

“THE LOWEST PLACE”: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
AND THE PROBLEM OF BOREDOM

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During the summer of 1849, having recently recovered from a serious though undiagnosed bout of poor health (bearing many of the symptoms of a nervous disorder), Christina Rossetti travelled on her own to Pleasley Hill, a village close to Mansfield in Nottinghamshire, to visit the family of her then fiancé, James Collinson. Throughout Rossetti’s month’s stay with the Collinsons, James was away in Wales, working on landscape paintings of the Isle of Wight. During her visit, Rossetti’s letters to her family are marked by a tone of increasing restlessness, bearing the symptoms of a boredom similar to the kind found in some of her most developed female characters: Maude from *Maude: A Monodrama* (1850), the Princess from “The Prince’s Progress” (1866), and the Charlmont sisters in her novella, *Commonplace, A Tale of Today* (1870). Despite enjoying the tranquillity and beauty of the English countryside, Rossetti often found the rhythms and social norms of country-living tedious. This reaction is especially seen in one of her letters to William Michael, in August 1849, in which her tone modulates drastically, albeit subtly, revealing a series of frictions between her own desires on the one hand and the social expectations and conventions of her hosts on the other. At turns, she is acerbic, playful, discontented, or bordering on the quietly desperate. Nevertheless, the persistent tone Rossetti conveys throughout the letter is one of boredom, of “being held in limbo” (105), to borrow Martin Heidegger’s description of how situational boredom, stemming from frustrating social circumstances and the routines of everyday life, radically affects one’s sense of subjectivity:

Though my visit here is extremely tolerable, still the postman is quite an event in my existence.... Local converse wearies me somewhat; yet this advantage it possesses – I cannot join in it; so may, during its continuance, abandon myself

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to my own meditations.... The talk of *beaus* is as perpetual here as at Mrs. Heimmann's: however, few jokes have been passed on me then might have been anticipated.... In my desperation I knit lace with a perseverance completely foreign to my nature.... Ah Will! If you were here we could write *bout-rimés* sonnets, and be subdued together. (*Letters* 1:18-19)

Rossetti here tacitly touches on a whole series of issues regarding the tensions between personal interests and social expectations for women. Rossetti's use of "tolerable," "wearies," "continuance," "perpetual," and "desperation" as descriptors of her visit with the Collinsons constitutes what Elizabeth Goodstein calls "the rhetoric of boredom," a mode of self-reflection shaped by a growing sense of the "incommensurability" between one's personal desire and the limited social opportunities for women, across all class divides, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular (24).

However, this letter records more than Rossetti's frustration. It also exhibits her resourcefulness in using her boredom, her lack of fulfillment, as a means for underscoring, in an understated way, an ethical predicament: the direct and clear impact that her experience of time passing too slowly and invariably had upon her emotional flourishing and intellectual life. In describing daily domestic routines and the conversations of visitors, Rossetti shows that boredom is not only a personal experience but also, as Goodstein puts it, a resource for self-examination: being bored opens up a "set of questions about the nature and meaning of subjective experience," questions having to do with temporality, gender, work time, leisure time, and the dynamics of desire within social interactions (24). In the case of Rossetti, writing had many purposes: it was a devotional exercise; a medium for aesthetic experimentation and play; an opportunity for evangelization (especially in her later writings); and, among other things, an outlet for both expressing and channelling her situational boredom and other dysphoric or "ugly feelings," to borrow a phrase from Sianne Ngai (335-38), into art.

While Rossetti's poetry and prose explores a host of "ugly feelings" in a variety of ways, her discussions and renderings of boredom tend to centre on two specific problems: first, the relationship between female-lived experience and the domestic space, and second, the spiritually ambivalent nature of boredom – it is either a kind of Christ-like suffering in the context of emerging modernity or, at the other end of the spectrum, a symptom of spiritual malaise, one which Rossetti directly associates with the deadly sin of *acedia* or sloth (more on this later). In many of Rossetti's writings, boredom functions as a "reflexive" exploration of the disturbing and paradoxical presence of the "deficiency" or lack of affective fulfillment often characterizing female experience within the contested space of the domestic sphere (Ngai 269). This

lack of fulfillment is what Alison Pease, reading Heidegger, has recently termed “situational boredom,” a condition of frustration typically “brought on by menial, repetitive tasks and the generally low expectations ... British patriarchy had for women” which female writers in particular identified as chief causes for various psychological and/or spiritual issues whose symptoms included neurasthenia, claustrophobia, and a hypersensitive awareness of “the slowing or stoppage of time” and the monotonous “repetition” of everyday routines (Pease 95). Typically, in Rossetti’s writing, such situational boredom is inextricably linked to the complex, often paradoxical, relationship between women and the domestic space (one which Rossetti both cherished and disliked) or between individuals and their specific acceptance, or refusal, of their respective Christian duties – this fact is especially seen if we read *Maude*, “The Prince’s Progress,” and *Commonplace* in light of Rossetti’s growing efforts to cultivate a sacramental vision in the face of the frustrations inevitable in everyday life and living.

I

In her first novella, *Maude: Prose and Verse* (1850), Rossetti explores the early development and anxieties of a young female poet’s mind, employing the same prosimetric style used by the young Dante Alighieri in *La Vita Nuova* (which Dante Rossetti translated into English in 1848). As early as William Michael Rossetti’s 1896 “Preface” to the first publication of *Maude*, the parallels between Maude and Christina have been noted. In particular, their shared love for writing poetry, their tendencies towards illness, and their similar concerns with respect to Tractarian debates regarding what constitutes worthy reception of the Eucharist have been discussed at length. Most scholarship on *Maude* has followed the interpretive vein William Michael lays out in his “Preface”: that the adolescent and religiously scrupulous Rossetti wrote *Maude* as a closet drama in order to lay out and process many of her own personal struggles with understanding the Anglo-Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist. Most of William Michael’s “Preface” reads like an *apologia* for the publication of a novella which he believed had little aesthetic merit (save for the snatches of verse it included) and did little more than exhibit nineteen-year-old Christina’s “extreme,” “wire-drawn” scrupulosity (x). The story, he claims, is a “juvenile performance,” mainly concerned with “delineating” character defects and agonizing over Maud’s responsibilities to recognize and fulfill her “religious obligations” (viii; ix). However, he insists the novella is worth reading since it functions as an archive for the adolescent work of a writer who had achieved a noteworthy “literary reputation” (viii). While *Maude* is certainly an awkward text with regards to its uneven expression and

melodramatic sensibilities, it also stages a tension between the boring routines of life in the domestic sphere on the one hand and the desires for creative outlet on the other. Rossetti sought to reconcile this tension through the cultivation of a sacramental vision.

Much has been said about how the domestic sphere is a conflicting one for Maude; throughout the novella, Rossetti describes it as the place where Maude's discontent with everyday life becomes most pronounced. Rossetti stresses this point when she describes Maude's general affective state at home as one of dissatisfaction (*Maude* 48). Poetry becomes a means of passive resistance and creative release for Maude but also paradoxically underscores her growing anxiety about her unworthiness to write and think about, let alone approach, confession and receiving Christ in the Eucharist, the two sacraments which she refers to as the "Holy Things" (52). Given that much of the narrative drama revolves around Maude's restlessness in the domestic sphere and her tortured uncertainty (bordering on an existential crisis) regarding whether she may dare receive Communion, Jan Marsh finds in Maude a surrogate for the adolescent Rossetti whose own "spiritual crisis" concerning her worthiness to receive the Eucharist reached a pitch when she was fifteen (59). Certain symptoms of Maude's "spiritual crisis" suggest that Rossetti's devotional tendencies, coupled with the intensity and force of her imaginative and analytical abilities, caused the "extreme" and "wire-drawn" scrupulosity William Michael discerned in her adolescence. While it is standard to read *Maude* in this way, as the text itself continually invites us to do so, little has been said about how Maude's difficulty with knowing what constitutes a worthy reception of the Eucharist has just as much to do with addressing the problem of cultivating a sacramental vision, while enduring a bout of prolonged boredom, as it does with fighting scrupulous tendencies.

Bernadette Waterman Ward explains that the cultivation of a sacramental vision, especially as understood by Victorian Tractarians and Roman Catholics, was a way of forming a new kind of poetic vision in which ordinary life and the natural world are vehicles for grace because the Creator "interacts and inheres in the world he made" (145). A derivative effect of cultivating such a vision meant that Victorians could resist the increasingly secular, materialistic view of the world in which meaning typically derived from economic success or pleasure. One of the problems Maude experiences is the inability to cultivate a sacramental vision of everyday life. She is representative then of what Max Weber described as the "disenchanted" condition of emerging modernity, a condition that caused the development of boredom as a psychosomatic condition in Victorian England in particular (155).

Instead of cultivating a vision focusing on the world as a place inhabited by the grace of the Creator (a vision encouraged by such Tractarians as John

Keble, whom Rossetti especially admired), Maude views it as burdensome and wearying. In her sonnet, “Yes, I too could face death and never shrink,” located near the start of the novella, we see her hone in on the problem of world weariness, Hamlet-style, claiming that it would be better to die than endure the vain, repetitive cycles of “Longer and fuller heart-sickness” that interminably measure out the passing of “Each day’s experience”:

Yes, I too could face death and never shrink
 But it is harder to bear hated life;
 To strive with hands and knees weary of strife;
 To drag the heavy chain whose every link
 Galls to the bone; to stand upon the brink
 Of the deep grave, nor drowse, though it be rife
 With sleep; to hold with steady hand the knife
 Nor strike home: this is courage as I think.
 Surely to suffer is more than to do.
 To do is quickly done; to suffer is
 Longer and fuller of heart-sicknesses;
 Each day’s experience testifies of this
 Good deeds are many, but good lives are few.
 Thousands taste the full cup; who drinks the lees? (10)

The boredom here is more than evident and registers throughout the sonnet at the levels of form and feeling. Rhyming “life” with “strife,” Maude then employs both enjambment and body-conscious language to capture how her boredom is prolonged, borne out in her very bones: “it is harder ... To strive with hands and knees weary of strife; / To drag the heavy chain whose every link / Galls to the bone.” Peter Toohey notes that boredom in art and literature is often suggested by exhaustion, by wearied and exhausted bodies, by “hunched shoulders,” a “head cupped in [one’s] hand,” and “elbows resting” placidly (22). Such postures suggest, Toohey argues, what Virginia Woolf called the “accumulated weariness of innumerable days” which “discharge[s] its burden” on the body (qtd in Toohey 22-23). Frustrated desire renders Maude’s body “weary”; her observations show how boredom emphasizes the psychosomatic state of the human person: what occurs in her mind and heart is borne out in her very bones, and vice versa.

The content and form of Maude’s first sonnet shows an intriguing conceptual sympathy between her affective state and the growing existential theories of what boredom is and how it manifests in everyday life – theories that were cropping up in Victorian England, especially in such works as Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, and later in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and were also emerging in continental

Europe with Kierkegaard and Baudelaire.¹ However, if we examine the prosimetric structure of *Maude* as a whole, we also discern in Rossetti a strange, simultaneous allowance and disavowal of boredom as a painful burden. She affirms its persistent presence in Maude's life while often also implicitly subverting its influence. As is so characteristic of Rossetti, she first showcases the burdens of fallen nature, of the fact that things are 'out of joint,' and then, through an understated and sometimes acerbic humour, she shows that such burdens do not have the last word. Rossetti both allows and disallows a sustained analysis of boredom: frequently hinting at its lingering presence, she also sidelines it through the jarring tonal contrast she creates in the shifts between the prose and verse sections of the novella.

There exists a comic dissonance between Maud's poetic, religious musings and the narrator's prose commentaries that cover both Maude's poetry and her personal behaviour. At times the narrator seems to suggest that Maude's boredom can be read as something of an affective pose, a desire to be one of the brave "few" who "drinks ... the lees" of suffering and tribulation. The formal organization of the text helps us to perceive this suggestion: both before and after we read Maude's first sonnet, she is portrayed as being slightly ridiculous and frivolous, suffering as much from legitimate situational boredom as she is from the consequences of self-absorption. For instance, just before Rossetti shows us Maude's poetry, we are told that Maude's journal – a hodgepodge of "commonplace-book, album, scrap-book," and "diary" (9) – will be greatly "enrich[ed]," in Maude's estimation, by her recording in it her latest profound examination of the meaninglessness of life. But after presenting us with the meditation on the vanity of life in the "Yes, I too could face death" sonnet, Rossetti notes that Maude "yawned, leaned back in her chair, and wondered how she could fill the time till dinner" now that her existential sonnet has been completed in the space of an afternoon (11).

Christopher Ricks describes this swift transition (from Maude's penning a sonnet, rife with affective melancholia, to her thoughts of dinner-time) as a playful move on Rossetti's part (197-98). He considers the transition from the existential to the playful as a "high comedy of the trapeze" (197), which, I suggest, shows Rossetti's lighthearted seriousness about Maude's boredom at the novella's outset. Though Maude's personal and existential crisis does become serious and legitimate midway through the novella (and Rossetti treats it as such), here, at this point, Rossetti seems to relish presenting and critiquing the stereotypical religious devotee whose spiritual reflections are more like affectation than a sincere lamentation or lyric longing for God that comes from the heart. Rossetti can both laugh at scrupulosity and empathize with it; given this, she may not be so "wire-drawn" as her brother suggests.

Apart from Rossetti's subtle playfulness, we also see that her increasing

grapple with Tractarian teachings regarding Communion shows that Maude's boredom is not just situational but spiritual, stemming from her inability to integrate, to read, the relationship between everyday life and the sacramental life. As John Keble shows in *The Christian Year* (1827), Tractarians believed that both the ordinary rhythms of life and participation in the sacramental life can create, when woven together, a profound, devotional aesthetic sensibility. Keble not only influenced Rossetti in her later writings; Mary Arseneau has documented evidence that Rossetti poured over Keble during the 1840s and that her marginalia during the 1850s and 1860s is a continuation of her young fascination with his work ("Incarnation" 92). Both Diane D'Amico and Arseneau point out that the sketches and little illustrations Rossetti drew on her edition of *The Christian Year* date to the early and mid-1840s, showing that she was engaged with Keble's poetry before and during the time she wrote *Maude* (D'Amico 36). It is not implausible then to suggest that Rossetti, with cues from Keble and other Tractarians, is seeking to work through her own young understanding of the integration between ordinary life and a sacramental vision of the world as she dramatizes Maude's various inner wrestlings.

In the circumstances and conversations occurring throughout the novella, and through the tensions between prose narrative and verse, we see the tentative unfolding of a Rossettian conception of the relationship between art and the devotional life which is still young but, nevertheless, far more balanced and less condescending (or tortured) than are Maude's own ideas on the same subjects. Instead of identifying solely with Maude, Rossetti seems to express her own Tractarian-influenced view of devotional living through the figure of Agnes. In *Maude*, Agnes's view of devotional living is based on the idea (promoted by Keble in *The Christian Year*) that even the ordinary events of life, in keeping with Christ's hidden life of thirty years, are rich sources of spiritual and artistic contemplation and, significantly, of *meaning*. The belief in the Eucharist, as divine presence under the humble auspices of bread and wine, function as the source of meaning for the Tractarian and Roman Catholic conception of the dignity of the humble and ordinary, and Agnes is the character who best understands this belief. We should look to Agnes and Maude's exchange regarding the reception of Communion in order to think through Rossetti's ideas about art, poetic identity, faith, and the experience of boredom.

Maude's vacillation between spiritual scrupulosity and a desire to receive the Eucharist is especially brought to the foreground in a conversation she has with Agnes towards the close of the novella, when she offers Agnes a glimpse of her sonnet, "Vanity of vanities." The poem resists any hope of new life or transformation: all is tending grave-wards and there is no mention of grace:

Vanity of vanities, the Preacher saith,

All things are vanity. The eye and ear
 Cannot be filled with what they see and hear:
 Like early dew, or like the sudden breath
 Of wind, or like the grass that withereth,
 Is man, tossed to and for by hope and fear:
 So little joy hath he, so little cheer:
 Till all things end in the long dust of death
 To-day is still the same as yesterday,
 To-morrow also even as one of them
 Until the ancient race of time be run,
 The old thorns shall grow out of the old stem
 And morning shall be cold and twilight grey. (30)

Recasting the complaints found in Ecclesiastes to express her own personal struggles and frustrations, Maude explores the depths of her psychological and spiritual anxieties, thus placing her psychomachia within a larger poetic and spiritual tradition: that of the Judeo-Christian tradition of lyric longing and lamentation. Unlike the first sonnet at the opening of *Maude*, “Vanity of vanities” does hint that meaning exists but only in the eternal realm, not the earthly one. Victorian devotional poetry inspired by Tractarianism tended to explore soteriology in a hidden, often indirect mode (in keeping with the Doctrine of Reserve, as G.B. Tennyson has noted) that affirmed the created world as a means of exploring the sacramental and symbolic significances it contained (Tennyson 80-110). This sonnet of Maude’s lacks the generally kataphatic, or affirmative, nature of most Tractarianism poetry, embodying instead an ethos much more closely linked to the apophatic tradition in which self-denial and a lack of fulfillment mark the way to spiritual fulfillment.² In “Vanity of vanities,” Maude’s boredom takes on increasingly spiritual as well as existential contours, as her poetry attempts to seek out some source of meaning or hope, even if it cannot include ordinary existence at this stage in her understanding of the Christian spiritual life.

However, once again, Rossetti offers a counter-check to Maude’s perspective. In this instance, she provides it through the voice of Agnes who, as D’Amico argues, functions as a figure of moderation challenging Maude’s scrupulosity by providing a defence of frequent reception of the Eucharist that closely parallels Keble’s position (36-42). Through the figure of Agnes, Rossetti offers a balanced and integrated view of the relationship between human insufficiency and divine grace, between unworthiness and the reception of Holy Communion. In doing so, this helps us to see how, from an early age, Rossetti not only allows herself to be an indirect mouthpiece for the predominantly masculine poetic and theological Tractarian movement. It also shows how she is already well aware of such pitfalls as scrupulosity and boredom

that many High-Anglicans could fall prey to if they did not cultivate a sacramental vision.

After reading Maude's "Vanity of vanities," Agnes challenges Maude's resolution to permanently abstain from receiving the Eucharist, appealing to mortality as evidence of the human need for the solace found in the sacramental life: "We must all die.... What if you keep to your resolution, and do as you have said, and receive the Blessed Sacrament no more?" (73). Rossetti describes how Agnes's "eyes filled with tears" after asking Maude her question (73). In her ensuing debate with Maude, Agnes's responses and questions reformulate the spiritual sentiments Keble presents in his "Holy Communion" from *The Christian Year*. Keble begins his poem by acknowledging the profound mystery and gift that is the Eucharist and how it is understandable that fallen human beings would hesitate to partake in this mystery. However, Keble, in a vein that contrasts him with Edward Pusey, is quick to remind us that the Eucharist is what satisfies restless hearts best, thus clearly echoing Augustine's sentiments from the opening of Book One of *The Confessions*:

O agony of wavering thought
 When sinners first so near are brought!
 "It is my Maker – dare I stay?"
 "My Saviour – dare I turn away?"

Thus while the storm is high within
 'Twixt love of Christ and fear of sin,
 Who can express the soothing charm,
 To feel thy kind upholding arm,

My Mother Church? and hear thee tell
 Of a world lost, yet loved so well
 That He, by whom the angels live,
 His only Son for her would give? (13-24)

Commenting on his own poem (*The Christian Year* is also prosimetric), Keble concludes that, although the Christian penitent has legitimate reasons to hesitate receiving the Eucharist, it is better to receive, since Communion brings "tearful joy and calm" to the "sinners" who "taste" it (59-60). Through the voices of Maude and Agnes, Rossetti stages the dramatic tensions Keble outlines in his poem; Agnes's voice does end up the dominant one by the novella's close, since we find out that Maude has received the Eucharist before she dies. However, it is important to note that Maude's initial responses to Agnes's plea that she reconsider her resolution to refrain parallels Pusey's rather more scrupulous position on the topic. As Lynda Palazzo observes, Maude is the only figure in the novella who seems to accept (for a time), or

attempt to abide by, Puseyite thinking (3-10). Speaking like a Puseyite, Maude tells Agnes that she will not receive Communion until her pain and suffering corrects her of her unworthiness:

I do not mean to never communicate again. Mr. Paulson told us last Sunday that sickness and suffering are sent for our correction. I suffer very much. Perhaps a time will come when these will have done their work on me also when I shall be purified indeed and weaned from the world. Who knows? The lost have been found, the dead quickened. (73-74)

Here, Maude's reservation regarding the Eucharist appears to be a scrupulous one as opposed to a legitimate concern over being barred from the sacrament through participation in some form of grievous sin. Maude's self-disgust, manifesting as a kind of dismissive boredom with life and people in general, drastically parts ways with Keble's celebration of the material world as sacramental and of ordinary life as a vehicle for the transmission of divine favour. Pusey was adamant that reception of Holy Communion was an important part of living out a devotional Christian life. However, it is in his qualification of when to receive and when to abstain from communicating that causes something of a tension in his writing on the subject.

In Pusey's 1843 sermon, "The Holy Eucharist, A Comfort to the Penitent," we see some of Maude's more particular scruples writ large. The question of spiritual worthiness and unworthiness, which Pusey poses when focussing on Holy Communion, is the one that Maude is wrestling with and which Rossetti seeks to resolve through the figure of Agnes. The ways in which the sermon vacillates on the subject of communicating encapsulates much of the dramatic problem at the heart of Maude's bored and restless dissatisfaction with herself. Pusey's consideration of communicating articulates many of the hesitations and reservations Maude feels.

In the following passage, the question of reception of the Eucharist is couched in a discourse of holy "fear" and uncertainty. Pusey's discernment about when and how to communicate is markedly different to the ways in which Keble treats the topic in *The Christian Year*:

[Communicating] is not a matter of obeying rubrics, but of life or death, of health or decay, of coming together for the better or for the worse, to salvation or to condemnation.... There is, in our fallen state, a reverent abstaining from more frequent Communion, founded on real though undue fears.... *Better, then, for a time forego what any would long for, or obtain it, where by God's bounty and Providence that Gift may be had, than by premature urgency, "walk not charitably," or risk injury to a brother's soul.... Rather should those who long for it, fear that if It were given them, they might not be fitted for it, or, if we*

have it, that we come short of the fullness of its blessing, than use inconsiderate eagerness in its restoration. (Nine Sermons 30; my emphasis)

Pusey's concerns are present in Maude's resolve to abstain from reception of Communion until she feels as though she is a more worthy subject. In contrast, for Keble and Newman, communicating is supposed to heal human weaknesses, and so the sacraments are for those who are contrite yet still suffering and struggling with various vices. In both Pusey's and Maude's belief that they should refrain from communicating until they can be proven worthy, there is too much emphasis on the concept of self-sufficiency and an obsession with perfectionism – two main causes for scrupulosity and spiritual restlessness as outlined by Keble and Newman.³

Towards the novella's end, Maude does choose to receive Communion, on Easter Sunday, following spiritual direction from Rev. Paulson (110-11). Rossetti makes Maude's reception an event that finally brings some form of peace to her restlessness (110-20). Overall, Rossetti may be suggesting that a poetic disdain for the things of ordinary life is symptomatic of a spiritual crisis that causes psychological distress and physical weariness. Maude's boredom is only resolved through her accident, her illness, and her return to a sacramental life. Maude reconciles the spiritual and material through the reception of Communion which, as sanctified bread, functions as a symbol of the integrated Christian life grounded in a vision of the holiness of the ordinary. In *Maude*, boredom appears to be a kind of pose and/or a symptom of religious scrupulosity. However, in Rossetti's later writings, especially in "The Prince's Progress" and *Commonplace*, boredom takes on even more ambivalent contours: it can be positive or negative, a fruitless burden or a means of moral strengthening, depending on how Christianized the imaginations of the bored subjects in question are.

II

"The Prince's Progress" (1866) has a simple narrative, replete with medieval, literary, and biblical allusions demonstrating that the "physical journey symbolizes a spiritual pilgrimage" (Arseneau, "Pilgrimage" 281). The poem's basic plot begins with a Princess left bored and waiting in her tower for her Prince, who continually stalls in fulfilling his quest, and it ends with the Princess's death and the consequent mourning of her passing by her attendant ladies – literally, the Princess was bored to death, left perpetually "stranded ... on the banks of desire," to borrow Goodstein's words (5). Boredom is a significant psychosomatic problem in the text. The Prince's continual delay in his quest – dallying with a milkmaid, an alchemist, and then with a group of women – demonstrates that he seems to equate his duty with monotony and

boredom. His fault, however, does not seem to stem from a direct decision to escape his quest; rather, his problem, as Arseneau explains, is a lack of intentionality: he “does not ... pursue his journey with the required urgency or singleness of purpose” (“Pilgrimage” 280). The Prince’s superficiality, his lack of purpose, causes the Princess to endure a prolonged predicament of situational boredom.

The Princess’s boredom is an aspect of her daily life as she bears out the frustration of lack and longing in her body. As a figure for Christ and the Christian faith (Arseneau, *Recovering* 140, 144), her boredom is different from Maude’s: a kind of spiritual suffering as opposed to Maude’s quasi-existential crisis. The Prince, however, attempts at all costs to avoid the boredom he perceives in fulfilling his duty, pursuing his own self-centred desires. Rossetti’s view of boredom is ambivalent: she views it as positive or negative, depending on the ways in which bored subjects react to their circumstances. Boredom in “The Prince’s Progress” is a complex mood: it pervades the text, continually hovering over and shaping the plot’s anti-climactic unfolding.

Rossetti herself acknowledged her intentional structuring of the poem around disappointments, passivity, temptations, distraction, boredom, and a series of non-events. Responding to Dante Rossetti’s suggestion that she include the spectacle of a medieval tournament in the poem, she wrote that it would spoil the sense of “barren boredom” that shapes the narrative and overall mood of the work:

My actual Prince ... seems to me invested with a certain artistic congruity of construction...: 1st a prelude and outset; 2nd an alluring milkmaid; 3rd a trial of barren boredom; 4th the social elements again; 5th barren boredom in a <severer> more uncompromising form; 6th a wind up and conclusion. See how the subtle elements balance each other and fuse into a noble conglom! (*Letters* 1: 277)

Rossetti suggests here that boredom both frustrates and paradoxically creates meaning throughout the poem. With regards to the Prince, boredom is a spiritual burden which he continually seeks to cast off. The first “trial of barren boredom” that Rossetti refers to occurs when the Prince leaves the alluring milkmaid and enters a “lifeless” and “loveless” land (133) of “rugged blackness” (128), a “land of neither life nor death” (139) which is “tedious” for the “social Prince” (152). The fifth, more severe, experience of boredom occurs when the Prince has almost reached the Princess’s Tower. The “more uncompromising” tedium and boredom the Prince faces in the last stretch of his journey is personified in the wasted and “barren” terrain (415) he must cross to reach the Princess who, by this point in the poem, lies “wasting upon her bed” (532). Before exploring the ways in which these specific passages open

up our reading of boredom in “The Prince’s Progress” (and how her rendering of boredom both affirms and troubles gender conventions), it is important to explore the ways in which Rossetti understands the spiritual laxity of the Prince as being representative of sloth, a close cousin of boredom.

The poem opens by introducing its two main characters: the long-suffering and patient Princess who waits out the “long hours,” which “go and come and go” (3), as she looks for the long-delayed arrival of the Prince. By contrast, “in his world-end palace,” the “strong Prince” sits, “taking his ease on cushion and mat” (13, 14), preferring to idle away his time in comfort rather than take up his “staff” and “hat” (13), the traditional emblems of the pilgrim. The Prince only half-heartedly takes up his quest to meet the Princess following the injunction of a mysterious voice that commands him to “start” his pilgrimage (16). The origin and nature of this voice remain obscure throughout the entire poem – the Prince simply calls it the “true voice” of his “doom” (19). Arseneau suggests that the voice seeks to give the Prince an important lesson in discerning the spiritual significance of ordinary events. She maintains that the voice serves as a warning to the Prince, seeking to awaken him from his complacency and to strengthen his resolve to act (“Pilgrimage” 280-82). The voice functions, among other things, as a stirring of the Prince’s conscience, especially seeking to arouse deep emotions in him by describing the Princess as a fading flower, a drooping lily (26). The voice also hints that, with speed and care, the Prince will see the Princess re-bloom upon his arrival, or if he arrives too late, she will die. Following this warning, a “sad” chorus interrupts the “voice of doom” and stresses the *carpe diem* theme of Renaissance love poetry: “seize the day” is the central message of the clipped words and quick-paced and tightly woven internal and ending rhymes of every line in the stanzas depicting the voice’s call to the Prince. Ultimately, the Prince’s spiritual insensitivity and laziness will prevent him from arriving on time: the anxious forebodings of the voice will be grimly fulfilled at the end of the poem when the Princess’s ladies-in-waiting chastise the Prince for having “loitered” so long on his journey (483).

Initially, the voice spurs the Prince to action: “Up rose the Prince with a flush on his cheek, / Up he rose to stir and to seek, / Going forth in the joy of his strength; / Strong of limb if of purpose weak” (44-47). However, the Prince has barely started on his journey before he is distracted from his mission and succumbs to the invitations of a “wave-haired milk-maid, rosy and white” (58) who, with her luscious and “shining” curls (94), curvaceous body, and coquettish behaviour, is a kind of caricature of a Pre-Raphaelite stunner. Rossetti is both humourous and cutting in her assessment of the Prince who says that he cannot resist the advances of the milkmaid, given both her beauty and the fact that he had already “journeyed *at least a mile*” of

his pilgrimage (59). Preferring pleasure and desire to duty, the Prince fails to observe that the milkmaid bears the tell-tale signs of a seductress: she is associated with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and her ambiguity – “Was she a maid, or an evil dream?” (68) – suggests her association with Keats’s deadly alluring “belle dame.”

The Prince’s primary failing, however, seems to be less the result of lust than of boredom and his constant desire to escape the demands of his arduous journey. The Prince’s problem is sloth: “Loth to stay” with the milk-maid, though “to leave her slack” (85), the Prince chooses to defer his main obligations, and busies himself with more pleasurable pursuits:

So he stretched his length in the apple-tree shade,
Lay and laughed and talked to the maid,
Who twisted her hair in a cunning braid
And writhed it in shining serpent-coils,
And held him a day and night fast laid
In her subtle toils. (91-96)

In her devotional work, *Time Flies* (1885), Rossetti discusses the nature of sloth, revealing how she, like Thomas Aquinas, views it as a sin against charity.

An admirer of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis (who discusses sloth according to Aquinas’s definition), Rossetti understood sloth (or acedia) as being busy with the wrong activities. Aquinas describes sloth as a sin against Sabbath-keeping, against giving God his due.⁴ As a result, the slothful figure is someone who fails to prioritize his or her duties according to moral obligations. In *Time Flies*, Rossetti calls sloth the “deadliest of the seven sins” and warns of the danger it causes to the spiritual “race” each Christian must “run” (303). Invoking Paul’s image of the saved Christian as one who exerts his spiritual muscles and who “runs the race” (2 Timothy 2.7; Corinthians 9.23-25; Acts 20.23-24; and Hebrews 12.1-3), Rossetti sees sloth as a threat to the energy and commitment needed to live a life of duty and devotion to God and others:

Sloth precludes energy. Sloth may accompany a great many amiable tempers and skin-deep charms: but sloth runs no race. And a race is the one thing set before us. We are not summoned to pose picturesquely in *tableaux vivants* or die away gracefully like dissolving views. We are called to run a race, and woe is us if we run it not lawfully, and with patience and with pressing toward the mark. Sloth tends to paralyze the will. Blessed are those merciful who labour to help the self helpless slothful, and betimes to arouse him. It is never too early to fight against sloth in one committed to my charge – or in myself. It is never too early, but ere long it may be too late. (304)

First and foremost, Rossetti's comment that Christians must not "pose picturesquely" is a vivid way of expressing the moral and spiritual duty to reject elements of laziness and malaise in the spiritual life. She perceives sloth as a paralysis of the will that not only prevents us from fulfilling our moral duties but also hinders our ability to discern what these duties are. As she shows in the relationship between boredom and the fulfillment of duty in *Commonplace*, Rossetti understands the obligation to acknowledge personal duty as being one of the central aspects of living out a devout Christian life.

We see this clearly in the final stanzas of "The Prince's Progress," when the Prince has arrived "too late" to the castle (481). When he reaches the Tower, a group of women-in-mourning, who had previously served as the Princess's ladies-in-waiting, announces that the Princess has died while waiting for him to arrive and fulfill the duties of love. The Prince, who was supposed to be the faithful bridegroom, has been replaced by "Bridegroom Death" (474). The women imply, in their dirge, that the Prince bored the Princess to death:

She has watched, she has waited long,
Watching athwart the golden grate
With a patient song.... (460-62)

Too late for love, too late for joy,
Too late, too late!
You loitered on the road too long,
You trifled at the gate:
The enchanted dove upon her branch
Died without a mate;
The enchanted princess in her tower
Slept, died, behind the grate;
Her heart was starving all this while
You made it wait. (481-90)

The Prince has consigned the Princess to the bored condition of literally wasting away, starved for love. Because he is presented as the inflictor of the Princess's predicament of boredom, Rossetti places moral blame on the Prince. The choric chastisement of the Prince reappears, in *Time Flies*, in the final lines of Rossetti's excerpt on sloth: "It is never too early to fight against sloth in one committed to my charge – or in myself. It is never too early, *but ere long it may be too late*" (304; my emphasis). The Prince's attempts to avoid the burdens and boredom of his journey have led to the death of the Princess.

In his desperation to avoid anything burdensome, the Prince does not read his surroundings for their symbolic and spiritual significance. The Prince's desperate attempts to flee duty and his failure to read the world symbolically

and responsibly leads to a trial of boredom for the Princess – who is left bearing out the consequences of the Prince’s carelessness. As John McGowan observes, Rossetti had a sacramental poetic vision, grounded in a “logocentric symbolism,” which saw that the “physical thing always carrie[d] a symbolic meaning”; McGowan also reminds us that Dante Rossetti possessed this sensibility too, but it “torture[d] rather than sustain[ed] him” (27).

Arseneau makes the convincing case that, by the time Rossetti wrote “The Prince’s Progress,” she was quite aware that Dante Rossetti did not share in her Christian faith; this fact pained her and “The Prince’s Progress” can be read as an allegory that fleshes out the tragic consequences of living without a sacramental worldview (*Recovering* 156-62). Moreover, the poem emphasizes that the neglect of moral duty can cause pain for others too – a fact that may also be reflective of Rossetti’s hints to her brother that his attitude towards Christianity caused her suffering. D.M.R. Bentley has noted that her brother’s art, from the early 1850s onwards, reveals “shifts in spiritual orientation and spiritual practice that would eventually bring him personally and artistically to the darker regions of the universe of positive agnosticism” (“From Allegory” 86). The Prince’s laziness, his interests in personal desire at the expense of anyone or anything outside of himself, seems applicable to Christina’s view of Dante Rossetti – an association he was aware of as he playfully etched a sketch of the Prince in his own image when he was working on illustrations for his sister’s *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* (see “You Should Have Wept Her Yesterday,” 1866). Rather than reject his sister’s critique, he aestheticized it.

More generally, however, the Prince is also representative of the person who is slothful towards, and neglectful of, personal and spiritual duties. Unlike other pilgrims, such as Christian from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* who, as Joan Rees explains, does receive salvation after being purified by raging waters before he can safely arrive at the Celestial City, Rossetti’s Prince continues to lag on his journey – even after he also almost drowns and is rescued by a group of beautiful women (who distract him from his quest, rather than assist him) (Rees 59-71). Arseneau, considering this observation of Rees’s, adds that the Prince does not discern how the events of his life, of his interactions with nature and others, may bear a moral or symbolic significance, and, as a result, he is lazy in the things that have to do with fulfilling one’s conscience (*Recovering* 151-54). Unlike the Prince, however, the Princess attends to her moral duty, and the descriptions of the Princess throughout the text are expressly scriptural and bridal.⁵

While many have taken issue with the passivity of the Princess, I suggest we read her figure along the lines suggested by Arseneau: that the Prince is representative of the struggling, fallen soul and the Princess serves as a stand-

in for Christ who is “patient, long-suffering, [and] faithful” (*Recovering* 144), even if slothful Christians are not. The boredom the Princess feels throughout the poem then is transformed into a redemptive pain: her acceptance of her suffering provides a Christological lesson for the Prince, a parable for the poem’s readers. Reading the Princess as a Christ-like figure enables us to understand Rossetti’s own spirituality and ethics of “self-postponement,” a central concept of *Commonplace*—her novella which provides an implicit but sustained exploration of the various ways one may ethically or unethically respond to the inevitability of monotony and boredom in everyday life and living.

Likening the Princess to Christ, Rossetti plays with conventional gender roles, casting the Princess as the ground and source of ethical action, as being far stronger and more self-possessed than the fickle, vacillating, and “slackening” Prince (546). In her preface to *Called to be Saints*, Rossetti says fidelity and steadfastness are represented by the lily, the flower used to describe the Princess throughout the poem. The Princess’s acceptance of this trial of boredom is Christ-like – she submits to the mundane as Christ did, through his Incarnation and by living in humble obscurity for thirty out of the thirty-three years of his life.⁶

Whereas boredom in *Maude* was seen as being something of an affective, poetic pose and a symptom of spiritual scrupulosity stemming from Maude’s difficulty to cultivate a sacramental vision, boredom in “The Prince’s Progress” is generally presented as a spiritual burden to be borne, not escaped from, so that progress in the spiritual life can be achieved. If the Prince reflected upon and embraced the “barren[ness]” of boredom, as opposed to trying to escape from it, Rossetti implies that he would have learned to run his race and, as a result, would have arrived at the Castle before the Princess’s time had run out. While Rossetti works towards an ethic of Christian duty and self-renunciation in “The Prince’s Progress,” her most sustained examination of boredom is found in *Commonplace, A Tale of Today* (1870). Here Rossetti provides us with her most detailed consideration of the deficits and dividends of boredom as a mood which stems from restless desires but also, at times, from the Christian, expressly Tractarian, sense of reserve and self-denial that so characterized her own personal life at home in the small social circles she kept throughout her life.⁷

III

Written in a simple and direct style, occasionally unsettled by subtle traces of Gothic romance, *Commonplace, A Tale of To-Day; and Other Short Stories* was one of the least successful and most simply designed of Rossetti’s works.

The volume is concerned with the events and practices of everyday life and how, in Michel de Certeau's terms, they "structure" the "determining conditions of social life" (96). Rossetti says as much in a letter she sent to her publisher F.S. Ellis in which she describes the stories in *Commonplace* as examples of the genre she terms "the every-day story" (*Letters* 1:347). Given that the novella, *Commonplace, A Tale of To-day*, which lends its title to the volume as a whole, provides some of Rossetti's most sustained sketches of Victorian, middle-class women in everyday life, it is surprising that the novella has not attracted more critical attention. Ricks gives us the most extensive discussion; he argues that Rossetti invites us to consider "how uncommonplace things must always feel from within their contingencies" and, in so doing, she shows that she is "alive to the compact contrarities of the word 'commonplace'" (192). It is certainly the case that Rossetti is invested in exploring how the most ordinary and seemingly insignificant events of daily life are significant to those experiencing them. She is also "alive" to the certain quality of boredom that often attends such ordinary circumstances, underscoring the very real and difficult personal questions that unfulfilled desire, the slow passing of time (made even more pronounced by monotonous routines), and problems of financial and social stability generated for women of the lower and upper middle-classes in Victorian England.

The narrative voice governing *Commonplace, A Tale of To-day* takes no prisoners in honestly examining the ordinary experience of Victorian women who, like Maria and Christina Rossetti themselves, had to be patient and resourceful in the face of their very real material limitations. In exploring the repetitive daily rhythms and routines of women within the domestic sphere, *Commonplace* is especially concerned with – to borrow Virginia Woolf's words from *A Room of One's Own* (1929) – the "work of suffering human beings attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in" (50). *Commonplace*'s aesthetic quality is shaped and structured by an intensive fidelity to the tick-tock of the clock and largely consists of detailed descriptions of various (though often unvarying) spots of time. "Presid[ings] over the tea and coffee" (4), for instance, characterize many of the chief events in *Commonplace*. Occasionally, deaths or marriages interrupt the detailed descriptions of the Charlmont sisters' daily routines but the narrator cheekily describes such interruptions as "parenthetical" to the main narrative (19) – despite the fact that they are actually essential to the novella's plot development and for the alleviation of situational boredom.

As with *Maude*, "The Prince's Progress," and her other longer poems and prose works, *Commonplace* has a rather straightforward plot which provides a series of both subtle and more explicit commentaries on the spiritual dimensions of ordinary life and living. It addresses the struggles of a tight-knit

and complicated female community (made up of the three orphaned Charlmont sisters) to find fulfillment and stability in their lives. The oldest sister, Catherine, is described by Rossetti as a woman who, out of love for her sisters and a desire for their happiness, continually effaces and limits her own desires so as to serve her family and ensure her younger sisters' interests. The two younger sisters, Lucy and Jane, are preoccupied with marriage prospects. Lucy spends most of the novella working through the disappointment of being rejected by Alan Hartley, the first man she ever loved; by the story's close, she is, however, happily married to a more considerate man, Arthur Tresham. Jane, who is superficial and "came near to being very beautiful" (5), ends up marrying an elderly widower for his estate. Both Lucy and Jane desire marriage, not only to fulfill their romantic expectations about love but also to ensure the possibility of a change from their otherwise provincial and monotonous existences in their small, uneventful hometown – the coastal village of "Brompton-on-Sea" (3).

Opening her novella with a description of the seaside resort, Rossetti zooms in on one house that stands out slightly from the "monotonous row" of "houses all alike," as it has a "slip of front garden," hinting to passers-by that it is the only "private residence on an esplanade full of lodging houses" (4). Characterized by repetition and understatement, the description of the esplanade is in sharp contrast to the natural world which appears to be peaceful and full of life: "The air [was] keen and sunny; the sea blue and rippling, not rolling; everything green, in sight and out of sight, coming on merrily" (3). Rossetti uses words stressing similarity and homogeneity, such as "row," "alike," "symmetrical," "monotonous," "appearances," and so on, to describe everyday domestic life and culture in "Brompton-on-Sea," establishing an ambiance of routine, repetition, and isolation:

A row of houses all alike stands facing the sea – all alike so far as stucco fronts and symmetrical doors and windows could make them so: but one house in the monotonous row was worth looking at, for the sake of more numerous hyacinths and early roses in its slip of front garden, and on several of its window-sills. Judging by appearances, and for once judging rightly, this must be a private residence on an esplanade full of lodging houses. (3-4)

As the permanent inhabitants in the "monotonous row" of homes, the Charlmont sisters, especially Catherine, live a quiet and predictable existence. Rossetti portrays boredom as the mood arising from everyday conditions, like those of living, location, and routine. Rossetti's observations, as she develops plot and character throughout *Commonplace*, work to address the normal, often unexamined conditions of middle-class women on a restrictive budget stripped of any romanticism; in contrast, Jane Charlmont, who represents

excessive romantic idealism, is presented as selfish and unsympathetic.

The subduing of romantic strains is accomplished through the detailed outlining of the sisters' daily routines. The Charlmont women share in a morning breakfast (19), peruse the *Times Supplement*, and go about a series of housekeeping duties which often include a scheduled visit with their former governess, Miss Drum (a truncation of 'humdrum'), who took care of the sisters after they were orphaned (19-21). Throughout the story, Catherine, who goes by "Miss Charlmont" on all occasions (and who has donned a spinster's cap at the age of thirty) (4), spends her time serving as a chaperone for her two younger sisters so that they can engage in various social opportunities. Her care for her young sisters will assist them in making the kind of marriages they desire – Lucy marrying for love, and Jane for money. However, Catherine remains unmarried by the novella's close and it is clear throughout the narrative that her place is in the family home. Self-sacrificing and considerate, she seems bored and boring: she never changes, and her sisters are the only ones who fluctuate in their responses to events. The reasons for her commitment to remaining at the Charlmont family home are the most romantic, unconventional, and mysterious aspects of the entire novella.

The fundamental condition of Catherine's is constituted by her promise to fulfill her dying mother's wish that she will always remain living in Brompton-on-Sea in the unlikely event that the corpse of her father (who was lost at sea) might wash ashore and find a member of the Charlmont family there to receive and mourn over it. The details of this wish could easily come from a Gothic romance, and Rossetti gestures towards the strange and romantic quality of this aspect of the otherwise uneventful plot by sequestering it entirely in its own chapter, which she calls "parenthetical" (19). The narrative style employed to describe the Charlmont family background, the nature of Mrs. Charlmont's strange last wish, and Catherine's reception of this wish is by turns melodramatic and controlled – the formal and rhetorical levels of the narrative typically mirroring Catherine's submissive and dutiful character.

Mrs. Charlmont's request (which contemporary reviewers found out of place in the otherwise sensible and subdued storyline⁸) functions like a moral law binding Catherine to the boredom-inducing domestic sphere. The dramatically forceful instructions Mrs. Charlmont gives from her deathbed contrasts with the short, economic way Rossetti describes Catherine's response:

Life was almost gone, and with the approach of death a sort of consciousness had returned. Mrs. Charlmont looked hard at Catherine, who was crying bitterly, and taking her hand said distinctly: "Catherine, promise to stay here ready for your father when he comes on shore – promise some of you to stay here: don't let him come on shore and find me gone and no one – don't let the

body come on shore and find us all gone and no one promise, Catherine!” And Catherine promised. (16)

This exchange between Mrs. Charlmont and Catherine shows Rossetti’s skill at subtly yoking the melodramatic to the understated. Their conversation is not told fully – Mrs. Charlmont’s gasps and desperate pleas receive all the attention. Catherine’s response is not provided. It is only summarized: “And Catherine promised.” The use of dashes to note the pauses in Mrs. Charlmont’s speech represents the dramatic intensity of her feelings and the efforts she has to exert to make her wish known as she lies dying. This exchange between mother and oldest daughter is consistent with the Gothic quality hovering throughout chapter two: the romantic and haunting foundation for the plot (the disappearance of Mr. Charlmont and the absence of his corpse); Mrs. Charlmont’s hysteria and melancholia after her husband’s disappearance; and the association of Catherine with an unnecessary and excessive law of confinement are the plot conventions of Gothic romance (as a young girl, Rossetti devoured Anne Radcliffe’s fiction with enthusiasm). Serena Trowbridge notes that Gothic forms shifted in their shape and style throughout the nineteenth century. Specifically, the trappings of medieval castles, dungeons, and locked rooms – which spatially represented the psychological problems of melancholia, hysteria, sexual repression, insanity, or neurasthenia – diminished, but their “traces” remained, especially in the “repeated trope of the enclosed space,” aligned with the Victorian domestic sphere (48). Rossetti’s inclusion of Gothic “traces” in the simple, unassuming narrative pace and trajectory of *Commonplace* underscores at the most fundamental level Catherine’s predicament as a bored heroine left interminably waiting, like the Princess in “The Prince’s Progress.” Curiously, the most exotic aspect of the tale is inextricably connected to the steady and practical Catherine.

Confined to the “monotonous” family home, Catherine waits for the unlikely event that her father’s corpse will return. Her character is defined by waiting – which is the temporal mode of expectation, without a sign of hope or fulfillment, that Walter Benjamin says determines boredom and being bored: the bored subject is she “who waits” and “takes in the time and renders it up in altered form – that of expectation” (D3,4). Catherine is left suspended in time, expecting a future that is transformed into a hope for heaven – a hope cultivated by, and demonstrated in, Catherine’s ability to perceive the world through a sacramentalized perspective, an ability of Catherine’s that Rossetti only reveals at the novella’s end.

Rossetti never affords Catherine an opportunity, until the novella’s end, to break free from a restrictive and diminished identity that is constituted by lack and longing. This is particularly evident in the way Catherine is described in the novella’s opening:

Miss Charlmont, having entered her thirty-third year, had taken on all occasions to appearing in some sort of cap. She began the custom at thirty, when she gave up dancing and adopted lace over neck and arms in evening dress. Her manner was firm and kindly, savouring of the provinces rather than the capital.... She presided over the tea and coffee ... [and was] sure to have friends, however [she] might lack for lovers. (4-5, 6)

Older than Anne Eliot (the similarly self-postponing heroine of *Persuasion* [1818] who finds love at the belated age of twenty-seven), Catherine adopts a style and way of behaving that deliberately removes her from opportunities to change her domestic, social, and personal conditions (through marriage). Catherine's fidelity to the law of her mother, a law enforced by the haunting memory of the always-absent but potentially returning body of the father) suggests that the thirty-three-year-old Catherine, like Christ,⁹ is living a life of humble service out of filial obedience and affection. Duty is the defining factor of Catherine's life, and it shapes the novella's aesthetic: its precise diction, its implicit scoffing and managing (via its parenthesizing) of Gothic and romantic episodes, and its way of narrating Catherine's words indirectly. Repeatedly, Catherine speaks indirectly; her words are usually reported afterwards, in passing, and this way of narrating her life contributes to the image of her as humble, submissive, and continually self-abnegating. Moreover, whenever Catherine's words are repeated, she is an impoverished subject whose speech is constituted by lack – as she lives her life under the influence of the missing and the dead.

However, out of loss, death, expectation, and monotony, Catherine finds an identity relegated to the domestic sphere, but one which brings her more peace than her sisters experience through their marriages. As the story closes, Lucy says she wishes that Catherine, “too, had a future” and a husband (142). It is here, finally, that Catherine speaks directly in the story:

Catherine leaned over her happy sister and gave her one kiss, a rare sign with her of affectionate emotion. Then she turned to face the open sky and sea – “My dear,” she answered, whilst her eyes gazed beyond the clouds and waves, and rested on the narrow streak of sunlight which glowed at the horizon – “My dear, my future seems further off than yours; but I certainly have a future, and I can wait.” (142)

Here Catherine finally hints at possibilities beyond her current, limited conditions. The extended horizon that she faces as she speaks suggests a life beyond her promise, and for once, in this passage, the sea does not appear to signify the watery crypt for her father. Moreover, the delicate “streak of sunlight” seems representative of the light in Scripture which signals the presence of God the Father or of the illuminating powers of the Holy Spirit. Catherine's

spiritual hopes for eternal life (which certainly anchored Rossetti throughout the often monotonous and painful aspects of her own everyday life) are the main focus – although, in keeping with Catherine’s nature, they remain subtle and understated, as is standard in Rossetti’s devotional poetry and prose.

As in so many passages throughout *Maude*, “The Prince’s Progress,” and other of Rossetti’s works, a touch of the melodramatic, strangely blended with understatement, occurs at the close of *Commonplace*. Rossetti’s treatment of light is quietly dramatic: normally, soft beams of light fall over dying souls (especially those of dying children) in Victorian literature, as typified in the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.¹⁰ Not only is Catherine’s death subtly foreshadowed as a hopeful event but also her longing for new life, for resurrection, is expressed in a romantically picturesque way: Rossetti’s description of the sky, sea, and light is Turner-esque, as we come upon the novella’s only vivid and exquisite rendering of nature when we at last glimpse into Catherine’s imagination. While Catherine may be reminding her sister that she is bound to her dutiful obedience to her mother’s dying wish, she also implies through her choice of images that her heart is hoping for heaven; Christian devotional poetry, and especially Newman’s poetry and Dante’s *Paradiso*, so often represents heaven with depictions of the sky, unlimited horizons, and the sun.¹¹

In remaining bound to her promise, despite its monotonous consequences, Catherine is honouring the obligations of conscience and moral duty. Her spiritual perspective is reminiscent of Rossetti’s “Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets”: “The wise do send their hearts before them to / Dear blessed Heaven” (1-2). Rossetti at last has allowed Catherine an active voice at the end of the novella, an active voice speaking for herself. In *The Wound of Knowledge* (1990), Rowan Williams notes that the active voice is reserved in scripture for moments when Christ calls someone to himself or when a person seeks Christ out, longing for conversion and a change of heart; the active voice is the mode in which the lyric desires of each personal heart are expressed (103-06). Catherine’s life is far from ideal but the ways in which Rossetti explores her devotion to duty provides a striking contrast to the Prince’s “slackening” paces throughout his quest and his lack of intentionality. And unlike Maude, Catherine is better able to integrate her sense of duty within the habit and routine of everyday life. Quiet and understated about her affection for her sisters, Catherine possesses the poetic sensibility, a subtle sacramentalized vision of existence.

IV

The problem of boredom, the “hope deferred” that made Rossetti’s “heart sick” (“A Pause of Thought” 2), pervades Rossetti’s simple and unwavering

considerations of the monotonies and rare excitements that make up ordinary life. Rossetti confessed she was quite at home in her idea of “hope deferred” (Marsh 12), and her own disappointed desires and bouts of boredom (as outlined in her writings and in her letters) are powerful dysphoric conditions that she used to create a wide-ranging series of explorations of human experience, faith, and nature.

Boredom is a complex psychosomatic problem in Rossetti’s poetry and prose. It functions as a trial that the spiritually slothful find burdensome and as a sanctifying burden to be borne by patient female subjects who understand that limitations and monotony are the everyday materials through which one can access grace and hope. Through an exploration of boredom, and of its dividends and deficits, Rossetti works out a passive aesthetics and a defence of duty grounded in her embrace of the Tractarian doctrine of reserve that is summed up well in her preface to *Called to Be Saints*, wherein she stresses that the ordinary is the fundamental place from which Christ forms the heart, adding that she “think[s] the Gospel records more lessons drawn by our Master from a seed or plant than from a pearl” (249). This important thematic thread is discernible in so many of Rossetti’s works: the longing to receive the “lowest place,” which paradoxically will become the highest place in eternal life.

Inspired by Luke 14.10, Rossetti’s short lyric on humility, a part of which ended up marking her gravestone, “The Lowest Place,” came to be a resonant theme throughout her writing, one which is at the heart of the aesthetic and moral interests in *Commonplace* and “The Prince’s Progress” and which has a troubling presence in *Maude*. The opening lines of the poem show why humility and self-renunciation are both attractive and frightening to the young Rossetti in particular: “Give me the lowest place,” she prays,

not that I dare
 Ask for the lowest place, but Thou hast died
 That I might live and share
 Thy glory by Thy side.
 Give me the lowest place: or if for me
 That lowest place too high, make one more low
 Where I may sit and see
 My God and love Thee so. (1-8)

To inhabit “the lowest place” is to cultivate a habit of humility, which is achieved through kenosis, self-emptying. Jean-Charles Nault notes that the Christian devotional tradition records how such attempts to live a life of humility are often accompanied by trials of boredom, melancholia, and other affects of discontents (8-33).

Rossetti’s wrestling with boredom and a whole host of “ugly feelings,”

which are part and parcel of being-in-the-world, signals the ways in which her writing is profoundly concerned with the paradoxical tension that exists between ordinary life and art, and (more pressingly for Rossetti herself) between worldly and sacramental perceptions of everyday existence. Boredom, as frustrated desire, functions, as Adam Phillips notes, as both a dividend and deficit: it paradoxically announces to us our possibilities and limitations, the “capacity” for modes of “representation” (such as art) to both face and seek to manage our status as “desiring subject[s]” – a status which is always already pleasurable and painful (75), especially for the Victorian Christian called to embrace, to a certain degree, the kind of “self-postponement” Catherine Charlmont accepts, for better, for worse.

Notes

1. Maude’s distaste for existence resonates with Søren Kierkegaard’s discussion of boredom and the bored subject in *Either/Or, A Fragment of Life* (1843). Kierkegaard reflects on how boredom arises as the appropriate response to a sense of meaninglessness in, and weariness with, one’s personal life and in the world. This sense of meaninglessness is born from encounters with privation, with lack and longing – all descriptors that Kierkegaard, reading Augustine, argues are not only problematic and uncomfortable but consequences of “evil.” Kierkegaard explains that “boredom ... is built upon emptiness” (55). Personal, social, and cultural vacuity – often announced by certain forms of affective disappointment – are effects of original sin for Augustine and both Kierkegaard and Rossetti share conceptual sympathies with Augustine on this score.
2. For the presence of the apophatic tradition in Rossetti’s work, see Elizabeth Ludlow.
3. In his 1830 “National Apostasy” sermon, Keble warns against obsessing over “scruples” which make one “alienated from God and Christ” (*Project Canterbury*).
4. For Aquinas, acedia often manifests itself as an incessant busy-ness, an inability to rest, or as a shirking of the duties. This point becomes evident when we consider Aquinas’s treatment of acedia in *Summa Theologica*: “Sloth, according to Damascene (*De Fide Orth.* ii, 14) is an oppressive sorrow, which, to wit, so weighs upon man’s mind, that he wants to do nothing; thus acid things are also cold. Hence sloth implies a certain weariness of work, as appears from a gloss [from Augustine] on Psalm 106:18, ‘Their soul abhorred all manner of meat,’ and from the definition of some who say that sloth is a ‘sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin good’” (II, Q. 35, Art. 1).
5. Specifically, the Princess is described throughout the poem in terms that are reminiscent of the Song of Solomon. For a discussion of the uses Rossetti makes of Scripture, to explore the simultaneously bridal and Christological aspects of the Princess, see Arseneau’s chapter, “Interpreting ‘The Prince’s Progress’” (*Recovering* 140-43; 155-62).
6. Through the figure of the lazy and fickle Prince, Rossetti may also be critiquing masculine artists or aesthetes who tended to avoid the work and determination of the muscular Christian. She may be recasting the parable of the foolish Virgins (Matthew 25) in masculine terms. Shut out from the wedding feast for arriving too late (because they failed to prepare themselves for their journey), the foolish Virgins were guilty of sloth, of not attending to the duties of ordinary life with a prudent and watchful attention.
7. The Tractarian doctrine of reserve has been explored as a formative influence on Ros-

- setti's work and its role is not now viewed as a repressive restraint on her writings (see Isobel Armstrong 341). The doctrine of reserve stemmed from Isaac Williams's "On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge" (1838-40), Tract 80 and 87 for the *Tracts for the Times*. As Emma Mason notes: "The doctrine of reserve indicated that God's scriptural laws should remain hidden to all but the faithful.... Devotional poetry and biblical exegesis alike were thus meant to render religious truth through metaphor, figure and allegory in a manner only the initiated believer could understand" (198).
8. Reviews of *Commonplace* in the *Academy* and *Athenaeum* in the summer of 1870 were generally favourable, but sharp criticism came from the *Spectator*, which was against the strange promise Mrs. Charlmont extracts from Catherine: "even the most conscientious" of old maids would have found the request absolutely absurd" (qtd in Marsh 388).
 9. Catherine's story is told when she has reached the age of thirty-three, the age Christ was at his crucifixion. I am grateful to D.M.R. Bentley for pointing this out.
 10. I am grateful again to D.M.R. Bentley for mentioning this in a conversation about *Commonplace*.
 11. In Newman's poem, "Lead Kindly Light" (1833), he likens God's hidden but abiding presence to soft rays of light. "Lead Kindly Light, amid th' encircling gloom; / Lead Thou me on!" (1-2). An ardent fan of Newman's prose and poetry, Rossetti uses references to light in order to gesture towards the quiet but sustaining presence of God in her life and, with characteristic Tractarian reserve, both Newman and Rossetti prefer to treat their personal relationships with God through the use of understated and simple analogies.

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