a longing for sexual freedom. And when critics do not focus on her deprivations, they often misremember her as a radical reformer and forget her deep piety.²⁴ (I have mentioned the unorthodox religious implications of her verse, but I do not believe that Rossetti was consciously rejecting Christianity; these implications would have been quite disturbing to her.) If Rossetti is not an angel in the house, she is a madwoman in the attic. Her poetry is either symptomatic or therapeutic, either naïve or dissident. She must be either a typical or an atypical woman poet; she cannot simply be a poet. Even this article’s concerns, its approach to memorializing Rossetti, reflect the same dilemma. But we can listen for Rossetti’s voice by considering her generic choices.

As women begin writing socially-relevant fiction, and Victorian poetry becomes more estranged from the general public, Rossetti finds herself caught in the middle. How can she speak within a poetic tradition that silences women and makes their public utterances indiscreet? She must balance feminine modesty (“if thou

²⁴ D’Amico, Smulders, Lynda Palazzo, and Mary Arseneau—though they make many excellent points about the relationship between faith and feminism—occasionally slight the former in favor of the latter. True, it is a mistake to consign Rossetti to a life of inert confinement. She worked with fallen women in the 1860s, and in 1854 attempted to volunteer in the Crimea. This sort of work may represent socially-acceptable Christian charity rather than feminist activism, but it does provide a path to spiritual fulfillment outside the domestic hearth. Yet it is difficult to cast Rossetti as an ardent feminist. Her views on postlapsarian womanhood are markedly conservative; for example, she signed an 1889 petition against female suffrage.

wilt, forget”) against her ambitious desire for an audience. Not for her the outspokenness of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which Rossetti’s brother Dante Gabriel disdains as “falsetto muscularity” (qtd. in Packer 204). In an 1870 letter to this brother, Rossetti assures him that “[i]t is not in me . . . to turn to politics or philanthropy with Mrs. Browning: such many-sidedness I leave to a greater than I, and, having said my say, may well sit silent” (*Family Letters* 31).²⁵ This exaggerated modesty and conformity echoes Rossetti’s parodic lyricism. It also directs us toward the voices of her poems and away from the writer’s own first person singular (this is an alternate meaning for “a greater than I”). By eschewing the poetess’s immoderate sentimental overflow, Rossetti calls attention to herself—but to her poetic incarnations, not her historical identity. Her verses, like women who speak with deathbed authority, harness memorability to let the lyric “I” appear where the personal “I” does not.

How does Rossetti revise her lyrical subjectivity, altering the way in which her poetic personae are remembered? Her habitual choice of shorter, rhymed meters over male-dominated blank verse—and her recycling of conventional imagery—associates her often-untitled lyrics with anonymous ballads, communal hymns, and seemingly-sourceless nursery rhymes. Rossetti joins her voice not to individual utterance but to collective song, to an anti-temporal and depersonalizing pattern. Thus every “I,” even in poems that apparently give voice to solo speakers, is representative. Rossetti’s verses exaggerate the ungrounded quality of lyrics. Inviting each

²⁵ Marsh posits that Rossetti’s determination to “sit silent” implies not that she is meek and helpless but that she will “leave her books to speak for themselves” (392).

reader to imagine herself as the speaker, encouraging memorization, they ask in several ways to be internalized.

In a society that would blunt her individuality, Rossetti doubly blunts it herself, burying herself in the grave and in small poems, embracing the half-humility of "The Lowest Place." Herbert Tucker puts this phenomenon in generic terms: despite its use of the first person, "lyric isolation from context distempers character and robs it of contour," creating an effect of "choral dissolution" (230, 235). First-person expression can be both self-occluding and intensely subjective. Like the moribund speakers of "Remember" and "When I am dead," Rossetti empties and makes posthumous the gestures of confession.²⁶ Reading these deathbed poems provides a valuable hermeneutic model, showing that it is possible for biographical study to enrich formal analysis without replacing it. As a critic, one can scrutinize the poet's texts rather than her life story. But one can also trace the influence of the poet's femininity on the peculiarly impersonal "I" of those texts.

As deathbed poems half-inhabit a body, so Rossetti half-inhabits subjectivity and locates her speakers in a numbed afterlife. And this space, I have argued, is the space of memory. Her women remember, rather than securely inhabit, both selfhood and world. Her lyrics are removed from emotion and sensation, rejecting

²⁶ This anonymity rubs oddly against the intensely private and intimate tone of Rossetti's poems: she portrays elation and despair with striking precision, yet often without a clear narrative context or a particularized speaker. As Roe puts it, Rossetti's is "a poetry of the self, though not necessarily that of the author" (52-53). I would add that ballads and sonnets, both popular forms, may deliberately appeal to a wide audience and ensure that many will remember the poet's work (if not the poet herself). Rossetti can be compared to male writers precisely because she embraces a stereotypically feminine role, favoring lyric over epic. Yet her impersonal lyrics—despite their tendency to be misremembered—are anything but feeble or trivial; they allow Rossetti to speak both in and against the poetess tradition.

immediacy and addressing the beloved only from a distance. Memorization, frequently divorced from understanding, can drain a poem of vitality by negating the series of surprises that accompanies a first reading. Rossetti's dead women, posing as clichéd objects of lyrical recollection, both drain themselves of vitality and insist on their powerfully memorable nature. Though anonymous, they are not to be silenced.

Even recognizing her non-specific "I," however, threatens to subject Rossetti to another ironic critical amnesia: the lyric's intimate detachment, though it renounces excessive feminine sentiment, also echoes the poetess's prefabricated subjectivity. For Virginia Jackson, "poetess" is an empty genre-category created by the practices of anthologization and lyrical reading, an emotional yet self-less figure who is "forgotten in the very process of being remembered" (210-11). Doubly generic, Rossetti can only speak from herself yet can never speak of herself. Though text and poetess are considered "too full of personal feeling to testify to anything more important than themselves," a woman poet is not an expressing consciousness but a partly-personified abstraction (Jackson 219). When a poetess writes a lyric, convention substitutes for individual psychic content.²⁷ Any woman versifier is remembered as Quintessence of Woman, and is therefore excluded from the highest echelons of poetry. Like their poems, female poets are easy to know and thus are often misconstrued; it is our challenge to acknowledge Rossetti's non-confessional lyricism without classing her as a pre-extant type.

As the sentimental poetess eclipses the Romantic male bard, nineteenth-century lyric begins to seem more marginal and

²⁷ Frances Thomas sees Rossetti as "self-effacing," yet also calls her work "confessional, egocentric and solipsistic" (10). Rossetti herself maintains that she has no desire to pen "love personals" (qtd. in Battiscombe 54).

ornamental than sublime. Rossetti's critical forgetting thus epitomizes the broader forgetting of Victorian poetry in favor of the socially-engaged novel. But it is her very tendency to be misremembered that provides Rossetti another escape from the poetess tradition—a fascinating irony with which I conclude. Though Rossetti was not part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Swinburne called her "the Jael who led their host to victory" (qtd. in Stuart 53); her focus on beautiful surfaces (roses, lilies, green grass) can be removed from its devout context and made into "a harbinger of aestheticism" (Crump xl). *Fin de siècle* poetry, rather than finding divine meanings in natural details, makes these details self-sufficient. Repeatedly invoking the same Christian symbols drains them of substance, just as lyrics on similar themes blur together and are forgotten. Rossetti's ballad-like stanzas, her iterative diction, her elegiac melancholy that loiters on the way to Paradise—all pave the way for the incantatory lyrics of the 1890s.²⁸ As a woman, it is difficult for her to speak with Tennysonian didacticism; she is therefore confined to slighter forms that become the favorite vehicles for Dowson, Johnson, and Symons. Writing at mid-century, as public faith ebbs and the feminist movement gains momentum, Rossetti exemplifies liminality. We hear in her poems subversive tones, many of which she may not have consciously intended. She is both known and misremembered—echoing the half-forgetful nostalgia, the haunting amnesia, that many of her poems both demand and enact.

²⁸ For Antony Harrison, Rossetti is a crucial transitional figure for the period between 1850 and 1900: she hovers between the conservative and the avant-garde. Turning away from novelistic societal relevance, she (despite her Christianity) ushers in an aesthetic idealism that eschews heavenly aspirations entirely. She is "an unwitting mediator between Ruskinian and decadent aesthetics"—that is, between those who find a Godly source for all beauty and those who worship beauty in place of God (54-55, 59-63).

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Abstract**Veronica Alfano**

Christina Rossetti's exaggerated lyrical techniques parody and subvert the figure of the sentimental Victorian poetess. I examine this process through the themes of memory and memorability, particularly in poems that portray dead or moribund women. Writing about death appears to cue humble self-forgetfulness, yet Rossetti's speakers also insist on being remembered. The poet derives her distinctive voice from confinement both in brief, mnemonic lyrics and in the grave. Her sonnet "Rest" endows its deceased subject with the powerful atemporality of a memorized poem; this removal from narrative progression has surprisingly heterodox religious consequences. And beneath the self-effacements of "Song [When I am dead, my dearest]" and "Remember" lies a determined claim on the reader's memory—expressed, paradoxically, through attenuated forms and indifferent post-mortem tones. These poems speak from a realm of numbed remembrance, revising the poetess's emotional intensity. Ironically, considered *en masse*, Rossetti's memorably small verses stand metonymically for one another and thus become forgettable. In the same way, Rossetti herself is frequently misconstrued because the restrictive association between her work and her biography has become so familiar. I ask, in concluding, how we as critics can best remember her as a poet and as a historical figure.

Key Words: Christina Rossetti, Victorian poetry, poetess, lyric, memory, biography

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