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## **‘What Happens, or Rather Doesn’t Happen’: Death and Possibility in Alice James and Christina Rossetti**

By Erika Kvistad

### **Abstract**

The idea of the dying Victorian woman as passive victim or object of desire has justly received critical attention, but this has meant a comparative neglect of the dying Victorian woman as an active, speaking, writing subject. In response, this article focuses on the death writing of Alice James and Christina Rossetti, reading the central role of death in their work as a way of articulating a space of possibility beyond what life has to offer. In Rossetti’s death poetry and James’s *Diary*, death is what gives form to the text, and represents the possibility for the text and its speaker to be read and understood. The article reads James and Rossetti’s death writing as neither definitively conforming to or subverting social norms about the links between death and femininity. It suggests, however, that reading these death explorations in terms of ventures into a promising unknown creates a more complex conception of the role of women as active participants in as well as victims of Victorian death culture, and of the strategies available to women writers facing the problem of an existence that could itself seem deathlike.

*Keywords:* Christina Rossetti, Alice James, death writing, nineteenth century, Victorian death culture, femininity

“Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”  
Romans 7:24, King James Version

### **Introduction: Deathly femininity and death exploration**

Victorian culture is full of images of women made more beautiful and more perfectly feminine by death. The serene face of the ‘Inconnue de la Seine’, purported to be the death mask of a drowned young woman, hung in thousands of homes; according to A. Alvarez it was considered an aspirational ideal of beauty.<sup>1</sup> In *Woman in American Society*, Abba Goold Woolson described the feminine ideal of her time as something between an invalid, a corpse and a ghost, ‘with her sunken cheeks, lost colour and wasted smiles...like some heart-sick wraith’.<sup>2</sup> Earlier in the century Elizabeth Siddal’s image became famous as Millais’s near-drowned Ophelia (1852), while Thomas Hood’s hugely popular poem ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ admired the effect of death on a young woman, suggesting that dying has erased her sins and made her lovable and pitiable: ‘Death has

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<sup>1</sup> A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, 1971 (New York: Norton, 1990), p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> Abba Goold Woolson, *Woman in American Society*, 1873, The Gerritsen Collection. <<http://gerritsen.chadwyck.com>>, pp. 191-192. Woolson contrasts the deathly ‘belles’ of American society to the less elegant, but livelier ‘efficient wives and mothers’ of England (188), but in *Suffer and be Still: Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972) Martha Vicinus suggests that by the late nineteenth century the feminine ideal of the active ‘perfect wife’ had given way to the ideal of the passive ‘perfect lady’, even in English society (ix).

left on her / Only the beautiful'.<sup>3</sup> In the same era, Alice James and Christina Rossetti wrote works that fit into this tradition of the conjunction of death and femininity, but that also reveal something very different. Rather than showing the dying woman as the aestheticised, objectified other, their writing imagines and approaches death from the position of the subject.

Influential writers like Elisabeth Bronfen and Bram Dijkstra have justly paid critical attention to the dying Victorian woman as passive victim or object of desire, but this has meant a comparative neglect of the dying Victorian woman as an active, speaking, writing subject. In response, this article reads the central role of death in the work of Alice James and Christina Rossetti as a way of articulating a space of possibility beyond what life has to offer. In their work, death is what gives form to the text, but it also represents the possibility for the text and its speaker to be read and understood.

Rather than assume, as Dijkstra does in his comment on James's diary in *Idols of Perversity*, that 'she could not overcome her environment...the realm of what she called "my suffocation" came to seem to her "the natural one"', I will discuss what the imaginative exploration of death offered James and Rossetti, both as writers and as women preparing to die.<sup>4</sup> A decision to imagine death in terms of possibility can, of course, be seen as in some ways not a choice at all, but an attempt to come to terms with a lack of possibility within life itself. James's and Rossetti's explorations of death shift between ecstasy and despair, and to read them definitively as conforming to or subverting social norms about the links between death and femininity would be reductive: both modes are present in the texts. But acting in a way that is informed and affected by a power structure outside oneself does not in itself mean acting without agency. While the cultural context in which James and Rossetti wrote linked women and death in ways that may have damaged and curtailed their sense of power, they approached death as writing subjects.

### **'Peg[ging] away pretty hard': Dying as art and profession**

Alice James died in 1892, Christina Rossetti two years later, and both left behind bodies of work in which imagining death plays a central role. Anne Jamison points out the wealth of death-poems in Rossetti's first collection of poems, published when she was only 30,<sup>5</sup> and James's diary represents a woman so fascinated with her own process of dying that Ruth Yeazell entitled an edition of her letters *The Death and Letters of Alice James*.<sup>6</sup> 'I think that if I get into the habit of writing a bit about what happens, or rather doesn't happen, I may lose a little of the sense of loneliness and desolation which abides with me,' writes James in her first diary entry, three years before her death. Her diary, like Rossetti's death poetry, is shaped by a sense of death as 'what happens, or rather doesn't happen' in the text. Paradoxically – as James half-acknowledges in a letter to her brother William where she calls death 'the most supremely interesting moment in life, the only

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<sup>3</sup>Thomas Hood, "The Bridge of Sighs", 1844, Bartleby.com, <<http://www.bartleby.com/101/654.html>>, lines 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup>Anne Jamison, 'Passing Strange: Christina Rossetti's Unusual Dead', *Textual Practice*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 2006, pp. 257-280, p. 258.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth Yeazell, *The Death and Letters of Alice James* (Cambridge: Exact Change, 2004).

one in fact when living seems life'<sup>7</sup> – Rossetti and James treat death as both the only event in the text and the one thing they can never actually bear witness to in writing, the defining plot element that always lies just outside the plot. The Alice James who speaks in her diary, and the subjects and speakers of Rossetti's death poems ('After Death', 'Song (When I am Dead, My Dearest)', 'Rest', and many others), are both finished and unfinished. Death becomes the anticipated event that will give their lives form and meaning, though this shaping principle remains itself obscure and unknowable.

The two bodies of work take very different forms. Rossetti imagines death through poems about imagined, constructed speakers who may or may not stand for Rossetti herself; James imagines it through autobiographical prose about real deaths, sometimes others' – she frequently notes news accounts of suicides – but more often her own. They construe the confessional and the artistic as almost mutually exclusive and place themselves on opposite sides of the divide, but for both writers the approach to death tends to unsettle these categories, rendering the artistic personal and the personal artistic.

In a preface to a collection of Rossetti's poems, her brother William Michael Rossetti suggests that she wrote because 'something impelled her feelings', an idea that Rossetti herself carefully resisted.<sup>8</sup> Still, her response to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's concern about the potential impropriety of some of her poetical themes suggests an ambiguity in her wariness of confessional writing. On the subject of a poem written from the point of view of an illegitimate child, she says,

...whilst it may be truly urged that unless white could be black and Heaven Hell my experience (thank God) precludes me from hers, I yet don't see why 'the Poet Mind' should be less able to construct her from its own inner consciousness than a hundred other unknown quantities.<sup>9</sup>

This both asserts Rossetti's status as artist, possessed of 'the Poet Mind', and hints at the permeable and flexible quality of that mind, undercutting the certainty of 'unless white could be black and Heaven Hell'. By portraying her subjects as pure constructs of her imagination, she creates, rather than disavows, an intimate connection between her 'own inner consciousness' and its artistic products. This intimacy is nowhere more apparent than in the death poems. Rossetti may be precluded from the experience of being an illegitimate child or a fallen woman, but the experience of death is one she will at some point share with her speakers. In writing their deaths, she necessarily imagines her own. When Rossetti confronts imagined death with real death in Sonnet 27 from 'Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets', it is as if the poet is being confronted with the mortal human: 'I have dreamed of Death: – what will it be to die / Not in a dream, but in the literal truth...?' (lines 1-4).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Alice James, *The Diary of Alice James*, ed. Leon Edel (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1964), pp. 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Margaret Reynolds, 'Speaking Un-likeness: The Double Text in Christina Rossetti's "After Death" and "Remember"', *Textual Practice*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1999, pp. 25-41, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Janet Camp Troxell, *Three Rossettis: Unpublished Letters To and From Dante Gabriel, Christina, William* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> Christina Rossetti, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Rebecca W. Crump (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State

Conversely, Alice James's first diary entry clearly signals her intent to pursue pure emotional self-expression, even down to the erratic punctuation that makes the last sentence sound already breathlessly relieved: 'I shall at least have it all my own way and it may bring relief as an outlet to that geyser of emotions, sensations, speculations and reflections which ferments perpetually within my poor old carcass for its sins; so here goes, my first Journal!' (25). Her diary was her only sustained piece of writing, and seems to have been viewed as a worthwhile pursuit by her friends and family. 'Was ever a diary...so honoured in its own country before?' asked James (56), and her brother Henry described it after her death as 'a new claim for the family renown'.<sup>11</sup> But no one, least of all James herself, seems to have thought of its author as an artist. James, in fact, tends to define herself as specifically *not* an artist, as in the entry where her nurse asks her whether she should like to be one. 'Imagine the joy and despair of it!' James writes, 'the joy of seeing with the trained eye and the despair of *doing* it' (31). The editor of the diary, Leon Edel, describes her as the 'invalid sister of the psychologist William and of the novelist Henry' (James, *Diary* v). This seems to suggest that invalidism was her profession as much as psychology was William's and writing was Henry's – a not unreasonable idea with regard to James, although it oversimplifies the troubled relation between illness and productivity in the diary. It was, at any rate, central to her status as a lifelong invalid that she should be incapable of 'doing': the diary is imagined as a record of incapacity rather than a proof of capacity.

But as in Rossetti's case, the approach to death blurs the lines between unmediated 'emotions, sensations, speculations and reflections' and structured, deliberate art. This is particularly the case because James is so curiously professional about the process of dying. Critical readings of James tend to describe death as her life's work: Elizabeth Duquette calls it 'her greatest work of self-realization' (722), Elisabeth Bronfen calls it 'the vocation she chose';<sup>12</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, with shades of the theatrical as well as the psychosomatic,<sup>13</sup> refers to 'Alice James, who produced an illness while her brothers did the writing'.<sup>14</sup> Most counter intuitively of all, James herself describes her invalidism, her lifelong stillness and inactivity, as the result of violent effort: 'Owing to muscular circumstances my youth was not of the most ardent, but I had to peg away pretty hard between 12 and 24, "killing myself" as some-one calls it – absorbing into the bone that the better part...is to possess one's soul in silence' (95). Choosing, or having chosen for her, the 'better part' entails taking on the long, hard task of self-destruction. The reference is to Luke 10:42, which contrasts Martha's busy activity with her sister

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University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Elizabeth Duquette, "'A New Claim for the Family Renown": Alice James and the Picturesque', *ELH*, Vol. 72, No. 3, Fall 2005, pp. 717-745, p. 717.

<sup>12</sup>Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 384.

<sup>13</sup>The word 'psychosomatic' is here used in the non-specialist sense, to describe an illness caused or aggravated by psychological factors. As Monica Greco points out in *Illness as a Work of Thought: A Foucauldian Perspective on Psychosomatics* (London: Routledge, 1998), this usage can have negative connotations: 'the word conveys associations of deception or self-deception; or it conveys that one has failed to "get oneself together" in managing the situations of one's life' (pp. 1-2). These associations are always a risk in describing James's condition, but it is possible to describe her as producing an illness in the sense of administering, presenting or "staging" it, without suggesting that she is herself responsible for it.

<sup>14</sup>Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. vii.

Mary's contemplative stillness: 'But one thing is needful: and Mary has chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her'. With an irony that does not preclude investment in the idea, James presents her illness as contiguous with feminine virtue, while also implying that it is a last resort, the one option that 'shall not be taken away from her'. A few months before her death she compares it to Henry's and William's publications as a contribution to the family's achievements: 'not a bad show for one family! Especially if I get myself dead, the hardest job of all' (211). Her euphoric response to being diagnosed with breast cancer in May 1891 – 'To him who waits, all things come!' (206) – seems to relate to a new sense of herself as artistically productive. In preparing for death, she anticipates success at her life's task and becomes both the subject and the creator of art: 'My aspirations may have been eccentric, but I cannot complain now, that they have not been brilliantly fulfilled...one becomes suddenly picturesque to oneself' (206-208).

### **The 'most poetical topic': Transgression and convention in death writing**

Any attempt to discuss the centrality of death in Rossetti's and James's work as a source of meaning and productivity must recognise that this centrality is problematic in itself. A passage on madness by Marta Caminero-Santangelo could equally be applied as a cautionary note to a feminist reading of death explorations: 'In order to use madness as a metaphor for the liberatory potentials of language, feminist critics must utterly unmoor it from its associations with mental illness as understood and constructed by discourses and practices both medical and popular'.<sup>15</sup> She adds, citing Susan Bordo's work on 'pathologies of female "protest"', that 'female maladies such as hysteria and anorexia "actually function as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produced them"' (3). If 'the symbolic resolution of the madwoman as an alternative to patriarchy ultimately traps the woman in silence' (4), death as another alternative requires, at the very least, some questioning. James sometimes suggests that her process of dying has elements of a knowing, jarring parody of a passive feminine ideal: 'How thankful I am that I never struggled to be of those "who are not as others are", but that I discovered at the earliest moment that my talents lay in being *more so*' (75). But there is also a sense in which this process was conditioned by and 'as if in collusion with' cultural images of refined female suffering and fading. James is wryly aware of the ways in which she falls short of this image, wishing she was able to use 'robust and sustaining expletives' (66), and expressing irritation that rather than wasting away she is 'taking onto [herself] gross fat' (142). However, she never actually rejects the image's validity. In the same way, Margaret Reynolds notes that Rossetti's work can be (and has been) interpreted as representing, rather than disrupting, 'a particular nineteenth-century feminine which makes lyrical utterance into autobiography [and] death, especially her own death, into the "most poetical topic" for a woman poet' (26).<sup>16</sup> The conventional association between death and femininity meant that for a woman, writing about death was not necessarily

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<sup>15</sup>Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity is Not Subversive* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> As an instance of death writing read as an appropriately feminine mode, Jamison cites the early nineteenth-century death poetry of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Elizabeth Landon, which enjoyed 'tremendous commercial success' and was, in particular, seen as 'appropriately sentimental' for school-girls and young women (271).

transgressive – in fact, it could be the safest topic of all. ‘A woman might die,’ Anne Jamison remarks on the subject of Rossetti’s ‘at once conventional and subversive’ poetry, ‘and raise no eyebrows’ (258).

The imaginative exploration of death might then be described as a ‘female malady’, the morbid textual result of a culture that encouraged women to construe themselves as dying. James’s ‘mortuary inclinations’ (230) and Rossetti’s ‘[dream] of death’ (‘Sonnet 27’, line 1) could be seen in Bordo’s terms as analogous to anorexia nervosa, in that they replicate aspects of stereotyped femininity like silence, passivity, self-denial and rejection of desire. In her reading of Rossetti’s ‘After Death’, Margaret Reynolds imagines the text itself as subject to this kind of malady. She describes Rossetti’s textual silences as a form of abjection,<sup>17</sup> a throwing up of ‘unpalatable’ truth, similar to ‘the bulimic who exercises control over her body and her self-image by puking up all that she judges redundant, ugly, not herself’ (30). Reynolds’s interpretation is worth looking at more closely, because it uncovers the ‘bitter second text’ (36) beneath the ‘neat, polite and ‘simple’’ surface (27) of the poem while, in my view, subtly misapplying the import of that second text.

‘After Death’ features a dead speaker who is unmistakably still a subject, capable of communication with the reader if not with the poem’s living character. Unlike the drifting spirit of ‘At Home’, this speaker still seems present in her body, aware that ‘[h]e leaned above me, thinking that I slept’ (line 5)), though also able to perceive things outside it: ‘the floor was swept / And strewn with rushes’ (lines 1-2). By not detaching the speaker’s still-living point of view from the dead body, Rossetti presents the prospect that death may be not so much an ending or transformation as a stagnation or paralysis that cuts off the ability to act without cutting off consciousness. It is possible to imagine this kind of frozen death-state as the final stage of a career of invalidism like Alice James’s. Like the speaker of ‘After Death’, James is forced not to move, and as the pitying male figure of ‘After Death’ is unaware of the speaker’s still-active consciousness, so James’s friends persistently misread her even as they sympathise with her: ‘when most sympathetic, the well let fly their wildest shots’ (77).<sup>18</sup>

Reynolds initially thinks of the poem’s speaker as potentially capable of desire,

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<sup>17</sup>In Julia Kristeva’s sense of the word. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) describes the abject as, among other things, a reminder of the material reality of death, ‘what I permanently thrust aside in order to live’ (3). The abject threatens the boundaries of the self, and the process of throwing it up or spitting it out is thus a process of self-confirmation.

<sup>18</sup>In James’s diary the mental and physical difference between ‘well people’ and ‘the weak’ (77) is presented as so marked that communication between them becomes almost impossible, as if the dead were trying to speak with the living. An incident from January 1890 is staged in a similar way to ‘After Death’, with the prone speaker watched over by an uncomprehending other:

A while ago I was greatly enjoying a friend from home...when suddenly she removed herself to the planet Mars by asking me whether I was in pain anywhere at that moment. She stood at the foot of the sofa, but she had no gift to divine that pain was as the essence of the Universe to my consciousness and that ghastly fatigue was a palpable substance between us. (77)

James’s friend would need the gift of telepathy or mediumship to cross this divide.

writing that ‘quite possibly, what she speaks is the secret of her desire’ (29) – obliquely incestuous desire, since she interprets the male figure as the speaker’s father. But she then revises this, reading the words ‘warm’ and ‘cold’ in the poem’s last line, ‘To know he still is warm though I am cold’, as describing the two characters’ emotional states. The event of her death has made him feel more and her feel less. More problematic is Reynolds’s depiction of the speaker’s physical and emotional coldness as a source of power: ‘Now, at last, she is “cold” – calculating, detached, in charge, indifferent, cruel — a dominatrix whose power of denial, or acquiescence, is indeed “sweet”’ (31). Even assuming that the dead speaker does have the power to deny or acquiesce – and if agency or consent are to mean anything at all, she does not – this implies that for the speaker, power lies in negating her own desire while responding to that of others. By reading passivity as powerful in itself, Reynolds reinforces the idea that female agency lies primarily in the act of denial and presents this denial as the best that can be hoped for. The one who wants the least wins, and the one who wants the least is, of course, the one who is dead.

In this way, Reynolds’s reading is both too optimistic and not optimistic enough. She revises Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s view of Rossetti as a poet who, ‘banqueting on bitterness, must bury herself alive in a coffin of renunciation’<sup>19</sup>. But her analysis produces something very close to their concept of the ‘aesthetics of renunciation’ (575), though here cast as elusiveness and complexity rather than as self-silencing piety: ‘this is Rossetti’s joke...she will always slip away, dissolve, evaporate, disappear’ (33). Elizabeth Duquette points out a somewhat similar analytical move in critical work on Alice James’s diary, which she says is too often ‘judge[d]...as indicative of loss and failure. Unfulfilled, repressed, and ignored, Alice James becomes, in many readings, a martyr to patriarchal hegemony’. In Duquette’s view, this ‘seriously obscures what she actually does achieve in the text’ (717). With this in mind, I would argue for a reading of Rossetti’s and James’s death explorations that may give a more hopeful view of their ways of finishing their texts’ unfinished lives. This reading suggests that these death explorations are more interested in desire than in denial, that what they strive for is the possibility of being understood rather than evasion and disappearance, and that death represents, finally, the hope of something better than life.

### **Dying well: Possibility, desire and the adventual**

Indifference and lack of affect does represent a sort of cold comfort in Rossetti’s death poetry, but this comfort needs to be placed in the context of what the event of death means to Rossetti. According to Jerome McGann, the ‘single most enabling principle of Christina Rossetti’s religious poetry’ is soul sleep, the idea that the soul enters a suspended sleep-state after death and wakes on Judgment Day.<sup>20</sup> Angela Leighton counters that ‘a disturbing sleeplessness of the mind’ is more typical of Rossetti’s dead subjects than placid unconsciousness.<sup>21</sup> But whether asleep or

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<sup>19</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 575.

<sup>20</sup> Jerome McGann, ‘The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti’. *Critical Inquiry*. Vol. 10, No. 1. 1983, pp. 127 – 144, p. 135. Soul sleep was espoused by Martin Luther, who cited passages from Ecclesiastes in support of the doctrine: “there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in the grave, where thou goest” (Eccl. 9:10). See Mark Johnston, *Surviving Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup>Angela Leighton, “‘When I Am Dead, My Dearest’: The Secret of Christina Rossetti”, *Modern Philology*,



sleepless, the dead of Rossetti's poems are in an intermediary state. They are 'dreaming through the twilight / That doth not rise or set' ('Song', lines 13-14), sleeping a 'sleep that no pain shall wake...till joy shall overtake / Her perfect peace' ('Dream Land', lines 29-32), held by a 'darkness more clear than noonday.../ Until the morning of eternity' ('Rest', lines 9-12), or, like the speaker of 'After Death', lingering in their bodies before burial. In short, they are waiting.

But waiting for what? In approaching death, both James and Rossetti approach something that is profoundly unknown, and that both determines and is excluded from the text. But while in James's diary the event that 'happens, or rather doesn't happen' is death itself, in Rossetti's death poetry, where death is often already in the past, the anticipated finishing, the unknowable, unwritten moment, is something beyond death. Kate E. Brown describes this sense of anticipation in Rossetti as a 'yearning for advent'.<sup>22</sup> The sense of waiting or yearning in James's diary can be thought of in the same terms, although James's perspective is far less specifically religious than Rossetti's – as with the stereotype of feminine invalidism, James tends to mock Christian doctrine without quite dismissing it. The two writers express their yearning in similar ways: for both it produces a fear of not finishing properly, a fear that has narrative and artistic as well as spiritual dimensions. Death, which for both James and Rossetti merges the writer as artist with the writer as human being, gives rise to a desire and a dread that are both wholly artistic and wholly human: the desire to be understood and the dread of being misread.

In Rossetti's work, this dread is plain in the second-to-last poem of *Later Life*, Sonnet 27, which reads almost as a revision of her earlier evocations of death as a state of enjoyable indifference. Like Rossetti herself, the poem's speaker has 'dreamed of death', but she is unable to take comfort in those dreams when faced with the prospect of the 'literal truth' of death, the physical experience of 'the pang that is the last and the last sigh' (lines 1-4). The triumphantly imperturbable body that 'shall not feel the rain' and 'haply...may remember, / And haply may forget' in 'Song' (lines 10-14) is here subject to a terrifying failure of the senses, 'with ears that cease to hear, / With eyes that glaze, with heart-pulse running down' (lines 10-12). In 'After Death', the dead subject can speak to the reader and provoke emotions – pity, at least – in the man who comes to her death-bed, while Sonnet 27, the speaker fears becoming unable to speak, 'too dulled, it may be, for a last good-bye' (line 5). She destroys any hope of taking pleasure in the sympathy of those around her with a devastating image of her future dying self: 'A helpless charmless spectacle of ruth' (line 7).

The speaker is not just interested in 'dying well' and afraid of dying badly; she thinks of death as something at which it is possible to fail. 'I.../ May miss the goal at last, may miss a crown' (lines 11-14) refers to the fear that she will not experience religious rapture, that she will die with 'no saint rejoicing on her bed' (line 13). But the missed crown is not just divine, but poetic: the speaker is afraid that in death, she will fail to speak. The poem's image of failed death implies a counter-image of successful death, in which last good-byes are possible and the dying subject remains active, aware and, like the speakers of Rossetti's earlier death poetry, still able to

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Vol. 87, No. 4 (May, 1990), pp. 373-388, p. 375.

<sup>22</sup> Kate E. Brown, 'Futurity and Postponement: Christina Rossetti and the Yearning for Advent', *Intertexts*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Spring, 2004), pp. 15-23, p. 15.

narrate. James describes the fear of failure in similar terms:

...H. and K. both extracted the consoling answer to the question 'Can she die?' that 'They sometimes do.' This is most cheering to all parties - the only drawback being that it will probably be in my sleep so that I shall not be one of the audience, dreadful fraud! a creature who has been denied all dramatic episodes might be allowed, I think, to assist at her extinction. I know I shall slump at the 11th hour... (135)

The last months of James's diary are filled with references to 'the development of [Henry James's] dramatic genius' (210); his play *The American* 'died an honourable death' (224) three months before the death of James herself. She imagines her own work of dying, 'the hardest job of all', as a parallel to her brother's work, a 'dramatic construction' (211) in which she is producer, performer and audience. Like Rossetti's speaker, though she construes death as a controllable process, she is simultaneously aware of the slippage between her fantasy and the irreducible, unforeseeable reality. She is aware that she might fail in any one of her roles, either by falling asleep, slumping, having the reins taken away from her, or breaking involuntarily out of character. A month before her death, she echoes the opening of Sonnet 27, though with characteristic wryness: 'I have always thought that I wanted to die, but I felt quite uncertain as to what my muscular demonstrations might be at the moment of transition' (230).

If Rossetti's speaker's dream of successful death is inspired by Rossetti's own earlier poems, it seems possible that James's vision of it might have been influenced by the death of Minny Temple. Temple was the James siblings' cousin, and Henry commemorated her short life in the characters of Milly Theale and Isabel Archer.<sup>23</sup> Temple is barely mentioned in James's diary, and Lyndall Gordon's biography of Henry James casts the young Alice – she was 21 when Temple died – as the unappealing, disapproving foil to Temple's 'girlish vivacity': 'Alice, seething with correct repression, scorned her eager response to every idea' (4). But Temple's death, and not least Henry James's mythologizing response to it, sheds light on James's conception of successful death because it seems to be the positive counter-image to her fears of dying badly. Unlike James's own 'ugly and gruesome method of progression down the dark Valley of the Shadow of Death' (James, *Diary* 207), the tuberculosis that killed Temple was not considered an ugly death. In the midst of her illness William James reported to Henry that Temple 'was delightful in all respects, and although very thin, was very cheerful'.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps most importantly, her death at the age of twenty-four was, at least as Henry James perceived it, perfectly timed. His letter to Mary James on Temple's death begins by describing it as 'strange & painful' but ends with a sense of its rightness:

But who complains that she's gone or would have her back to die more painfully?... On the dramatic fitness – as one may call it – of her early death it seems almost idle to dwell. No one who ever knew her can have failed to look at her future as a sadly insoluble problem...life – poor narrow life – contained no place for her. How all her conduct & character seem to have pointed to this

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<sup>23</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *A Private Life of Henry James: Two Women and his Art* (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Henry James, *A Life in Letters*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 36.

conclusion – how profoundly inconsequential, in her history, continued life would have been! (36-38)

Temple dies at the dramatically appropriate moment, escaping the ‘profoundly inconsequential’ ‘poor narrow life’ she must, apparently, have gone on to live, and her interrupted life is given form and permanence in Henry James’s novels. For Alice James, who from an early age seems to have felt herself equally unsuited to life, some of the urgency of her desire to die might have stemmed from a sense that she had already lived too long, missing her moment of ‘dramatic fitness’. There is a sense in the diary that James’s continued life is in some way improper, even morbid – her description of emotions ‘ferment[ing] perpetually within my poor old carcass’ (25) carries a hint that her body is already dead and decaying while her mind lives on incongruously within it. The idea has something in common with Emily R. Wilson’s concept of ‘tragic overliving’: ‘The sense that the central character ‘should’ have died generates an uneasy feeling in the audience or reader that the text itself “should” have ended’.<sup>25</sup> In James’s case, this is complicated by the fact that the text can be seen as beginning well after the moment when the central character “should” have died’.

For both James and Rossetti, finishing in the right way is a struggle, but one with rewards greater than anything they expect from life. What Kate E. Brown calls the ‘adventual’ aspect of death in Rossetti’s work – the promising unknown, ‘a concept of eventuality in which the future is neither determined by nor even predictable within the historical present’ (15) – is for both writers something profoundly romantic, in every sense of the word. It gives literary form to an otherwise formless life, and it has aspects of both the romantic quest and romantic love.

Minnie Temple once wrote to a friend: ‘Do you remember my old hobby of the ‘remote possibility’ of the best thing, being better than a clear certainty of the second best? Well, I believe it more than ever, every day I live. Indeed I don’t believe anything else’ (qtd Gordon 108). James’s and Rossetti’s approaches to death share the same devotion to possibility. James’s near-lifelong process of dying put love and adventure out of her reach, but also seems to have provided her with both in the realm of possibility. On 24 September 1890 she quotes the first stanza of Rossetti’s ‘Song’, followed by a newspaper clipping about a woman’s suicide due to romantic disappointment, which reproduces her suicide note in full. The note is a declaration of love and forgiveness, and includes the line, ‘what I could not say living I can say dying, for oh, my darling, I cannot live without you’ (qtd James, *Diary* 141). James’s remark, apparently applying to both poem and letter, is ambivalently but genuinely admiring: ‘What a beautiful sincerity and dignity! How happy and wise to go in the illusion of her sorrow and never learn that ‘Jack’ is a figment of her fancy, born simply of her rich and generous possibilities’ (141). To James, who addresses her diary to ‘dear Inconnu (please note the sex! pale shadow of Romance still surviving even in the most rejected and despised by Man)’ (166), rich and generous possibilities are what is real: ‘who would ever give up the reality of dreams for relative knowledge?’ (66).<sup>26</sup> One of her few speculations on what will happen to her after

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<sup>25</sup> Emily R. Wilson, *Mocked with Death: Tragic Overliving from Sophocles to Milton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> James and her companion Katherine Peabody Loring were in the prototypical Boston Marriage, a term coined by Henry James to describe two women living together, and later used to denote committed

death comes on hearing of the death of Charles Wolcott Balestier: 'I ne'er saw the youth, but I wonder if we sha'n't soon meet in that 'twilight land', swooping past each other like Vedder's ghosts. Will he pause and ask: 'What is your name?' And shall I say, 'I do not know, I only died last night'...?' (223). Death is the possibility of becoming someone else, or perhaps the possibility of a self-realisation so complete you no longer recognise yourself.

For Rossetti, the promise that death represents is more specific, though still fundamentally unknowable: advent, which in the liturgical year is the period immediately before the Nativity, is also the anticipation of the second coming of Christ and the day of judgment. In Rossetti's death poetry advent binds together death and love. Two recurring themes in her poems about advent are the buried dead waiting for the rapture and the return of Christ as bridegroom. Neither idea is at all iconoclastic within Christian ideology; the Bride of Christ is a conventional image for the Church as a whole, with the implication that everyone within the Church is in a bridal relationship with Christ. But they are startling in the context of Rossetti's senseless, passionless dead women, whose unfeeling sleep thus becomes a waiting to be torn out of the earth, judged, and wed: 'It may be at the midnight, black as pitch, / Earth shall cast up her poor, cast up her rich.../ For lo, the Bridegroom fetcheth home the Bride' ('Advent Sunday', lines 4-8).

But 'Advent Sunday' emphasises perhaps unexpected elements of the relationship between the awoken dead woman and the returned Christ: their similarity ('His Eyes are as a Dove, and she's Dove-eyed' (line 14)) and their mutual recognition and understanding ('His Hands are Hands she knows, she knows His Side.../He knows His lovely mirror, sister, Bride' (lines 9-15)). In 'Love is Strong as Death', this bridal imagery is employed by a first-person speaker who is not anticipating death or calmly past it, but in the middle of it, surrounded by 'cold billows of death' (line 3). Admitting her past indifference, 'I have not thirsted for Thee', the speaker of the first stanza asks God, the speaker of the second stanza, 'wilt Thou look upon, wilt Thou see / Thy perishing me?' (lines 2-6) He responds: 'Yea, I have thirsted for thee...Through death's darkness I look and see / And clasp thee to Me' (lines 8-12). This dialogue reads as an adventual rewriting of the monologue of 'After Death'. Both poems juxtapose a presumably-female figure who is both emotionally cold and death-cold with a 'warm' male figure, but the satisfaction of indifference and of being pitied without comprehension in 'After Death' is replaced, here, by the pleasure of being seen and understood. Unlike the man in 'After Death', the speaker of the second stanza has loved the first-stanza speaker long before her death ('long ago with love's bands I bound thee'), and instead of an absence of touch, put in such specific terms that it feels like a loss ('He did not touch the shroud...or take my hand in his' ('After Death', lines 9-10), there is real contact: 'Now the Everlasting Arms surround thee' ('Love is as Strong as Death', line 10). 'Through death's darkness I look and see' provides the imagined, divine answer to the speaker of Sonnet 27. It is a response to the speaker's fear, not just that she will be seen to die badly or have her death misread by the witnesses to her death – who, 'hopeless in their fear' (line 9), do not expect her to experience rapture – but that, in the darkness of death, she will not be seen by the one witness who would not misread her.

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relationships between women that may or may not have romantic or sexual elements. This makes her insistence on the gender of her addressee less easily interpreted, but addressing her writing to an unknown male reader does at least seem to represent, for her, a 'pale shadow of Romance'.

Paul's question in Romans, 'Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?', is also Rossetti's and James's question. In the Bible verse, 'the body of this death'<sup>27</sup> is a body that is still alive, though mortal and beset by sin. The desire to be delivered from it is not so much a desire for the end of life as a recognition of the deathliness inherent in life itself and a desire for something beyond it: the recognition and desire Rossetti voices when she writes in Sonnet 25 of 'Later Life' that '[t]his Life we live is dead for all its breath.../Unveil thy face, o Death who art not Death' (lines 9-14). Rossetti's solution is credal, but also essentially artistic; the God who speaks in 'Love is as Strong as Death' is her own creation. But James, 'having been denied baptism by my parents, marriage by obtuse and imperceptive man,' is determined 'to assist myself at this first and last ceremony' (216). She will finish – the event is always in the future tense, just outside the scope of the text – herself. James and Rossetti's explorations of death are ventures into a promising unknown, though they contain elements of surrender to a deathly ideal of femininity. Reading them gives a more complex image of the role of women as active participants in as well as victims of Victorian death culture, and of the strategies and possibilities available to women writers facing the problem of an existence that could itself seem deathlike.

### Biographical Note

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<sup>27</sup>Alternative translations include 'this body of death' (New International Version), 'this body that is infected by death' (International Standard Version), and 'my dying body' (God's Word Translation).

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