

Being Unsituated: Christina Rossetti's Prepositions

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ABSTRACT: This essay will attend to Rossetti's poetics of place and focus on poems from different periods in her writing life, including "Italia, Io Ti Saluto!" (1865), "By the Sea", "At Home", "After Death", "Dream-Land" (1849), and "Somewhere or Other" (1866). Drawing on the insights of spatial criticism, I will consider not only the figuration of place but also the experience of place and the unplaceable that they present. Following on from Heather Dubrow's work on deictics in her study of Renaissance Lyric, I propose that attention to Rossetti's language of location, and especially to her prepositions, can help to explain the haunting sense of place expressed in her poems. I argue that a sense of dislocation was, for Rossetti, not only a psycho-spiritual condition, but also an imaginative and poetic resource.

Christina Rossetti spent most of her life in London, but there's little trace of it in her poems. A contemporary critic, Arthur Christopher Benson, thought this strange enough to remark, "it is certainly singular that one who lived out almost the whole of her life in a city so majestic, sober and inspiring as London should never bring the consciousness of streets and thoroughfares and populous murmurs into her writings." Instead, he notes, her poems have a "haunting sense of locality."ⁱ Virginia Woolf sensed this when she pointed out that although Rossetti seemed "outwardly" to have spent her "sixty-four years ... in Hallam Street and Endsleigh Gardens and Torrington Square ... in reality she dwelt in some curious region where the spirit strives towards an unseen God."ⁱⁱ Even in this "curious region," she was striving to be somewhere else: that preposition "towards" registers something fundamental about Rossetti's sense of place.

Her poems offer spaces for devotion, meditation or lament, they map out psychic territories, geographies of isolation, of longing, of suffering, but distinct geographical locations are rarely mentioned. "Birchington Churchyard" (discussed in this volume by John Regan), "The Lambs at Grasmere" and "In the Round Tower at Jhansi" are unusual in their geographical specificity.ⁱⁱⁱ She preferred un-places, mis-places or non-spaces, sometimes haunted as well as haunting: "The Convent threshold", a "Sea-side Grave", "By the water", "By the Sea", "The coast: a nightmare", "One foot in sea, and one on shore", "Dream-Land", "The Bourne", "In Ghostland". When she does emphatically locate her writing, it tends to be in time rather than space: spring, the bleak mid-winter, Whitsun Eve, Advent Sunday, "When I was dead."^{iv} Because she rarely anchors her poems in real places, they resist the kinds of cartographic analysis we find in John Barrell's study of Clare's poetic sense of place or in Julia Carson's examination of Wordsworth's poetry.^v And yet while Rossetti's poems resist mapping, they invite other kinds of spatial imagining.

In his foundational geocritical study of literary place, *Atlas of the European Novel*, Franco Morretti uses maps as analytical tools, “that dissect texts in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden.”^{vi} Doing so, he brings to notice literature’s spatial dimensions; explorations of narrative, for example, or the spread of a genre in relation to real places in the world. Central to his analysis are place names such as Bath, London, Plymouth, Norland Park, Antigua.^{vii} And yet these proper nouns are not the only markers of literature’s spatial negotiations. Rossetti’s spatial imagining is registered in the deep grammar of her writing, in prepositions, those small, often overlooked words like “by”, “at”, “where”, “to” and “from”, often used to anchor or locate the speaker in space and place and to register how spaces are encountered and experienced. In his *Oxford Modern English Grammar* (2011), Bas Aarts defines prepositions as “uninflected, usually short words which often express spatial meanings which can be literal (*in the box, near the school, on the desk*) or figurative (*in love, beyond belief, beneath contempt*). Other meanings are non-spatial and abstract, as in the phrases *for your benefit, the first of July*.”^{viii}

Morretti’s more recent experiments in distant computational reading at Stanford Literary Lab (published in *Canon/Archive*, 2017) revealed the centrality of locative prepositions in differentiating certain fictional genres: the Gothic novel isn’t just distinguished from the Jacobin novel, or Bildungsroman by key context words like “castle”, but by more frequent use of certain verb tenses, articles and locative prepositions.^{ix} This, in turn, is the result of certain “*higher order choices*”: “do you want to write a story where each and every room may be full of surprises? Then locative prepositions, articles and verbs in the past tense are bound to follow.”^x But while the perspectives offered by distant reading can be inviting and illuminating, the hidden dimensions which close reading can open up are also worth attention. In Rossetti’s poetry it’s not just the frequency of these words that’s worth noticing, but also the distinctive and complex ways in which they are employed.

It is perhaps appropriate that a poet distinguished by her reserve and reticence should make so much of prepositions, those small words which John Hollander has described as the “most private parts of speech.”^{xi} Writing in praise of Emily Dickinson’s prepositions, Hollander has suggested that they are “one of the great sources of difficulty” in her poetry.^{xii} But if they can be “quite opaque”^{xiii}, this opacity can also prove rich and rewarding. Rossetti’s prepositions, too, can be difficult and reward close reading. This essay proposes that attention to her use of prepositions illuminates Rossetti’s poetics of place, as it enriches our understanding of the ways in which poems can convey experiences of space. Doing so, it follows on from Heather Dubrow’s study of deixis in Renaissance Lyric. In *Deixis in the Early Modern English Lyric: Unsettling Spatial Anchors like “Here”, “This”, “Come”* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), Dubrow explores how a number of poets use words such as *here* and *there* in distinctive ways to gesture at and move between dimensions of space, both real and imagined. Attending to these deictic markers, and to the varying senses of distance they open up, suggests new realms of meaning and new ways of understanding Renaissance Lyric. Similarly, attending to Rossetti’s prepositions can enrich our sense of her complexity as a Lyric poet, shedding light on her metaphysical thinking, as well as offering new ways of understanding her poetics of place, and the ways in which her sense of place was shaped and negotiated. Thus, a study of her prepositions offers new possibilities: it demonstrates how close reading can make an important contribution to space studies.

Rossetti's prepositions reward attention. David Kent has noted how her changing use of the preposition "after" in "Praying Always" contributes to the poem's complex play of meaning.^{xiv} Her locative prepositions also invite scrutiny. Rossetti can move nimbly between different senses or functions of a preposition in the same poem; doing so, she unsettles the anchoring sense these words often convey. In "By the Sea", for example, written in 1858 and published in the revised 1875 edition of *Goblin Market*:

Why does the sea moan evermore?
 Shut out from heaven it makes its moan,
 It frets against the boundary shore;
 All earth's full rivers cannot fill
 The sea, that drinking thirsteth still.

Sheer miracles of loveliness
 Lie hid in its unlooked-on bed:
 Anemones, salt, passionless,
 Blow flower-like; just enough alive
 To blow and multiply and thrive.

Shells quaint with curve, or spot, or spike,
 Encrusted live things argus-eyed,
 All fair alike, yet all unlike,
 Are born without a pang, and die
 Without a pang, and so pass by.^{xv}

It is, as Anne Ferry has noted, unusual to end a poetic line, let alone a poem, with a preposition; she recalls how in his rhyming guide for poets, Bysshe cautions against ending a line with such words.^{xvi} In Rossetti's poem the final word, "by", is part of an intransitive phrasal verb, "pass by": the preposition "by" is not locative, that is to say it does not locate, rather it describes a movement away from, it is directional. OED sense 6a, for "pass by" is designated as, "On alongside of, into the vicinity of and on beyond, past. Originally the *nearness in passing* was emphasized; in later use 'by' is more frequently distinguished from 'through' ... and expresses *passing without stopping or contact*, and thus *avoidance*, *aloofness*; but often the notion is merely that of getting beyond." This open-ended sense of "beyond" works against the finality of the poem's conclusion, and the double sense of ending and resisting an end is also expressed in its rhyme with "die". The rhyme also calls up the ghosts of prepositional phrases which signify death: "pass on" or "pass away."

In this poem "by" is a key word which organises the poem's movement of thought and patterns of sound: it picks up the *i* sounds of all the rhyme words in the stanza: *spike*, *argus-eyed*, *unlike*, *die*. But it also returns to the sound of the very first word of the poem's title, "By the Sea". Here the word "by" has a different function: it is a locating or locative preposition, defined in OED as "*Of position or action near or adjacent to*.**1.** a. At the side or edge of; in the vicinity of; near, close to, beside." It is clear from the revisions she made to the poem that Rossetti wanted to emphasise this word: "By the Sea" was

originally part of a longer piece called “The Yawn”; the decision to present a shorter version with the title, “By the Sea”, draws attention to the idea of location in the poem both in terms of spatial position, beside the sea, but also in terms of the larger metaphysical question the poem raises. Rossetti was not alone in finding the coast “both a metaphor, and an occasion, for liminality.”^{xvii} British culture of the long nineteenth century became obsessed with enacting and thus revising a coastal imaginary. As Matthew Ingelby and P.M Kerr have pointed out, in the 19th century, “the coast became a place of limit-testing, but also a place that prompted renewed consideration of the limit.”^{xviii}

For Rossetti, this took shape in her own “instinctive attention to margins.” Constance W. Hassett has argued that, in Rossetti’s poetry, “the notion of physical limits easily slips over into existential metaphor.”^{xix} Lovers in her poems “find themselves doubly edged, ‘on the water’s brink/ As on the brink of parting’ ... isolation is a matter of having ‘hedged me with a thorny hedge... heaven is ‘accessible tho’ fenced.’”^{xx} This attentiveness to margins extends to her fondness for threshold spaces, and the metaphysical limits they often allow her to explore. In “By the Sea”, as we move through the poem we pass from a liminal physical location, beside the sea, to an unseen interior place deep in the sea, “hid in its unlooked on bed”, toward an unknown and barely imaginable place beyond. The poem’s spatial imagining moves from a suggestion of nearness (in the phrase “By the Sea) to the more distant sense suggested by “pass by.” The shift between these two senses of “by” also traces the poem’s conceptual movement from spatial to metaphysical imagining. Peter Macdonald is right to notice how the poem sends the reader in two directions, the literal and the figurative, by shadowing uncertainties of meaning in the effects of repetition in the verse.^{xxi} As with “moan” at the beginning of the poem, “pang” doesn’t sound quite the same twice”: nor does the preposition “by.”

Thinking about Wordsworth’s prepositions in *The Force of Poetry* (1987), Christopher Ricks remarks on the stability they bring to his poems. This is because, he argues, prepositions express “the fundamental relationships of things” and so “constitute a bedrock”. The “language of prepositions”, he claims, changes strikingly less than most”; they are “subject no doubt to change but to change of geological slowness”.^{xxii} And yet despite this diachronic stability, prepositions can convey a number of different senses at one time. If Wordsworth’s prepositions suggest stability, it may be because he does not call this multiplicity of possible meanings into play. Rossetti does, and so in her poems, as in “By the Sea”, prepositions are often more shifting than grounding. They are often adjusted to different perspectives, from one function or sense to another, so that the reader can be left with a “haunting sense of locality.” John Hollander has noted, prepositions such as *up/down, in/out, to/from, over/under*, “provide fundamental categories for the construction of tropes of lyric and romance.”^{xxiii} Rossetti’s artful play with prepositions is fundamental to her haunting poetics of place. Her prepositions often unsettle or complicate the poem’s spatial imaginings. Moving between locative and directional uses of the same preposition can unsettle the poem’s representation of place. Her prepositions point to the ways in which questions of distance and proximity can bear on wider psychological and metaphysical speculations. Attending to Rossetti’s prepositions not only allows for a richer sense of her poetics of place, it also addresses a conceptual question at the heart of spatial analysis, which considers the question of how “Being is synonymous with being situated”.^{xxiv}

ii. to, from

A sense of being in the wrong place, or being misplaced, haunts the memoir that was to become the “Preface” to *The Poetical works of Christina Rossetti*, 1904. There, Rossetti’s brother William Michael explains how at the age of 15 Christina suffered from a severe illness from which she never quite recovered. After that time she was, “compelled, if not naturally disposed, to regard this world as a “valley of the shadow of death”, and to make near acquaintance with promises, and also with threatenings, applicable to a different world.”^{xxv}

Born in London, she was the daughter of a political exile from the Kingdom of Naples and a half Italian mother. In his “Preface,” William Michael describes Christina and the other Rossetti siblings as “not a little different from British children in habit of thought and standard of association.” Baptised into the Anglican church, Christina remained a high Anglican throughout her life, although her brother William felt that her “proper place was in the Roman Catholic Church.”^{xxvi} Her poetry he described as “somewhat devious from the British tradition.”^{xxvii} The Rossettis were, according to Angela Thirlwell, “both integrated into and alien from English society.”^{xxviii}

An awkward linguistic sense of not quite belonging also characterised her Italian poems, according to one contemporary Italian critic. In a literary paper named *Il Marzocco*, Thomas Neale claimed, “It might almost be thought that the writer of those verses did not, as we know she did, speak from early childhood her paternal language”^{xxix} This sense of estrangement also extended to her expression of English according to the 19th century poet and novelist Charles Whitehead. He sensed a subtle foreign air when he heard Rossetti speaking English: “the effect produced was as though a highly educated foreigner, thoroughly acquainted with the grammar and the vocabulary of the English language, were to speak English, and continue to do so for years, although English was not his mother tongue.”^{xxx} According to Mrs. Frend, the daughter of Rossetti’s friend Anne Gilchrist, she had:

the beautiful Italian voice all the Rossettis were gifted with – a voice made up of strange, sweet inflexions, which rippled into silvery modulations in sustained conversation, making ordinary English words and phrases fall upon the ear with a soft, foreign, musical intonation, though she pronounced the words themselves with the purest of English accents.^{xxxi}

Reading her English poems, we don’t usually hear this foreign air: but at times Rossetti explores and expresses her own sense of being out of place, or feeling herself caught between places in other ways.

In “*Italia, Io Ti Saluto!*,” for example, published in *Prince’s Pageant and other Poems* (1881), Rossetti explores a sense of being between North and South, the terms she chooses to describe England, the country of her birth, and Italy, the country of her ancestors. A manuscript version of this poem does not exist but one of Rossetti’s modern editors, Simon Humphreys, guesses that it was written after she returned from a trip to Italy, in 1865^{xxxii}. A sense of in-between-ness is at first figured in the movement between languages, from the Italian title to the English language poem that follows:

To come back from the sweet South, to the North

Where I was born, bred, look to die;

Come back to do my day's work in its day,

Play out my play —

Amen, amen, say I.

To see no more the country half my own,

Nor hear the half familiar speech,

Amen, I say; I turn to that bleak North

Whence I came forth —

The South lies out of reach.

But when our swallows fly back to the South,

To the sweet South, to the sweet South,

The tears may come again into my eyes

On the old wise,

And the sweet name to my mouth.^{xxxiii}

In these lines the prepositions “from” and “to”, are doing more work than it might seem at first glance, suggesting shifting ideas of distance as well as direction, time as well as place. The word “from” can denote a place, the point of departure (OED, sense 1) but it can also suggest distance, as in OED 4. a. “Indicating a place or object which *is left at a distance* or left behind by an object which withdraws or goes away.” Similarly, the word “to” expresses both an aim or direction (OED 2, a. Expressing direction: In the direction of, towards.) and can also mean place reached or destination (OED 4) ““Expressing motion directed towards and reaching: governing a noun denoting the place, thing, or person approached and reached.” However, since the verb phrase in the first line of the poem is in the infinitive, “to come back”, it is unclear whether or not the speaker has yet returned or not, and so whether the “from” connotes distance or simply a point of departure, or whether the “to” expresses having reached the destination or simply aiming toward that place. When, in the next stanza, we reach the line, “I turn to that bleak North *from* whence I came forth/ The South lies out of

reach” (*italics mine*), it is as though she is speaking from a middle place, neither North nor South. The South is “out of reach”, but the North seems distant too because of the archaic adverb “whence” and preposition “forth”, which both introduce a sense of temporal distance which also suggest it is further away.

In the next stanza, perspective shifts again: with the swallows flying back to the south, a feeling of melancholy separation is introduced. Once again, it is not clear when this return occurs or will occur, since the verb phrase is conditional: “But when...” At this point the word “to” is repeated three times in the stanza, “to the South/ To the sweet South, to the Sweet South”, drawing attention to the onomatopoeia of the repeated “Sweet South”, where the sibilant repeated ‘s’ mimics the screech of the swallow’s song. Rossetti was an admirer of Tennyson and both the onomatopoeia and the repeated “t” sound an echo of a passage from *The Princess* in which the prince, recalling a song from his native land, remembers the swallows flying south:

‘O Swallow, Swallow, flying, flying South,
Fly to her, and fall upon her gilded eaves,
And tell her, tell her, what I tell to thee.

‘O tell her, Swallow, thou that knowest each,
That bright and fierce and fickle is the South,
And dark and true and tender is the North.’^{xxxiv}

The repeated word “tell” in the line, “tell her, tell her, what I tell to thee,” serves to “ape the treble” of the swallow’s song. Rossetti, imagining swallows flying South, not only mimics their cry, her lines also sound an echo of Tennyson’s Prince in their triple repetitions: “to the South,/To the sweet South, to the sweet South.” Doing so, she calls up that comforting sense that the North, where she herself will tend, is, in Tennyson’s words, “dark and true and tender”. In these lines a humble preposition of place, “to”, turns into a song but this is a song of longing, of longing for a place.

Such play with repetition, or “reduplicative diction”, is, as John Regan has argued in this volume, characteristic of Rossetti’s poems. Nor is it perhaps surprising that the word “to” should be significant and richly suggestive in a poem about place and migration. As well as suggesting direction and the swallow’s treble song (*to...to...to*) it also marks time. The first word of the poem, “to”, is not itself acting as a spatial preposition but serves instead as a mark of the infinitive phrasal verb, “to come back”. The function of the word “to” in the phrase “to come back” does serve to place the utterance in time: or, in this case, out of time, since in the infinitive, a mood that resists being placed in a particular time. It is only at the end of the first stanza that the voice shifts into the present tense, “I say.” This shifting between tenses makes it harder for the reader to place the speaker in place as well as in time.

In this poem, Rossetti plays with prepositions but also with the semantic possibilities of words of location. “South” appears as the first word of the last stanza, and is repeated twice in the following line, reappearing unexpectedly as a rhyme sound: it’s the only occasion that the first line of the poem finds a rhyme. The word also spreads itself across the poem’s last line, sounding out the *s* and *outh* sounds in the phrase “sweet ... to my mouth”, playfully inverting the idea of the south being in “my mouth”, so that “my mouth” comes to be contained in the sound of “south.”

Another way in which the poem’s vocabulary of location becomes expressive rather than indicative is the strange prepositional phrase “on the old wise” (l.14). The more idiomatic version of this phrase would be “in the old wise”, meaning “in the old way” (this is the gloss which the Oxford editor Simon Humphries gives in his notes to the poem)^{xxxv}. The phrase “on the old wise” is archaic, like “in the old wise”, but also unidiomatic. Rossetti’s preposition is marked and strange, “on” instead of “in”. The result is a slightly foreign sounding phrase, an effect we might expect in a poem with an Italian title; this is an example of that deliberately unidiomatic use of language Matthew Reynolds has called “translationese.”^{xxxvi} We experience in this slight linguistic estrangement a distance which suggests geographical displacement.

iii. *At, on, through*

An early poem, “At Home”, written in June 1858, and first published in 1862, in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, describes another kind of displacement. It opens disconcertingly:

When I was dead, my spirit turned

To seek the much frequented house.^{xxxvii}

After the comforting associations of its title “At Home”, the phrase “when I was dead” is all the more unsettling. Like a strange inversion of Tennyson’s grieving speaker in *In Memoriam A.H.H.* returning to familiar doors and places, all the more poignant for their associations with his dead friend, Rossetti’s dead speaker herself returns to the home where living friends are “Feasting beneath green orange boughs” (l.4), laughing, planning their futures, while the speaker shivers, “all forgotten” (l.27). She returns, as a ghost, to her old home, only to find that she does not belong. Rossetti’s narrative puts pressure on the preposition in the poem’s title. “At” can serve both as a prepositional phrase, “at home” meaning comfortable, or as an indicator of place. It can also be an idiomatic term for a gathering of friends, an “at home”, sometimes spelled “at-home” (OED 1). The title raises the

question who is at home, and who or what is the poem's subject: it could be the friends, having an "at home" from which the speaker is excluded (because she is dead/ a ghost); it could be the speaker herself, returning to her old house, so literally back "at home". But the poem also plays with the poignant irony of the speaker not being "at home", that is in the sense of comfortable, at ease, because she does not belong. The poem ends, "I passed from that familiar room" (l.29): passes *from* there, but to where? It is left uncertain.

Rossetti explores the spatial location of voice, its uncertain place, in a number of poems. This interest was part of a wider 19th century fascination with the relation between voices and print, voice and page. But whereas the dramatic monologue places voices in a realised dramatic situation, Rossetti's lyric voices often speak from somewhere less certain. Doing so they invite speculation about the location of the voice: in the room or from elsewhere, from heaven or hovering as a ghost, from South or North. If, as Steve Connor has suggested, the voice "is not merely orientated in space", but "provides the dynamic grammar of orientation,"^{xxxviii} in Rossetti's poems voices are harder to locate. And this sense of disorientation is often expressed or explored in the poem's prepositions.

We find this in "After death", a sonnet written in 1849 and published in the *Goblin Market* volume (1862). The poem is written in the voice and from the perspective of the dead woman, looking down at her own body on its deathbed, as it is mourned:

The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept
 And strewn with rushes, rosemary and may
 Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay,
 Where thro' the lattice ivy-shadows crept.
 He leaned above me, thinking that I slept
 And could not hear him; but I heard him say:
 "Poor child, poor child:" and as he turned away
 Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.
 He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold
 That hid my face, or take my hand in his,
 Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:
 He did not love me living; but once dead
 He pitied me; and very sweet it is
 To know he still is warm tho' I am cold.^{xxxix}

The emphatic use of those locative prepositions “on” and “upon” to describe the bed and the location of the speaker’s body in the room draws attention to the dislocation of body and the speaking voice: from where does it speak? The shift from those locative prepositions “upon” and “on” to the more abstract directional preposition “through” in the next line to describe the shadows creeping in “through” the window, introduces a change from the physical and certain to the strange and ghostly. The poem explores liminal space and time in and through its prepositional complexity.

Rossetti was drawn to liminal places because they were thresholds to somewhere else; often, to places beyond this world. Her poem “Dream-Land” explores such a place. It was first published in *The Germ* in 1849 and then republished in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862). The poem begins:

Where sunless rivers weep
 Their waves into the deep,
 She sleeps a charmed sleep:
 Awake her not.
 Led by a single star,
 She came from very far
 To seek where shadows are
 Her pleasant lot.^{x1}

“Dreamland” was new to the 19th century; that is to say, the word’s first usage is cited in OED as 1826, “The place seen or visited in dreams, and existing only in the imagination; the world of dreams; (hence) sleep” (sense 1) and another related sense in 1832, “2. An imagined place or state of existence, *esp.* one that is unrealistically ideal; (also) a state of fantasy” (1832). Rossetti takes this concept of dreamland and transforms it into something new. Her Dream-land is located in a particular time, the time between death and the Resurrection. A devout Tractarian, she believed in the doctrine of Soul Sleep, the idea that the soul would sleep after burial and dream of heaven, before being woken on the Day of Judgement. Soul Sleep is usually understood in terms of time: it is a “waiting time” between the death and the reunion of the soul and body on the Last Day in which the soul is in a suspended state.

That experience of long waiting is realised in her stanza, with its sections of triple rhyme divided by a rhyme which is not resolved for four lines (*aaabcccb*). In Rossetti’s poem, the contrast between the easy gratification of the successive rhymes intensifies the sense of anticipation between the fourth line and its concluding rhyme in the eight line. The stanza shape recalls Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott”, a poem which offers four rhyming lines before the dividing line (*aaaabcccb*). In part this suspension of the middle rhyme

contributes to the “*suggestive indefiniteness of meaning*, with the view of bringing about a definiteness of vague and therefore spiritual *effect*” which Edgar Allan Poe noted as a feature of Tennyson’s poem.^{xlii} Rossetti’s “Dream-Land” creates a “suggestive indefiniteness of meaning” in part through its unsettled language of place.

The word “lot”, for example (l.8): a “lot” had a specific geographical sense current in the 19c., designated in OED: [III.] Sense 10 as “A plot of land. orig. and chiefly *N. American* — Sense 11 is also “ Chiefly *N. Amer.* and *Austral.* Each of the plots or portions into which a tract of land is divided when offered for sale”. Sense 12, too, is associated with the New World— its first usage was 1789. 12. orig. and chiefly *N. Amer.* A small enclosure, usually adjoining a farm building, in which domestic animals or livestock are turned out to graze. But the word also has a dominant temporal meaning, and, specifically, a Biblical sense given in OED 6.a. “A person’s destiny, fortune, or situation in life (originally viewed as having been allotted by fate or divine providence).” It’s an arresting word to use here, a word which associates place both with Biblical ideas of destiny and also with distant realms, new worlds.

Prepositions of place often suggest more than one sense in “Dream-Land”, adding to its “suggestive indefiniteness of meaning.” For example, “for” in the phrase, “for twilight cold and lorn” (l.11), suggests both purpose and destination, where “twilight” could be a place defined or described in terms of time, between day and night, a metaphorical or metaphysical destination or condition, or all of these at once. In *The Invention of Evening: Perception and Time in Romantic Poetry* (2006) Christopher Miller has explored the Romantic fascination with evening and shown that evening settings enabled poets to represent the passage of time and associate it with movements of thought and perception. In “Dream-Land”, Rossetti is interested in figuring the spatial equivalent of twilight, a place that’s between worlds. This liminality is also expressed linguistically, in the ambiguity of her prepositions.

The preposition “thro”, for example, repeated in the line “thro’ sleep, as thro’ a veil” is called up in two senses that we are asked to see as equivalent: the first, in the phrase “thro’ sleep,” is temporal (OED II. “With reference to time, and in other extended uses”, but in particular II. 10 b. “With reference to an intervening or intermediate stage or condition which is gone past in a process or course of action”). In the phrase “as thro’ a veil”, however, the preposition has a spatial function, designated in OED I, 1.a. as “From one end, side, or surface of (something) to another.” This analogy suggests that sleep is like a veil, and that passing through time is like passing through the veil. So passing through time, or duration, is likened to passing through space. This is, in turn, analogous to the way the poem imagines passing through a particular time, soul sleep, as passing through an imagined place, Dream-land.

The third stanza locates the dead woman, the poem’s “she”, in terms of space and time once again: “Her face is toward the west,/ The purple land” (ll.19-20). Here the preposition “toward” is directional, pointing to somewhere distant rather than expressing the subject’s current location. Her face is “toward the west”, a place which also has a temporal meaning: it is the direction in which the sun sets in the northern hemisphere, associated with the end of the day, with finality. She will rest in this place, “till time shall cease, and “joy shall overtake/Her perfect peace.” Very few of the poem’s spatial prepositions are locative, that is to say very few locate in particular space: more often they are directional: “toward” (l.19), “from” (l.6), “for” (l.11), “thro” (l.13), “over” (l.18). This pattern emphasises, by contrast, the shift to locative prepositions we find towards the end of the poem:

She cannot see the grain
 Ripening on hill and plain;
 She cannot feel the rain
 Upon her hand.

Rest, rest, for evermore
 Upon a mossy shore;
 Rest, rest at the heart's core
 Till time shall cease:

(ll. 21-28)

The first two prepositions here, “on” and “upon” suggest direct contact, and yet this is contact which the subject of the poem is unconscious of: she “cannot see” it, nor can she “feel” it. But then the prepositions settle into place, as the speaker urges the lady to rest “Upon a mossy shore” and “at the heart’s core”. She moves from liminal place, “mossy shore” to an internal space, “the heart’s core”. And yet there is something curious about the choice of preposition and something uncertain about the sense of place it describes: the word “at” collocates with “heart” more usually in the figurative expression “sick at heart”. Here it is used to spatially locate, where we might more usually expect the preposition “in”, as in, “in the heart’s core”. The word “in” gives the heart dimension, but does not necessarily suggest place. OED distinguishes between “at” and “in or on” in the following way: OED, 5: “At, as distinguished from in or on” in being “sometimes used to express some practical connection with a place, as distinguished from mere local position: cf. in school, at school; in or on the sea, at sea; in prison, at the hotel.” So “at”, in this phrase, has a less purely locating function than “in” would have, it is not a “mere local position”. That is to say the preposition “at” unsettles the sense of the heart as simply a *place* of rest and suggests, instead, a mood or condition. So even in the poem’s last preposition, the particular usage pulls away from a purely local sense and suggests a more complex relation. It is fitting, perhaps, that the poem’s spatial prepositions don’t simply *locate* dreamland. Instead, they gather to themselves and express a “suggestive indefiniteness” which is, paradoxically, a defining feature of Dream-land.

A sense of uncertainty about place is the central concern of Rossetti’s short poem “Somewhere or Other”, written in October 1863 and published in *The Prince’s Progress* (1866). The poem dramatizes this sense of uncertainty, as the speaker asks where her destined lover can be. Part of the poem’s unsettling dynamic is the way it shifts its focus between near and far. Once again prepositions are at play:

Somewhere or other there must surely be
 The face not seen, the voice not heard,
 The heart that not yet — never yet — ah me!
 Made answer to my word.

Somewhere or other, may be near or far;
 Past land and sea, clean out of sight;
 Beyond the wandering moon, beyond the star
 That tracks her night by night.

Somewhere or other, may be far or near;
 With just a wall, a hedge, between;
 With just the last leaves of the dying year
 Fallen on a turf grown green.^{xliii}

The poem was originally entitled “A Prospective Meeting”, but was, on publication, given the title “Somewhere or Other”, introducing what Constance Hassett calls a “purposeful haziness.”^{xliii} But it also changes the emphasis of the poem from interaction or meeting to a location, from event to place. This poem is challenging in its deliberate lack of specificity and speculative openness. The initial comfort of the casual idiom “somewhere or other” soon becomes discomfiting and turns to searching and longing for her imagined lover, caught in the plangent tone of “ah me!” In its imaginative search for her destined lover the poem expands its focus “beyond” land and sea, “out of sight”, “beyond the moon”, and after this sense of expansion, the sudden contraction of space, from far to near, from abstract to particular is abrupt and unsettling: “a wall, a hedge between”. That preposition “between” itself hedges between spatial and figurative sense, OED 17. fig., “to be, come, stand between a person and any object desired”. The poem’s final spatial preposition, “on”, carries a weight of certainty: it is unambiguously locating, and it is a locative preposition, in contrast to the more abstract sense of space suggested by the directional prepositions “near” and “far”, “past”, “beyond” and the figurative prepositional phrase “out of sight”. Here in the final line the preposition “on” is more definite and so carries force: the “last leaves of the dying year” have fallen “on a turf grown green.” This is the turf of a grave, grown green again after the disruption of burial. In this brief line, the speaker expresses her fear that she will never meet her destined lover because he will die first.

The finality of “turf grown green”, with its emphatic triple stress, is deeply unsettling. Rossetti’s imagination expands, seeks, searches “somewhere or other” and concludes in a specific, small, confined location, “on a turf grown green”, the grave. Elsewhere, Rossetti liked to imagine death as a place, comforting in its abstraction: “the beautiful land”; “the shadowy land,” “a foreign land”, “a land of rest”, “the land of love”, “the land of no more night”, “the harvest land of love”, “the land of light”, “that sunny land.” But here it is figured in particular and narrow terms, and this final sense of physical intimacy brings with it a sense of poignant loss.

But even as the poem’s focus narrows in the last line, its rhythm resists a sense of contraction: the extra stress works against the narrowing of focus and the sense of closure it suggests. The final word “green”, too, offers hope and a sense of the possibility of life beyond and after death. Green, the colour of life, of growth, the colour associated with Spring and birth. Rossetti did not believe that the grave would be the soul’s final resting place.

The poem’s prepositions chart a move from remote to local, from space to place, where, “‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’”^{xliv} But in the end the metaphorical possibility of its language, of “green”, and the life beyond it suggests, allows for a sense of hope that is abstract and remote, but nonetheless consoling.

The place and places that mattered most to Rossetti were spiritual. These spiritual realms, notably heaven, as Heather Dubrow has pointed out, are “too often neglected by theorists of space and place.”^{xlv} Dubrow is right to claim that space studies would benefit from attending to such places, and could be enriched, too, by the perspectives and methods of new formalism. Such attention opens up new avenues of enquiry and areas of understanding for the study of Rossetti’s poetry. It sheds light too on the ways in which she negotiates her own, often conflicted, sense of place.

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ⁱ Arthur Christopher Benson, “Christina Rossetti”, *The National Review*, 26 February 1895, pp.753-63, p.753.

ⁱⁱ Virginia Woolf. 1967 (1930). “I am Christina Rossetti”, *Collected Essays*, vol.4. ed. Andrew McNeillie, pp. 54-60, p.55. London: Hogarth Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this Rossetti was distinct from many of her contemporaries. Tennyson, for example, whom she admired, often emphatically grounds his poems in the titles he gave: “Mariana in the South”, “Locksley Hall”, “Audley Court”, “In the Valley of Caunteretz”, “In the Garden at Swainston”, to name a few, and if his poems aren’t located in the titles, then they are soon situated geographically in the body of the poem: for example, “Oenone” begins “There lies a vale in Ida”; “Maud” opens with the line “I hate the dreadful hollow *behind the little wood*”.

^{iv} The opening words of her early poem “At Home”. Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, ed. R.W. Crump, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001, p.22. All future references to Christina Rossetti’s poems will be to this edition and given in the form *Complete Poems*, page number.

^v John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); Julia S. Carson, “Topographical Measures: Wordsworth’s and Crosthwaite’s Lines on the Lake District.” *Romanticism* 16, no. 1, pp. 72-93.

^{vi} Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800-1900* (London, Verso: 1998), p.3

^{vii} Moretti, 1998, ch. 1, “The novel, the nation state”, pp. 11-70. For a recent discussion of the significance of naming in contemporary poetry, see Neil Alexander and David Cooper, “Introduction”, *Poetry and Geography. Space & Place in Post-War Poetry*, ed. Neil Alexander and David Cooper (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013) pp.1-18, pp.8-9. They argue that “the poetic naming of a place ... opens up imaginative space for meditating on the interpenetrations of geography, selfhood and collective identity” (p.8).

^{viii} Aarts, 2011:74. Lowth, 1762: 91-92. We also find this expressed more recently in *The Cambridge Grammar of the English language* by Huddleston and Pullum. In their view, prepositions can be generally defined as “a relatively closed grammatically distinct class of words whose most central members characteristically express spatial relations or serve to mark various syntactic functions and semantic roles” (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002: 603).

^{ix} Franco Moretti, Sarah Allison, Ryan Heuser, Matthew Jockers, Michael Witmore, “Quantitative Formalism. An Experiment”, Franco Moretti, ed., *Canon/Archive. Studies in Quantitative Formalism from the Stanford Literary Lab*, Stanford, n+1 foundation, 2017, “Quantitative Formalism. An Experiment”, pp. 1-31 p.7.

^x *Ibid.*, Moretti, 2017, p. 31.

^{xi} John Hollander, “Of of: the poetics of a preposition”, *The Work of Poetry*, Columbia: New York, 1997, pp.96-112, p.96.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, Hollander, p.97.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, Hollander, p.97.

^{xiv} “Sequence and Meaning in Christina Rossetti’s Verses (1893), *Victorian Poetry*, 1 October 1979, vol. 17 (3), pp.259-264.

^{xv} *Complete Poems*, p. 185.

^{xvi} Anne Ferry, *By Design. Intention in Poetry*, Stanford University Press: Stanford, California, 2008, p.19.

^{xvii} Matthew Ingleby and Matthew P.M. Kerr, “Introduction”, in Matthew Ingleby and Matthew P.M. Kerr (eds.), *Coastal Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century*, (forthcoming, Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 1-28, p. 3.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, Ingleby and Kerr, 2018, p.2.

^{xix} Constance W. Hassett, “Christina Rossetti and the Poetry of Reticence”, *Philological Quarterly*; Fall 1986; 65, 4, pp.495-514, 497.

^{xx} *ibid.*, Hassett, 1986, p. 497.

^{xxi} Peter Macdonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, p.229.

^{xxii} Christopher Ricks, William Wordsworth 2: ‘A sinking inward into ourselves from thought to thought’, *The Force of Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp.117-14, p. 121.

^{xxiii} “Of *of*: the poetics of a preposition”, *The Work of Poetry*, Columbia: New York, 1997, pp.96-112, p.97.

^{xxiv} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Colin Smith, London and New York: Routledge, 1962, p.294.

^{xxv} *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti. With Memoir, Notes &c by William Michael Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti, London, Macmillan and Company, 1904, “Preface”, l.

^{xxvi} “Preface”, 1904, lv.

^{xxvii} “Preface”, 1904, xlvi

^{xxviii} Angela Thirlwell, “William Michael and Lucy Rossetti: Outsider Insiders – The True Cosmopolitans”, *Outsiders Looking In. The Rossettis Then and Now*, ed. David Clifford and Laurence Roussillon, Anthem: Wimbledon, 2004, pp.29-48, p.29.

^{xxix} “Th. Neal”, cited in “Preface”, 1904, vi.

^{xxx} Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti. A Biographical and Critical Study*, 1898, London: Hurst and Blackett, p.137.

^{xxxi} Grace Gilchrist Frennd recalling her first meeting with Christina Rossetti in “Christina Rossetti”, *Good Words*, December 1896. Cited in Mackenzie Bell, 1898, pp. 38-39.

^{xxxii} Simon Humphries (ed.), *Christina Rossetti. Poems and Prose*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 461, note to p. 216.

^{xxxiii} *Complete Poems*, pp.282-3.

^{xxxiv} Tennyson, "The Princess", ll. 75-80, in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks, London: Longmans, 1969.

^{xxxv} *Christina Rossetti. Poems and Prose*, 2008, p. 461, note to p. 216, l.14.

^{xxxvi} Matthew Reynolds, "Browning and Translationese", *Essays in Criticism*, 2003, Volume 53, Issue 2, 1 April 2003, pp. 97–128.

^{xxxvii} *Complete Poems*, p.22.

^{xxxviii} Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 5.

^{xxxix} *Complete Poems*, pp.31-32.

^{xl} *Complete Poems*, p.21.

^{xli} Edgar Allen Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, ed. Ames J. Harrison, 17 vols., 1902, New York: AMS Press, 1965, XIV, 28.

^{xlii} *Complete Poems*, p. 155.

^{xliii} Constance W. Hassett, 1986, p.498.

^{xliv} Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*, 1977, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p.6.

^{xlv} Dubrow, 2014, p.12.