

'He did not love me living; but once dead / He pitied me': Death as the 'Ultimate Gesture' in Christina Rossetti's 'Aesthetic of Renunciation'

Dr. Mousumi Guha Banerjee

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English Literature, The English and Foreign Languages University, Shillong Campus, Shillong – 793022, Meghalaya, India.

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The thought of death has a constant fascination for Rossetti, almost such a fascination as it had for Leopardi or Baudelaire; only it is not the fascination of attraction, as with the one, or of the repulsion, as with the other; but of *interest*, sad but unquiet interest: interest in what the dead are doing underground, in their memories – if memory they have left; a singular, whimsical *sympathy* with the poor dead. (1)

This remark, that I have sought to begin with, illustrates the pervasion of a persistent sense of the mortality of human life in the poetry of Christina Rossetti. Her poem, 'After Death' (1849), is a significant illustration of this remark by Arthur Symons:

He leaned above me, thinking that I slept
 And could not hear him; but I heard him say,
 'Poor child, poor child': and as he turned away
 Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.
 He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold
 That hid my face, or take my hand in his,
 Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head.
 He did not love me living; but once dead
 He pitied me; and very sweet it is
 To know he still is warm though I am cold. (2)

In such poems, we find the themes of love and death to be woven together. According to Symons, the unique appeal of these poems consists in their passionate musical tone and their 'thoughtfulness that broods as well as sees, and has, like shadowed water, its mysterious depths', (3) both of which are evident in 'An End' (1849):

Love, strong as Death, is dead.
 Come, let us make his bed
 Among the dying flowers:
 A green turf at his head;
 And a stone at his feet,
 Where we may sit
 In the quiet evening hours. (4)

Critics distinguish a unique disposition in Rossetti, particularly in her poems that envisage death as the pivotal idea. Alice Law (5) affirms that in 'Dreamland' (1849), Rossetti appropriately anticipated the onslaught of death and considered it as a possibility for an unending state of tranquillity. 'Death had no terrors for her; it was to her but as cool, refreshing sleep'. (6) However, the poet also condemns death since the dead 'are estranged from all material things' (7):

Where sunless rivers weep
 Their waves into the deep,
 She sleeps a charmed sleep:
 Awake her not (8)

It is this 'perfect peace' that the poet is in search of and she firmly endorses that it is death that can provide the artist with the succour and reassurance that she passionately desires, but that is again something which seems to elude her forever. Death brings an end to all forms of restlessness and misgivings and is, most significantly, beyond time. It shall exist not only till the end of time, but outside of it as well, and in this sense, is trans-chronological. Death releases the author from the harrowing confines of time and offers her a sense of the ecstasy of timelessness and liberation from the pangs of artistic self-expression.

Georgina Battscombe (9) diagnoses the poet's standpoint on death as being noticeably converse. Rossetti's experience of drooping melancholy on the one hand, and remarkable ecstasy, on the other, is demonstrated in two sonnets. The first, 'Two Thoughts of Death' (1850), unmask the gruesomeness of death:

Foul worms fill up her mouth so sweet and red;
Foul worms are underneath her graceful head.

Yet these, being born of her from nothingness

These worms are certainly flesh of her flesh. (10)

The second sonnet avows and testifies Rossetti's certitude and credence in life, life ceaseless and life timeless:

Then my heart answered me: Thou fool to say

That she is dead whose night is turned to day,

And whose day shall no more turn back to night. (11)

Battscombe enunciates this by saying that: 'For her, death is not to be desired as an escape from this naughty world but as an entry to another and incomparably better one.' (12) Hence, death to Rossetti, is a transformation of the spatio-temporal reality, into which she is oppressively thrust, to a much-desired world of her own. Death helps her migrate to such a world of rest and peace where she can have a serene, sedate and idyllic experience, a world that knows no night and is blessed with perennial sunshine.

The anxiety that the poet experiences due to the immutability of death is further unfolded in another poem called 'Remember' (1849) that portrays an apprehensive and unsatiated desire of love which is on the threshold of being interrupted by death. Here the speaker implores her lover not to dismiss her from his mind altogether when her life would be brutally ended by death, since on the event of termination of her life, it is her memory that he can carry for her sake:

Yet if you should forget me for a while

And afterwards remember, do not grieve:

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. (13)

To the lover, the fact of the beloved's death should not be a source of sadness. Death, on the contrary, leads to an oblivion, which erases out even 'a vestige of the thoughts' about the darkness and corruption of the poet-lover's individuality. Hence, death metaphorizes a reality that the poet never moves away from, but rather acquiesces in as something untransmuting and invincible.

The poet's yearning for death is also illustrated in another poem, 'Oh, Roses for the Flush of Youth' (1849), where the speaker wishes herself to be crowned 'old before my time':

Oh roses for the flush of youth,

And laurel for the perfect prime;

But pluck an ivy branch for me

Grown old before my time. (14)

The roses emblematic of 'the flush of youth' are renounced by her and she earnestly craves for old age much before her time.

Dolores Rosenblum, in the 1982 issue of *Victorian Poetry*, argues that the suffering individual in Rossetti's poetry is exceptionally the figure of a woman – an immured maiden or a denounced bride enduring a perpetual confinement in her very existence, persistently and acquiescently, for the sake of her ever-dawdling groom, and hence, for this dispirited woman, 'the only resolution is death itself'. She courts death 'because life is not *enough* – and because the aesthetic of renunciation requires this ultimate gesture'. (15)

This widely diversified and, sometimes, contradictory array of implications of the theme of death inherent in the idea of love has led various critics to elucidate such conflicting thoughts in psychological and even biographical terms. C. M. Bowra describes the duality by maintaining that in works such as these, 'the idea of love turned inexorably to the theme of death, and in this association we can surely see her instinctive shrinking from the surrender which love demands'. (16) On the other hand, Lona Mosk Packer (17) reads a Freudian desire for death in Rossetti's poetry. It is a possibility that the plaintive strain of despondency and renunciation in her poetics have evolved from her apprehension that she has fallen prey to an appalling indiscretion in associating herself with one man, James Collinson, and perhaps it is this consciousness that forced a prospective relationship to remain unfulfilled, a relationship that could have consummated her desire for a sexual ecstasy. This absence of temporal love seemed to give rise to an urge for death later, as

revealed in 'Parting After Parting' (1858 and 1864), a poem that she wrote after a visit to William Bell Scott and his wife in Newcastle:

Parting after parting,
 Sore loss and gnawing pain:
 Meeting grows half a sorrow
 Because of parting again.
 When shall the day break
 That these things shall not be?
 When shall new earth be ours
 Without a sea,
 And time that is not time
 But eternity? (18)

This longing, as Packer considers, is occasioned by Rossetti's 'leaving Scott after having known the rare happiness of sharing a life with him, even temporarily'. (19)

The self-same despair and a keen inclination for death due to an unfulfilled experience of love, as Packer declares, is evinced in 'A Triad' (1856), which pertains to three women possessing disparate conceptions of love. The first of them reprehensibly yields, the second is deceitful and dispassionate and the third desists and invalidates. For Packer, they represent the women in Scott's life: Lady Pauline Trevelyan being the first of them and Scott's mistress; Letitia Norquay Scott, a 'sluggish wife', as delicate as a hued hyacinth developing in 'soulless love' is the second; and the third is Christina Rossetti herself, a lady 'blue with famine after love', ultimately collapsing into a moribund state owing to its unachievability. A majority of the contemporary critics have associated suppressed sexuality with the theme of separation between lovers in Rossetti's poetry and have presupposed that the poet transfers her sensibilities to the narrators of her poems, irrespective of the kind of rationale she has for her pessimism and dejection. Taking into account her enchantment with death and agony that unfolds in her later verses, Geoffrey W. Rossetti urges that this was the consequence of 'religious melancholy' added to the impact 'of the prolonged ill-health and troubles of later life', some of it perhaps produced by 'a semi-pathological condition of the body'. (20) Mary F. Sanders ascribes Rossetti's passionate conviction of death to her being a habitual valetudinarian as well as to her remarkable insight and sensitivity. The upshot, Sanders maintains in *The Life of Christina Rossetti*, was that the mystifying kingdom of life beyond death was ever-existing in her mind: 'She was stern in her beliefs; the present life was a time of prohibition, which mis-spent, condemned the soul to an eternal hell.' (21) A poem named 'The Martyr' (1846), written by the adolescent Rossetti, centres round a young girl who is on the verge of being condemned eternally for her ideology and convictions. An utter depletion of her belief and certitude at the terminating moment of her life might perpetually close the gates of paradise to her:

See, the sun hath risen!
 Lead her from the prison;
 She is young and tender, lead her tenderly:
 May no fear subdue her,
 Lest the saints be fewer,
 Lest her place in heaven be lost eternally. (22)

The association of the concept of death with the notion of love has elicited further readings from critics. Arthur Christopher Benson discerns in Rossetti a pessimism concerning love: 'As a rule her thoughts of love are clouded by some dark sense of loss, of having missed the satisfaction that the hungry soul might claim.' (23) He adduces the poem, 'When I am Dead, My Dearest' (1848), as a testimony to this idea:

When I am dead, my dearest,
 Sing no sad songs for me;
 Plant thou no roses at my head.
 Nor shady cypress trees:
 Be the green grass above me
 With showers and dewdrops wet:
 And if thou wilt, remember,
 And if thou wilt, forget. (24)

Another widely reviewed long narrative poem, 'The Prince's Progress', speaks of a different facet of the imaginary universe. The poem recounts the narrative of an elegant, yet languid, youth who undertakes a leisurely journey to catch a sight of his beloved, but dallies in iniquitous relationships on the way. He falls prey to spurious adulations and pecuniary concerns, and after coming upon his long-awaiting betrothed

eventually, he discovers her to be dead. 'There is an elusiveness about its magic', Symons registers, 'making familiar things look strange, and weaving and unweaving its spells beneath our eyes.' (25) He emphasizes on the mysterious sparkle evident in the milkmaid's eyes as she brings her enchantment to bear upon the straggling and errant Prince:

Was it milk now, or was it cream?
Was she a maid, or an evil dream?
Her eyes began to glitter and gleam;
He would have gone, but he stayed instead;
Green they gleamed as he looked in them:
"Give me my fee", she said. – (26)

John Stuart Mill contends that Rossetti's ingenious craftsmanship is most impeccably voiced in 'The Prince's Progress' due to its 'atmosphere of old-world charm of mysticism'. (27)

It is perceivable from the narrative structure of the poem that it, perhaps unarguably, creates a transcendental spatio-temporal world and in order to achieve this, adopts a condition of reverie for the purpose of performing an introspective appraisal of the conventions. An analogous approach is deployed in poems that conceive of a position, often related to death. In these poems, narrators cast a retrospective glance and cogitate from a metaphysical stance of subjectivity. Through this act of subjectivization, Rossetti avows 'not only from the other side, but from the side of the "other"'. (28) 'After Death', written in 1849, is marked by disconcerting associations of power and dominance, with regard to a typical nineteenth-century artistic depiction of the beautiful dead woman, and we find the poem subverting the conventional significance to mean the contrary. Rossetti's implication here is remarkably subtle, since with this metaphor of apparent 'deadness' in the poem, she transforms the deceased and voiceless damsel into the narrator, a prerogative she enjoys by observing a man's actions and behaviour, most commonly unrecognized by himself. This transfiguration of the silent and dead girl gives her the authority to visualize the man inclining on the speaker and pronouncing a requiem, 'Poor child, poor child'. (29) She then withdraws herself from there quietly and expresses her awareness by a tangential indication, 'and I knew he wept'. (30) Rossetti conjures up, as well as takes up her pen against, the customary passion attached to the Victorian 'deathbed' spectacle, making clear the fact that it is through death that a woman achieves omniscience, unthought and unimagined by a man. Rossetti, quite perceptibly, asserts the overbearing potency of death that empowers the woman writer to be insightful and to envisage the mortal follies and misapprehensions. Through death, she triumphs over her disquietude concerning her creativity and wields enormous power despite being positioned in the midst of an inexorable male tradition of artistic expression:

He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is
To know he still is warm tho' I am cold. (31)

Burlinson's interpretation of this artistic autonomy of the speaker, supreme as she is by her death, is a poignant demonstration of a virtual 'secret world of masculine vulnerability' to the female omnipotent and omniscient narrator:

The spatial and physical autonomy of the speaker seems essential for her articulation and assertion of representational power over the unnamed older man, whose emotional response is summoned only by her demise. From her deathbed, the speaker disrupts conventional masculine/feminine, reason/feeling oppositions, making woman cold and man warm. She also inverts public/private distinctions, so crucial to Victorian bourgeois culture's sense of its own organization, turning the private masculine grief – so private the tears cannot be shown even to a dead girl – into a public affair and thus suggesting that the man's personal response is part of a much larger cultural and gendered behaviour pattern regulated by notions of legitimacy. As voyeurs, readers see into a secret world of masculine vulnerability. (32)

While, on the one hand, 'After Death' deals with the relationship between a young woman and a man, 'At Home' substantiates the condition of the 'dead' speaker who casts a retrospective glance on her adult friends who carry on with their considerably undisturbed lives. To her astonishment, she discovers that her friends exclusively pursue present and future comfort. To her perplexity, she observes that '... no one spoke of yesterday'. (33) The speaker reflects on the possibility of dominating her companions by remaining out of their vision, but appears to prevent herself from doing so, thereby reconciling with her predicament of physical invisibility. It is this separation from the spatio-temporal reality that brings about an anxiety in the female poet's authorship, but the contradiction in her physically inconspicuous presence is that she gives an expression to her experience, a theme that occasions the event of the poem's composition. Her mortal non-presence leads to the poem's presence and her non-mortal experience takes an

authoritative stance in ushering the incidents happening within the poem. It is in this sense that the fact of death overpowers the living, so much so that the latter does not quite perceive the presence of the former, but can only feel the acuteness of the absence caused by such fatality.

Rossetti's representation of speakers, who are found to either vacillate between life and death or speak from 'a posthumous place', (34) has emerged as the subject of debate between critics. Jerome McGann has ascribed this positioning by Rossetti to her conviction of the notion of 'Soul Sleep', which implied that there was a period between death and the Judgement Day when the soul hibernated or subsisted in abeyance. (35) This view has also been argued against, while a few others consider that Rossetti was more engrossed in 'entombment ... a disturbing sleeplessness of the mind' (36) than in death or 'Soul Sleep'. Irrespective of the fact of Rossetti's explicit deployment of this idea, her positioning of speakers in equivocal situations reveals the relationship between her work and that of the other remarkable Victorian women poets such as Emily Dickinson and Emily Brontë, who have also so situated their characters as to question the social and creative inadequacies of their cultural ethos. In the writings of all these artists, the audacious subversion/inversion of the hierarchy of the living and the dead, by reinstating the body of the dead woman and making her express her mind and experience without constructing her as a reticent, calm and docile entity, appears to us as a cardinal motif of the literary persuasion of these writers as well as a revealing form of cultural representation. Such a portrayal reaches us as a stark reflection of a skillfully manoeuvred and self-conscious metaphoric design that not only foregrounded itself as a reaction against their intellectually torturous experience of peripheralization by the authoritative male literary tradition, but also unequivocally constituted the narrative of their endurance of an oppressive culture that threatened to impede their artistic endeavour of self-definition.

Rossetti worked extensively with the idea and implications of death and her poem, 'The Hour and the Ghost' (1856), entails yet another new mode of narrative representation of the metaphor of the dead. Characteristically, this category of poems portrays the supernatural, giving rise to speculations on such a theme, rarely conceived in poetry. These poems evidently bear a mood of despair and the spectacle is cryptic and inexplicable. In 'The Hour and the Ghost', a dead lover returns on the very day of the wedding of his beloved, who has renounced his love for someone else's. He comes to carry her away to his home beyond the sepulchre. The lady persistently requests her new bridegroom to take her finally in his clasp:

BRIDE.

Hold me one moment longer,
He taunts me with the past,
His clutch is waxing stronger,
Hold me fast, hold me fast. (37)

In spite of her repeated requests, the ghost gives vent to his vengefulness:

GHOST.

O fair frail sin,
O poor harvest gathered in!
Thou shalt visit him again
To watch his heart grow cold; (38)

Arthur Symons delineates these as 'strange little poems, with their sombre and fantastic colouring – the picturesque outcome of deep and curious ponderings on things unseen'. (39) The anonymous commentator of the *Catholic World* (1876), on the other hand, seems to felicitously express the disenchantment created by the ethos of phantasm that Rossetti creates: 'We should imagine that the ghost would have grown wiser, if not more charitable, by his visit to the other world, and would show himself quite willing to throw at least the ghost of a slipper after the happy pair.' (40)

In another poem entitled 'The Poor Ghost' (1863), in a situation bearing a resemblance to that in 'The Hour and the Ghost', the deceased beloved returns with the objective of taking her betrothed beyond the barrow. But to her utter dismay and astonishment, she is told that her death has brought their relationship to 'an end' and she is urged to go back:

'Indeed I loved you, my chosen friend,
I loved you for life, but life has an end;
Through sickness I was ready to tend:
But death mars all, which we cannot mend. (41)

According to Symons, the poet intends to establish these apparitions as characters in the temporal world. They are actual dead men and women who come back in their spiritual forms, and are not evoked by séance.

He observes that Rossetti 'cares intimately' (42) about perceiving the subliminal state of the innate consciousness of the lifeless.

The thematics of death in Rossetti is, to a large extent, based on the unification with Christ and the revived troops of Paradise, an aspect from which she derived an atemporal sense of consummation. This is well demonstrated in the *Monna Innominata* sequence through the expression, 'the flowering land / Of love'. (43) A couple of lines of verse from an unpublished sonnet written in 1849 underlines an analogous thought: 'Some say that love and joy are one: and so / They are indeed in heaven, but not on earth.' (44) Rossetti reflects, as she does in 'The Thread of Life', 'Three Stages' and 'An Old World Thicket', on the pangs of seclusion, unaccomplishment and discontent that comprise much of the essence of the *Intimations Ode* of Wordsworth and the *Dejection Ode* of Coleridge. The quintessential argument is put forward in the second sonnet of 'The Thread of Life', an array of three sonnets forming a triplet, in which the speaker deplores her state of being cloistered, believing 'Everything / Around me free and sunny and at ease.' Despite the fact that the 'gay birds sing' and all 'sounds are music', this gaiety and freedom seem to her to be dissonant and melancholic:

Then gaze I at the merrymaking crew,
And smile a moment and a moment sigh
Thinking: Why can I not rejoice with you? (45)

The position of the speaker here is specifically akin to that of Wordsworth in the first four stanzas of the *Intimations Ode*. His dissociated self desires harmony with the joyous entities of nature as a reservation against mortal impermanence. But, though he has been consequently successful in participating in the Mayday celebration and being in oneness with the frolicking lambs, the 'happy Shepherd boy' and the birds that 'sing a joyous song', he is able to feel that: 'The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.' (46) Contrarily, the speaker in Rossetti repudiates as a 'foolish fancy' the yearning for emancipation from self-confinement and for the pensive oneness with nature attained by Wordsworth's speaker who employs his 'philosophic mind' and acquires a 'faith that looks through death'. This faith, enrobed in enigmatic images of 'celestial light', 'clouds of glory' and 'mighty waters', does not seem felicitous for Rossetti since she believes in the necessity of dissociation from the blissful objects of nature and of the temporal world, an act that would subsequently pave the path for a beatific experience. Revealing an anti-Wordsworthian thesis, the poems of Rossetti undeniably endorse, in the manner her poems 'Three Stages' and 'The Thread of Life' substantiate, what she affirms clearly: 'I cannot crown my head / With royal purple blossoms for the feast, / Nor flush with laughter, nor exult in song.' (47) The third sonnet of 'The Thread of Life' conveys the idea of self-assertion. The self-solipsist poet maintains that the cloistered inner being continues to be 'that one only thing / I hold to use or waste, to keep or give'. It remains, she says, 'My sole possession every day I live, / ... Ever mine own, till Death shall ply his sieve; / And still mine own, when saints break grave and sing'. (48) In accordance with the conformist Christian ethos, death is an eventuality that requires to be hailed, and not disparaged. It is actually a portal leading to heaven. In another poem, entitled 'Paradise', Rossetti expresses her conviction that in the reality of physical existence, glimpses of Paradise are possible only in a reverie:

Once in a dream I saw the flowers
That bud and bloom in paradise;
More fair they are than waking eyes
Have seen in all this world of ours. (49)

The beauty of Rossetti's perception of death is that she conceived of afterlife as a tangibly manifest certainty, since it is only in Paradise that, she argues, divine perfection exists and where, also, the experience of alienation is overwhelmed:

I hope to see these things again,
But not as once in dreams by night;
To see them with my very sight,
And touch and handle and attain:
To have all Heaven beneath my feet
For narrow way that once they trod;
To have my part with all the saints,
And with my God. (50)

For Rossetti, the culmination of life is a much-coveted desire, since it is in death that she discovers bliss and ecstasy, that takes her away from moral scruples and disquietude and provides her with the blessed opportunity to 'have my part with all the saints / And with my God'. She feels disinclined to have visions of afterlife through 'dreams by night', but rather wishes earnestly to experience death as a palpable reality,

which she firmly believes is capable of providing her with the much-needed comfort and reassurance in the midst of the apprehensive pangs of authorship.

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