

## **Glasstexts: Seeing Through Rossetti's Material Word**

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### **Abstract**

Rossetti's relationship to the material has always received critical attention, most recently in the work of Matthew Polotsky and Brian Donnelly. Eric Fontana has investigated the speech acts in his poems, but none has considered words themselves as material objects in Rossetti's poetry. Focusing exclusively on instances of glass inscription in Rossetti's poems, I show how the poet's material words recognise reading and writing as visual experiences we sometimes forget we are having.

Analysing inscribed glass in three key Dante Gabriel Rossetti poems, 'Words On The Window-Pane', 'Jenny', and 'Rose Mary', I investigate the ways in which Rossetti's glasstexts assume the duality of the surfaces on which they appear, arguing that they draw our attention to words as both things and pictures of things. I suggest that scratched, scrawled and engraved words enhance the contradictions and complications inherent in glass, and intensify the complex interplay between transitivity and reflection that defines the experience of reading itself. I also argue that these glasstexts are of their historical moment because, as Isobel Armstrong has shown, they are preoccupied with surface markings that betray glass as visible mediation, revealing its dual function as medium and barrier.

### **Biographical Note**

Dinah Roe is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Oxford Brookes University, specialising in nineteenth-century poetry and Pre-Raphaelite studies. Her publications on Dante Gabriel Rossetti

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In *Appreciations*, Walter Pater praises Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s artistic commitment to ‘the great, undeniable reality in things’, taking special notice of the poet-artist’s attraction to vitreous objects: ‘dim mirrors’, ‘magic crystals in secret drawers, the names and words scratched on the windows, windows open upon prospects of the saddest or the sweetest’ (237). Concentrating particularly on instances of glass inscription in three poems, ‘Words On The Window-Pane’, ‘Jenny’, and ‘Rose Mary’, I would like to investigate the ways in which Rossetti’s glasstexts assume the duality of the surfaces on which they appear in order to draw our attention to words as both ‘things’ and pictures of things.<sup>1</sup> Rossetti’s portrayals of words on glass are characteristic of their historical moment in fixating on ways in which glass is resistant to purity, transitivity and reflection. His poems participate in what Armstrong identifies as the ‘glass culture of nineteenth-century modernity’ because they do not present glass as ‘invisible mediation’, but are instead preoccupied with the ‘marks on the surface, scratches’ that ‘call paradoxes and

contradictions into play that have to be worked through' (13, 14, 12). I want to argue that, in forcing us to recognise glass as an 'antithetical material' that 'holds contrary states within itself as barrier and medium', glass inscription makes mediation visible and unmistakable, drawing attention inevitably to the problem of representation (Armstrong 11). Tracing the development of glasstexts through poems from 1853, 1870, and 1881 respectively, I also want to show how the poet's portrayal of inscribed glass becomes increasingly fraught as his idealistic hopes for the transparency of the word give way to a proto-modern pessimism. The later the glasstext, the more sceptical it becomes about the word's ability to adequately reflect or see through the problems of representation. Rather than suspending contradiction so that the problems of representation can be acknowledged, seen and seen through, Rossetti's glasstexts increasingly generate further complexities, paradoxes and riddles.

For although Rossetti's glass inscriptions are translucent, they are not transparent; they demand be both looked at and looked through. In this, the glass objects themselves – Rossetti's windows, mirrors, and crystals, can be understood as portals. Rossetti's explorations of words on glass participate in what William Michael Rossetti tells us as was his brother's literary rebellion against 'descriptive *poetry*', or poetry of the kind that 'exhibits and extols objects' rather than 'turning them into the "medium of exchange" between the material world and the soul' (411, emphasis in original). Pater too detects in Rossetti's poetry a resistance to a 'Manichean opposition of spirit and matter', citing his poems as evidence that 'he knows no region of spirit which shall not be sensuous also, or material' (236). Instead of portraying the relationship of spirit and matter as crystal clear, however, his poems depict this exchange as a flawed, murky affair, one that partakes of what Armstrong identifies as the 'riddles' generated by 'the logic of the 'material and sensuous nature' of glass (11).

Rossetti's relationship to the material word has always drawn critical attention, most recently in the work of Matthew Polotsky and Brian Donnelly, and in my own work on Rossetti's frame poems. Eric Fontana has investigated speech acts in his poems, but none has considered words themselves as material objects in Rossetti's poetry.<sup>2</sup> In exploring instances of glass inscription in Rossetti's poems, I want to show how the poet's material words remind us that reading is a visual experience we can sometimes forget we are having.

Rossetti's glasstexts tell by showing, rather than the other way around. In 'Words On The Window-Pane', we never discover the actual content of what the poet's footnote describes as the anonymous woman writer's 'fragmentary inscription' (*Ballads and Sonnets* 321). We are privy only to her words' appearance and their emotional effect on the speaker reading them in the present:

Did she in summer write it, or in spring,  
 Or with this wail of autumn at her ears,  
 Or in some winter left among old years  
 Scratched it through tettered cark? A certain thing  
 That round her heart the frost was hardening,  
 Not to be thawed of tears, which on this pane  
 Channelled the rime, perchance, in fevered rain,  
 For false man's sake and love's most bitter sting.  
 Howbeit, between this last word and the next  
 Unwritten, subtly seasoned was the smart,  
 And here at least the grace to weep: if she,  
 Rather, midway in her disconsolate text,

Rebelled not, loathing from the trodden heart  
 That thing which she had found man's love to be

(Rossetti *Ballads and Sonnets* p. 321)

In frosting and texturing the glass, written words here draw the speaker's attention to the materiality of window pane itself. Rather than looking through the glass (making it, in effect, disappear), the speaker looks *at* it. Written words make him conscious of the window pane as a partition, but they also make him aware of the dual function of glass as a barrier and a medium. Where a window normally mediates between inside and out, this one mediates between past and present, writer and reader, image and text, enacting the shifts in the speaker's focus that his reading of text on glass necessitates.

Though Rossetti's sonnet is not explicit on this point, Jerome McGann has argued convincingly that the archaism, 'tettered cark' dates the anonymous woman's inscription roughly to the Elizabethan period, when diamond 'writing rings' were designed specifically for this type of glass etching (McGann *The Rossetti Archive*). Rosemary Freeman tells us that in the period it was common for 'a man to scratch an emblematic poem on his friend's window pane, taking the brittleness of the glass as his "picture" and his theme' (7). Adam Smyth points out that early modern poems about such 'unusual forms of inscription', explore 'ways of thinking curiously about what writing is: they become mechanisms for putting pressure on ideas of text, surface, author and reader' (551).

Rossetti is less interested than his Elizabeth forebears in bringing 'pressure' to bear on his glass surface. He takes glass's malleability along with its brittleness as his "picture" and theme'; his glass transforms rather than shatters. He appeals primarily to the glass's liquid origins – not its potential to break, but to shapeshift and give. Instead of applying 'pressure', he applies heat.

The coldness of the metaphorical frost freezing round the woman's heart is contrasted with the heat of her tears' fevered rain, which is hot enough to melt channels in the rime on the glass pane. This window glass is textured by text, frosted with frost, and blurred by rain and hot tears, heightening the confusion, disorientation and dissociation which turn out to be conducive to liminal experience. This blurring, melting effect disorients the speaker, transforming the closed window into an opening to the past through which he can enter into empathetic relation with the glasswriter. It also presents the woman's etched word as both image and text. This etched window-pane is at once a picture of and a figure for the frost round the woman's heart. Her fevered tears that 'Channel[ling] this cold 'rime' (rhyme) 'perchance' represents self-expression in lines of poetry. Frost is static, but capable of transformation. The poem's transmission via the glass pane both fixes the woman's emotion (frost / etching) and releases it by channelling her feelings along with the rime. This tearful 'fevered rain' anticipates the poetic 'delirium' Pater admires in 'the poetry of the middle age' where 'all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears' (218). At once permitting and obstructing vision, the duality of the window pane facilitates this act of transubstantiation; weeping on glass and writing on glass turns rime into rhyme, pain into pane.

Things themselves in this sonnet prove to be as slippery as the glass, frost, rain and tears this poem features. Rossetti's poem treats words as objects as well as language, and their associations are consequently both material and linguistic. The word 'thing' itself appears twice in this poem as a signifier without a signified; 'A certain thing / That round her heart the frost was hardening' has its echo in the poem's final line, 'That thing which she had found man's love to be'. Etched words themselves are also things, onomatopoeically 'Scatched [...] through tettered cark'. Their appearance tells us more than their unrevealed content. Materiality is what

makes meaning here, not language; we never discover what the words are, and the inscription itself is incomplete. The glasstext is significant not because it tells, but because it shows. Just as the 'thing' in lines 4 and 14 remains ambiguous and unnamed, the word 'between this last word and the next' remains 'Unwritten'. Yet this absent word is what registers its writer's presence. The speaker speculates that at this juncture, 'midway in her disconsolate text', the glasswriter paused 'to weep'. Here, the unwritten word rather than the written one gives the writer emotional release; the blank space on the glass expresses visually what is inexpressible in language. Because it is not scratched, the blank is smooth and transparent (rather than translucent), allowing for an aesthetic transitivity. The blank is a material channel that releases the glasswriter's emotions in a way that her written words do not: the blank records the 'here' in which she wept, connecting present reader and past writer.

This blank is doubly liminal because it impossibly registers a space 'between' a word that appears and a word that does not: 'between this last word and the next / Unwritten'. This blank visually represents / records the failure of language, drawing attention to the writing surface itself in order to demonstrate how the space between words (or the space between a word that appears and a word that does not) makes meaning. Words that do not appear are as important as words that do appear, a notion reinforced when we realise that in fact none of the Elizabethan glasswriter's words appear in this poem; they all belong to the sonnet's contemporary speaker. The absence of her words, however, is not something the poem itself recognises as problematic, presenting the contemporary speaker's interpretation of the glasstext as the only and correct one. The words on the pane mean this window is seen rather than seen through. Drawing attention to the doubleness of the glass as medium and barrier, the words inscribed on the window pane communicate, not through language, but through material presence. This poem's portrayal of

glass reading and writing differs from Rossetti's subsequent explorations of the medium in maintaining a belief in unproblematic transitivity. In this poem, glass writing is an image of literary transmission that is fragile but also extraordinary. Words survive time, and in some way, so does their original author, whose feelings they record. The speaker can share the glasswriter's perspective by standing in the room she once occupied; in looking at the same material text (not one printed or reproduced), they are connected.

In bringing the past into the present, the words on the window here intensify the poem's focus on psychological and physical interiority rather than trying to breach the divide between inside and outside. As Rem Koolhaas notes, in architectural terms, 'The glazed façade is always a physical partition, its openness to the world only an aesthetic gesture' (148). Even where they are not glazed, the 'openness' of windows in Rossetti's poems and pictures tends to be 'aesthetic gesture' only. His windows tend to frame interior rather than exterior views, privileging the built environment over the natural world in his explorations of human experience. Gerhard Joseph argues that windows in Pre-Raphaelite art are often 'a compensatory move to avoid the claustal entrapment in the foreground', and that windows represent 'the soul's perceptual opening' in 'rooms representing individual consciousness' (65, 64). However, in Rossetti's poems, this 'compensatory move' does not mitigate entrapment but instead reinforces tightly-bounded space. Windows usually render the outside world invisible, as in: 'The Bride's Prelude' when 'The bridesmaid leaned, / And where the window-panes were white, / Looked for the day' (752-4); in 'The Burden of Nineveh' 'Where the blank windows blind the wall' (72) and in 'Beauty and the Bird' where we see the woman's 'golden head, inclin'd / Outside his cage close to the window-blind', rather than the view outside. (*Poems* 2 – 3). If windows are meant to be figures for eyes, they are frequently blind to their exterior, able only to look inward, rather like mirrors. The



recognition that Rossetti's windows function like mirrors prepares us for the next major poem to feature writing on glass: 'Jenny'. In contrast with 'Words On The Window-Pane', the speaker is figured explicitly within the world of the poem as author, actor and observer, putting the uncritical idealism of the earlier poem under some strain. Like the window in the former poem, this one explores spatial, social and social and psychological interiority. When the speaker notices day dawning through 'gauze curtains half drawn-to', the outside vista is unclear, glancing, blurry and impressionistic:

And there's an early waggon drawn  
 To market, and some sheep that jog  
 Bleating before a barking dog;  
 And the old streets come peering through  
 Another night that London knew;  
 And all as ghostlike as the lamps.

(313, 304 – 309)

This partial view through Jenny's 'half-drawn' curtains offers only a fleeting glimpse of the 'ghostlike' world outside. Rather than 'avoiding claustral entrapment', it reinforces interiority. Though the rising sun temporarily draws the speaker's attention outside, its primary function is to illuminate the interior. Dawn redirects the speaker's gaze back to Jenny's room, where he notices that the 'lamp's doubled shade grows blue' while 'in the alcove coolly spread / Glimmers with dawn your empty bed' (314, 317 – 18). While the rising sun illuminates Jenny's room, it does not throw much light on Jenny. It does, however, catch the writing on her mirror:

And yonder your fair face I see

Reflected lying on my knee,  
 Where teems with first foreshadowings  
 Your pier-glass scrawled with diamond rings:

(319 – 322)

Regarding the trope of reflection in Rossetti's work, J. Hillis Miller persuasively observes, 'The mirrored image undoes what seeks its image there' (331).<sup>3</sup> As so often in this particular poem, the material text contributes significantly to this undoing; where we might expect to find Jenny's 'fair face', we see instead the defaced surface of her mirror. This is one of many instances of scrutiny so intense that the subject begins to disappear, a process the speaker identifies shortly before dawn breaks: 'Yet, Jenny, looking long at you, / The woman almost fades from view' (276 – 277). The longer he contemplates Jenny, the less he sees of her, and the more she becomes a linguistic puzzle 'a cipher', 'a riddle' and ultimately of course, a poem (278, 280). Like any poem, the mirror is a mediator that can only offer a reflection of Jenny's face disfigured by 'vile text'. The speaker's and Rossetti's efforts to represent her in language ironically highlight the problems of representation itself; mimesis inevitably distorts what it seeks to reproduce.

The words that distort Jenny's reflection are the signatures of her clients.<sup>4</sup> Scrawled by diamonds, these client's autographs remind us of the economic transaction that defines the relationship. Just as Jenny's 'fair face' cannot be fully reflected in this vandalised mirror, she cannot herself reflect; the speaker characterises 'Jenny's desecrated mind' as 'a Lethe of the middle street' that 'reflects not any face' (164, 166, 167).

Armstrong argues that 'in the nineteenth century' the 'two activities' of 'looking on' and 'seeing through' glass helped to 'set up a dialogue between reflection and translucency, the

mirror and the window', a dialectic that is suggested by the architectural resonance of Jenny's pier-glass (95). Originally designed for the wall space between genuine windows they were intended to mimic, pier-glasses were set in frames carved to resemble curtains and structured to suggest actual window frames. Jenny's pier-glass is therefore in dialogue with her window, whose form it echoes but whose function it resists. Even here, Rossetti cannot resist further obfuscation; scrawled words enhance the architectural confusion of mirror and window inherent in the pier-glass; the speaker can neither look through nor look on this glass.

In 'The Stealthy School of Criticism', Rossetti acknowledges that the 'baffling problems which the face of Jenny conjures up' were 'inspiring for poetic effort' (793). Indeed, each one of his speaker's attempts to represent Jenny is baffled and occluded by text: her reflection in the pier-glass is over-written; she is compared to 'a rose shut in a book / In which pure women may not look' because of the 'vile text' showing through the 'transparent' pressed rose of her heart (253 – 54; 259, 258). Nor, according to the speaker, can Jenny reflect on herself or the politics and ironies of her situation. If he were to share his thoughts with her, 'the pages of her brain' would initially 'Be parted at such words', but then would reflexively 'Close back upon the dusty sense' like 'a volume seldom read' that 'Being opened halfway shuts again' (160 – 162; 158 – 159). This image of a half-open book is reminiscent of Jenny's 'half-drawn' curtains, suggesting an unsettling conflation of window and book.

Intensively revised from 1848 through to its publication in 1870, the poem was one of those buried with Elizabeth Siddal on her death in 1862, and the grisly recovery of the worm-eaten manuscript may well have contributed to the revised versions' new focus on writing, representation and the material text. The manuscript version exhumed in 1869 does not seem to have included the pier-glass; Jenny's mirror first appears in autumn 1869 in what McGann calls

the ‘Exhumation Proofs’.<sup>5</sup> The mirror’s appearance in this late redraft is significant because it suggests Rossetti is consciously considering the moral and material challenges of representing Jenny in poetry. The addition of the pier glass in later manuscript drafts helps register the poem’s increasingly reflective tone in its long transition from draft to print. These revisions mark a shift in his thinking about writing on glass. This portrayal of the material text as a barrier to sympathetic reading counters the early optimism about the text’s power to connect writer and reader in ‘Words on The Window-Pane’. Initially more focused on the erotic economies of the transaction between prostitute and speaker, the revised poem widens its scope to encompass the ethics of artistic representation, and is a catalyst for Rossetti’s famous meditation on the ‘inner standing point’.

Textual distortion preoccupies Rossetti’s 1869 revisions to ‘Jenny’, which, alongside the addition of the puzzling pier-glass that does not reveal Jenny’s face, also include stanzas portraying her heart and mind as equally inscrutable textual surfaces. The speaker describes Jenny’s life story as a pornographic text that makes her invisible to ‘pure women’:

Like a rose shut in a book  
 In which pure women may not look,  
 For its base pages claim control  
 To crush the flower within the soul;  
 Where through each dead rose-leaf that clings,  
 Pale as transparent psyche-wings,  
 To the vile text, are traced such things  
 As might make lady’s cheek indeed  
 More than a living rose to read;<sup>6</sup>

(253 – 261)

Text has a deadening effect on Jenny's heart, transforming it from a living organ to a dead rose. Suggestive of the leaves of a book, each 'transparent' 'dead rose-leaf' of her heart reveals the 'vile text' beneath, text which carries the contagious traces of the sexual 'things' that have happened to Jenny. Characteristically, 'the woman almost fades from view' as the shameful erotics of her story show through her heart, leaving a crimson trace, not on the woman reader's 'pitiful heart' but on her blushing cheek (272). While we are told that the 'sanguine stain' of Jenny's 'crushed' rose heart colours these pages, it is not her heart but the words of her life story that are portrayed as corrupt and infectious (270, 269). The transparency of Jenny's heart is ironised and paradoxical; rather than an insight into Jenny's heart, as we have been led to expect, we see more text.

Amanda Anderson notes that 'It becomes impossible to read directly (from the heart, to the heart, as the speaker conceives it) because the rose clings to the page, thereby becoming, from one perspective, imprinted - "traced" - by the contaminating or "vile" text' (163). Because 'pure women' readers cannot look into Jenny's contaminated heart without risking exposure, a sympathetic reading 'can never be' (274). Male readers, however, are apparently immune. While pure women are denied access to Jenny's contaminated heart, as Rossetti explains in 'The Stealthy School of Criticism', a male speaker (and poet) can and must handle it without fear of contagion. Defending his use of dramatic monologue to tell Jenny's story, Rossetti writes:

The heart of such a mystery as this must be plucked from the very world in which it beats or bleeds; and the beauty and pity, the self-questionings and all-questionings which it brings with it, can come with full force only from the mouth of one alive to its whole appeal, such as the speaker put forward in the poem, - that is, of a young and thoughtful man of the world...' (793).

Reading and writing about Jenny in particular, and the practice of dramatic monologue in general, are male privileges, as William Morris recognises in his review of the poem, which

praises the speaker as ‘a man of the world’ and the poem as ‘difficult for a modern poet to deal with, but necessary for a man to think of’ (200). Swinburne praises the ‘the delicately beautiful and pitiful fancy of the rose pressed in between the pages of an impure book’ as an ‘imaginative instance of positive and perfect nature’ characteristic of ‘the whole train of thought evolved in the man’s mind’ (572, 571). Rossetti’s poem, and perhaps his defence of it, seems dimly aware of the limitations of the male perspective, as the speaker’s fixation with foiled attempts to interpret Jenny’s heart, face and mind suggest. Because the word here is exclusively read and written by ‘a young and thoughtful man of the world’, Jenny herself must always fade from view. Book and inscribed pier-glass are inverse images of textual interference and distortion; Jenny’s heart is undermined by ‘vile text’ while her face is superscribed by her mirror’s diamond scrawls.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the pier-glass also raises (though it does not recognise) the possibility that words distort the speaker’s reflection as well as Jenny’s. He does not record his own face’s appearance in the glass, only the reflection of ‘my knee’ (320), a body part we glimpse four other times throughout the poem (3, 19, 66, 338), and is the only part of the speaker we ever see. As Miller argues in his analysis of Rossetti’s catoptric poems, ‘It is as if for Rossetti “the mirror stage” were not the discovery of one’s self (the *Ideal-Ich*) in the mirror but the discovery of a vacancy there, an empty glass’ (339). A mirror that and does not fully reveal the speaker to himself and a false window that reflects only the interior, this inscribed pier-glass can be understood as a figure for the dramatic monologue.

While words in ‘Jenny’ and ‘Words On The Window-Pane’ are scrawled by diamonds, a gemstone itself is engraved with words in ‘Rose Mary’. In common with the glass inscriptions of ‘Jenny’ and ‘Words on A Window-Pane’, the words ‘graved’ on Rose Mary’s magic beryl stone are telling because they show (I. 271). As in the other two poems, the precise content of ‘that

writing' on 'the fated glass' remains a mystery; Rose Mary's father can only convey 'its sense' to his wife (I. 274; III. 117; I. 275). This 'mystic rune' is indecipherable because it is 'In a tongue long dead', and is unrepresentable in Rossetti's text because runes are pictographic (I. 272). The crystal ball therefore shares with Jenny's pier-glass and the Elizabethan glasswriter's window-pane a general preoccupation with the role of writing in representation, and a particular interest in the materiality of writing.

The text carved into the beryl stone enacts the poem's conflation of reading and scrying. As a pictograph, this 'mystic rune' is simultaneously word and image, language and symbol (I. 271). To decipher it, one must be both viewer and reader, a dual identity to which Rossetti's comparisons of crystal gazer and reader allude. For instance, in the poem's opening lines, Rose Mary's mother remembers how her daughter 'read the stars in the Beryl-stone', and Rose Mary herself later compares the animation of the images in the beryl stone to 'the turning leaves of a book' (I. 7, 101). As in 'Jenny', reading presents particular difficulties for women. While 'pure women' readers in *Jenny* cannot be permitted to 'look' at the 'vile text' of the prostitute's story, the impure Rose Mary's 'sinful eyes' misread the crystal because it contains 'The truth which none but the pure may know' (II. 94, 79). Rose Mary's mother cannot read at all; she is unable to decipher the runic inscription for herself and she fatally misreads her daughter's visions.

The 'sense' of this inscription is the key to the poem's dramatic irony: "*None sees here but the pure alone*" (I. 277). The poem's scryer, Rose Mary, is sexually impure and thus cannot correctly interpret the visions in the beryl, as she has secretly consummated her relationship with the knight, James Heronhaye. Urged by her mother, who is unaware of her daughter's sexual transgression, Rose Mary consults the magic beryl to discover the location of her lover's potential attackers. She misidentifies their hiding place and her knight is ambushed and murdered

as a result. We later discover that Heronhaye was murdered on his way to marry another woman, a fact Rose Mary never learns. In the end, Rose Mary dies after cleaving the stone ‘in twain’ with her father’s sword, escaping her ‘heavy doom’ and ascending to a ‘place afar’ which welcomes the ‘hearts of steadfast lovers’ (III. 232, 248, 250). Both impure sinner and ‘true soul’, Rose Mary is the embodiment of the magic beryl’s Blakean ability to ‘show the truth by contraries’ (III. 246; II. 95).

A crystal ball that acts like a mirror and like a window, the beryl is explicitly glassy in nature. Rossetti himself conflates mirror and crystal; while writing the poem, he describes ‘Rose Mary’ as ‘a long ballad poem about a magic mirror’, adding that ‘My mirror however is a crystal ball’.<sup>8</sup> Many of the poem’s critics follow suit, treating the beryl as a mirror. Noting that ‘Ambiguous representations of the mirror [...] are at the heart of the text’ Isobel Armstrong spoke of ‘Rose Mary’ as ‘The culmination of the mirror poem’, in her 2013 lecture, ‘Pre-Raphaelite Poetry: Mirrors, Folds, Mirrors’. The crystal ball also functions as a window of sorts because its sayer not only looks at it, but also sees through it to the world outside. The supernatural beryl is a ‘magic window’, as David Riede calls it, but it is worth remembering that the vistas it presents are a part of the real, natural world outside (the road, the heath, the sky) (Riede 178). Nevertheless, like the window in ‘Jenny’, this glass presents only a gauzy, partial view: as Rose Mary’s mother reminds her, each scene is ‘One shadow’ that ‘comes but once to the glass’ (I. 150).

This poem’s conflation of mirror and window finds its way into Pater’s assessment:

The lovely little sceneries scattered up and down [Rossetti’s] poems, glimpses of a landscape, not indeed of broad open-air effects, but rather that of a painter concentrated upon the picturesque effect of one or two selected objects at a time—the “hollow



brimmed with mist,” or the “ruined weir,” as he sees it from one of the windows, or reflected in one of the mirrors of his “house of life” (the vignettes for instance seen by Rose Mary in the magic beryl) attest, by their very freshness and simplicity, to a pictorial or descriptive power in dealing with the inanimate world, which is certainly also one half of the charm, in that other, more remote and mystic, use of it.’ (234 – 235)

Mirrors and windows are not the only things Pater conflates – Rossetti and Rose Mary converge too. Rossetti ‘sees [...] from one of the windows, *or* reflected in one of the mirrors of his “house of life” the same “hollow brimmed with mist”<sup>9</sup> and “ruined weir”<sup>9</sup> that Rose Mary sees in her ‘magic beryl’ (emphasis mine)<sup>9</sup>. Both painter-poet and scryer see the same ‘selected objects’ and ‘sceneries’ across mediums: the ‘vignettes’ Rose Mary sees in the ‘beryl’, Rossetti sees in ‘mirrors’ and from ‘windows’. These windows and mirrors are a part of the literary architecture of Rossetti’s poems, to which Pater alludes when he locates them in the poet’s “house of life”<sup>10</sup>. For Pater, Rossetti’s windows and mirrors look out on and reflect a material world and an ‘inanimate world’ simultaneously, producing Pre-Raphaelite depictions of ‘truth to nature’ and proto-Aesthetic representations of representations. As Miller observes, this ‘confusion of interior and exterior, mirror and window, is characteristic of all that art Walter Pater called “aesthetic.” In such art, nature has been made over into the images of art, and those images made over once more, at a double remove’ (334).

Like Rose Mary, Rossetti is a kind of scryer, an interpreter of visions; as Pater remarks, ‘the whole of Rossetti’s work might count as a *House of Life*, of which he is but the “Interpreter”<sup>9</sup>’ (238). The visions of both Rose Mary and Rossetti are partially reliant on the written word; Rossetti describes ‘selected objects’ in the words of his poems (as the multiple meanings of ‘vignettes’ suggests) and Rose Mary literally sees her visions through the words

etched on the beryl stone. Both Rose Mary and Rossetti communicate their visions in language: Rose Mary to her mother and Rossetti to the reader. Pater recognises that the poem, like much if not all of Rossetti's work, wrestles with problems of representation and interpretation across media. Here, a flawed medium (Rose Mary) uses a flawed medium (crystal) to see a flawed vision that encourages flawed interpretations. While Rossetti reads a *House of Life*, Rose Mary reads the 'house of lies' the beryl presents (II. 93), 'lies' that reflect not only the scryer's but the crystal's impurity. This poem's focus on the purity of the scryer makes it easy to disregard its equally intense fixation with the flawed crystal's impurities. The murky, cursed beryl is possessed by demons. The beryl stone is not a transparent crystal ball, but a 'Freaked' 'Rainbow-hued' and 'shadowy sphere' whose 'shuddering' internal 'light' gives it a 'misty pall' that makes the beryl resemble 'the cloud-nest of the wading moon' or 'the middle light of the waterfall' (I. 38, 39, 33, 36, 39, 37, 40). The 'fated glass' is so murky that Rose Mary can see nothing in it until "a man with besom grey" appears to sweep away the "flying dust" and "clouds" inside. (III. 117; I. 86, 87, 187).

Rose Mary mistakes the "ruined weir" as the location of the ambush where in fact her knight's attackers are concealed in the "hollow brimmed with mist". A literal blind spot, this misty hollow represents the scryer's sexual impurity, which impedes her vision. The cause of the trouble it is not just that Rose Mary is misreading, but that she ignores the warning 'graved' in the beryl stone: "None sees here but the pure alone" (I. 271, 277). Originally 'Read' by 'A priest of the Holy Sepulchre', this 'mystic rune' is at once word and image (I. 273, 271). Looking through 'the words' rather than at them, Rose Mary fails to register the serious obstruction to her vision their translucence represents (I. 276). Written in 'a tongue long dead', 'that writing' is no longer connected to sound; the runic phonemes no longer survive, nor, presumably, do their

meanings; Rose Mary's mother cannot interpret the inscription herself, but has learned 'its sense' from 'her lord' (l. 272, 273, 275).

Following his discussion of 'Rose Mary', Pater discovers in Rossetti's conflation of pictures words and media an indication of the poet's resistance to 'a Manichean opposition of spirit and matter'. Perhaps inspired by the poem's portrayal of crystallo-mancy, Pater uses the crystal as a figure to explore the way in which '*matter* and *spirit* ... play inextricably into each other' in poetry (236, emphasis in original). Comparing Dante Alighieri to Rossetti, Pater writes that 'in the vehement and impassioned heat of his conceptions, the material and the spiritual are fused and blent: if the spiritual attains the definite visibility of a crystal, what is material loses its earthiness and impurity' (236)<sup>11</sup>.

Kate Hext identifies a 'figurative contradiction' here, noting that crystal is formed by 'extreme reductions of temperature', not 'vehement heat' (75). Victoria Mills argues that Pater's conception complicates the "'clear crystal nature"' he writes about elsewhere in relation to 'the diaphanous type'. Noting that a crystal is 'multi-faceted and refractive' rather than clear, Mills points out that 'the term "diaphanous" means "a state of shining through", which suggests something rather more translucent than transparent' (159). Armstrong identifies Pater's 'alliance of change with the transparency of Diaphanëite', noting that Pater's is 'a transparency that exposes contradiction', and is therefore "'revolutionist"' because it is discontented with "'society as it is"' (362). Mills too identifies subversive tendencies in Pater's writing about Diaphanëite in her discussion of Pater's crystal figure, reframing Pater's 'scientific inaccuracy' as a 'subversion of scientific connoisseurship', arguing that 'At first glance, [Pater's] crystal images seem to be rooted in ideas of clarity and purity', but upon closer examination, his 'opaque use of the crystal figure' often 'reveals a deliberate attempt to problematise the crystal' (159).

Such attempts are not unique to Pater, but reflect a wider nineteenth-century preoccupation with the complexity and impurity of crystal. Arguing that “‘Crystal’ is the single defining term on glass culture and nineteenth century modernism’, Armstrong observes that the idea that ‘crystal constitutes a living representation of the faceted multiplicity of convergent times and spaces’ was ‘intrinsic to nineteenth-century glass culture, in contradistinction to the traceless purity of later glass culture’ (151).

Ultimately, Pater’s paradoxical portrayal of the crystal enacts Rossetti’s resistance to the ‘artificial’ opposition of ‘Spirit and matter’ he identifies in the poet’s work (236, 235). The ‘definite visibility’ of the crystal means that its fusion of matter and spirit can be seen, not that this blend is necessarily clear or free of traces. In this fusion, ‘what is material’ is retained as an essential part of the new, crystallised structure. Pater admires the subversive multiplicities, convergences and impurities in Rossetti’s poems, which is perhaps why he praises them in terms that recall the murky practice of crystal gazing: ‘The shadowy world, which he realises so powerfully, has still the ways and houses, the land and water, the light and darkness, the fire and flowers that had so much to do in the moulding of those bodily powers and aspects which counted for so large a part of the soul, here’ (236). Rossetti’s inscribed window panes, mirrors and crystals are not unproblematically transparent, but translucent. Defined by the interplay of clarity and opacity, substance and shadow, signifier and signified, they are figures for the indistinguishability of matter and spirit in Rossetti’s poems.

As Pater observes, for Rossetti, the material provides ‘a solid resisting substance, in a world where all beside might be shadow’ (236). The poetic fusion of matter and spirit results from a working process that Pater likens to tracing, a process that relies on translucence and diaphaneity:

That he had this gift of transparency in language—the control of a style which did but obediently shift and shape itself to the mental motion, as a well-trained hand can follow on the tracing-paper the outline of an original drawing below it, was proved afterwards by a volume of typically perfect translations from the delightful but difficult “early Italian poets:” such transparency being indeed the secret of all genuine style, of all such style as can truly belong to one man and not to another (229-230).

Appropriately enough when considering Rossetti, the identities of artist and poet here collapse into one another as Pater describes a linguistic process as if it were a visual one: translating poetry is like tracing ‘the outline of an original drawing’ through translucent paper. Paradoxically, tracing can also be original. According to Pater, Rossetti’s poems exhibit ‘such style as can truly belong to one man and not another’ because they are skilfully rendered tracings of his own ‘mental motion’. Rossetti himself pictured writing as materialised ‘mental motion’, describing the composition of ‘Rose Mary’ as the poem ‘floating paperwards on a slow brain-breeze’.<sup>12</sup> In being true to himself, he is true to the poet he is translating. As Coste puts it, Pater thought that ‘because he had the gift of accurately or transparently translating his own experience, Rossetti was a gifted translator’ (49).

Tracing paper is translucent or semi-transparent; light only passes through it partially, meaning that the eye is never unaware of its mediating presence (unlike, for example, the glass in a pair of spectacles). Nor does tracing paper seek to disappear, but instead draws attention to itself as a mediator. By invoking the materiality of tracing paper, one wonders if Pater was thinking of the ‘transparent psyche wings’ of Jenny’s ‘rose shut in a book’, through whose petals ‘are traced such things’ to make a reader blush. Like tracing paper, these petals are not wholly

‘transparent’, but translucent, diaphanous; they interpose themselves between reader and text, leaving their own material trace on the original paper via their ‘sanguine stain’, a stain that registers itself in a prospective reader’s blush. Pater characterization of Rossetti’s poems as tracings makes sense because, by definition, a trace can be at once matter and spirit, both ‘a line or figure drawn’ and a ‘non-material indication or evidence of the presence or existence of something’.<sup>13</sup>

This is suggestive of how Rossetti’s words on glass try and fail to reconcile the worlds of showing and telling, image and word, matter and spirit. His glasstexts draw our attention to words as both material and linguistic traces, reminding us that reading itself is a material process. Rose Mary compares the movement of images in the beryl stone to “‘the turning leaves of a book”” (I. 101). In ‘Words On The Window-Pane’, graffiti ‘Scatched...through tettered cark’ releases the window’s liminal energies; words become simultaneously a medium and a barrier between the poem’s nineteenth-century speaker and Elizabethan glass writer (4). Clients’ names scratched onto the prostitute’s mirror in ‘Jenny’ literally and figuratively complicate the speaker’s reflections on Jenny’s reflection. The primary function of these poems’ material words is to reveal themselves as mediation, rather to act as labels, captions, or glosses.

By enhancing the contradictions and complications of the vitreous surfaces on which they appear, words scratched, scrawled and engraved on glass in Rossetti’s poems prioritise the complex interplay between transitivity and reflection that defines the experience of reading itself. As Rossetti’s poetry evolves, this interplay grows increasingly unstable. Rossetti’s attempt to work through the complexities of a nineteenth-century ‘glass dialectic’ that ‘marked contradiction’ (Armstrong 14) ultimately causes and creates more problems than it solves, resulting in what Pater has called the poet-artist’s ‘insanity of realism’, for which the glasstext

becomes a figure (233). Words begin by destabilising the objects on which they appear ('Words On The Window-Pane'), and end by destabilising their readers (the speaker in 'Jenny'; 'Rose Mary'). These glasstexts are examples of the 'forced and almost grotesque materialising of abstractions' that Pater worries will expose Rossetti's 'Poetry as a mania' (233). The fate of the final poem's glasstext - destruction by the crystal-gazer's sword - expresses Rossetti's artistic frustration which the vitreous world only enhances rather than solves.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Rossetti's poems are taken from the *Collected Poetry and Prose* (ed McGann).

<sup>2</sup> See Matthew Polotsky, 'The Substance of Shadows: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Mimesis', *Victorian Poetry* 59.2 (summer 2012): 167-187; Brian Donnelly, 'Sonnet-Image-Intertext: Reading Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin and Found*', *Victorian Poetry* 48.4: (Winter 2010): 475-488; Dinah Roe, 'Words about the Picture: Material and Metaphor in Dante Rossetti's Inscribed Picture Frames', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 27 (Fall 2018): 33 - 55. Fontana, Ernest, 'Exercitive Speech Acts in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti', *Victorian Poetry* 47.2 (Summer 2009): 449-458.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Rossetti's use of mirrors, see Rosalind White, "'What of Her Glass Without Her": Prismatic Desire and Autoerotic Anxiety in the Art and Poetry of Dante Rossetti', *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* Vol 29 (Spring 2019): 16-35.

<sup>4</sup> About these signatures, Jerome McGann remarks: 'Lovers would commonly scratch their names together on a mirror. The reference is of course ironic' (*Collected Poetry* note 322, p. 382). However, I think it more likely that the signatures belong only to the clients. Graffiti of this kind was not uncommon in the period, and was connected with territorial marking. For instance, George Sala's *Quite Alone* mentions a coffee house 'mirror' on which 'gallant youths' had 'scratched their names [...] as well as on the window-panes, in a hundred places, with their diamond rings' (214).

<sup>5</sup> Second Issue (partial), Princeton/Troxell (copy 1). For a detailed discussion of this poem's complex textual history and Rossetti's revisions, see McGann's, 'Scholarly Commentary' for 'Jenny' (*The Rossetti Archive*).



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<sup>6</sup> McGann identifies this passage as ‘a late (Oct-Nov 1869) addition’ (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 382).

<sup>7</sup> As Alison Chapman observes, ‘A description of [Jenny’s] mirror image is not given, but we have instead the suggestion of its mysterious distortion by virtue of the scrawl “superscribed” upon the glass. The image of Jenny is depicted as an adjunct of the speaker and is overlapped by the text upon the mirror’ (68).

<sup>8</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ford Madox Brown, 7 Sept. 1871 (*The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* 137).

<sup>9</sup> The quotations Pater gives are from Part I of ‘Rose Mary’ (214, 138).

<sup>10</sup> *The House of Life* is the title of Rossetti’s 1881 sonnet sequence.

<sup>11</sup> Pater paraphrases this passage in *Plato and Platonism* (1893) when he compares Plato and Dante Alighieri.

<sup>12</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti to William Bell Scott, 2 Aug. 1871 (*Correspondence* 94).

<sup>13</sup> "trace, n.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, [www.oed.com/view/Entry/204174](http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/204174) 4 January 2019.

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