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Poetic Vigil, Rhythmical Vigilance

The close reader of literature tends to be a vigilant creature. He – the pronoun denotes the kind of critic that emerged through the strains of “New” or “Practical” Criticism that developed on either side of the Atlantic during the first half of the twentieth century – generally reads short extracts with great absorption. Works that are too large or various would disrupt the unilateral focus necessary to procure formalism’s distinctive goods: interpretations, keen observations, pattern-recognition. Often this formalist attentiveness is explicitly or implicitly held itself to constitute a moral good, or even, in more reflexive variations upon the general methodology, a potential correction to the distractions and diremptions of modern culture. Michael Fried pleads emblematically for such an approach, when he describes the ideal spectator as one “so deeply absorbed in his meditation that it would be hard to distract him”.¹

To give a practical example of the critical approach that I am sketching out (as well as a foil for what I will later argue constitutes another way to approach literary works), take this appropriately short poem by Christina Rossetti. The work is entitled “In Progress”:

Ten years ago it seemed impossible
That she should ever grow as calm as this,
With self-remembrance in her warmest kiss
And dim dried eyes like an exhausted well.
Slow-speaking when she has some fact to tell,
Silent with long unbroken silences,
Centred in self yet not displeased to please,
Gravely monotonous like a passing bell.
Mindful of drudging daily common things,
Patient at pastime, patient at her work,
Weary perhaps but strenuous certainly.
Sometimes I fancy that we may one day see
Her head shoot forth seven stars from where they lurk
And her eyes lightnings and her shoulders wings.²

¹ Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 69. Fried is referring here to Laugier’s comment upon a philosopher depicted by Chardin, who for Fried serves as a mutually-reinforcing counterpart to the ideal spectator.

² Rossetti, *The Complete Poems* III, p. 286. *In Progress* was written in 1862.

“Close” reading might proceed in the following manner: this is a sad and oblique poem. The opening octet offers a self-renunciation that is all the painfuller for being so subtle: for the kissing speaker, “self-remembrance” means holding back rather than letting go. The litotes of “not unpleased to please” offers a dismally dutiful version of care. Assonance and alliteration (“dim dried eyes”, “slow-speaking”) underscore the vocal labour that describes and discharges the poem’s theme. A series of stress-inversions produces a run of initial trochees (“Silent”, “Centred”, “Gravely”), which we might reasonably hope will come to an end with the ringing bell that announces the volta in this Petrarchan sonnet. But in fact the bell does not ring, only “pass”. The ensuing sestet does not transfigure the theme so much as give us more of the same: still more alliterating repetitions of the same idea (“drudging daily common things”), still more lines that no sooner begin than they tire themselves out, beginning as they do upon trochaic inversions (“Mindful”, “Patient”, “Weary”). We have almost given up hope for variation or remittance by the time that the twelfth line brooks the example of every other line before it, being not end-stopped but rather enjambling freely into a visionary apocalyptic mode that is as arresting as it is abrupt. It is almost as if the first-person has so fully disassociated herself from the “she” that she is or once was, a disassociation marked by the casual surmise of “Sometimes I fancy that we may one day see”, that the return of the repressed self occurs with belated fantastical violence: as the mindful quiet woman grows electric and sprouts wings.

This rapid précis of Rossetti’s sonnet showcases some of the affordances of formalism: it connects structural features to a readerly experience that is fuzzily personal yet also generic. I admire this way of reading; I would even venture that my above analysis of *In Progress* is, in its own small way, true. Yet I also believe this mode of attentiveness to be lacking, in ways that touch directly upon the concerns of this collection of essays. To cast aspersions upon narrow formalism is nothing new: Jerome McGann, whose work offers one of the most spirited and persuasive contestations of “close” reading that is on offer, considers Rossetti as a specific case in point. Her body of devotional verse, McGann contends, proves resistant (my reading of *In Progress* notwithstanding) to the kinds of reduction that serves poets such as Keats or Tennyson so well. If we attend only to the surface of Rossetti’s work, it may well appear merely conventional; yet if we restore it to the complex devotional contexts in which its author was so immersed, an unsuspected variety and subtlety comes into view.³

3 McGann, *The Religious Poetry of Christina*, pp. 127–144.

I wholeheartedly agree that Rossetti's work is subtle and various. Yet this essay argues for a slightly different emendation of narrowly formalist reading than McGann's, to my mind, somewhat artificial separation between a naively undialectical initial experience, on the one hand, and the restoration of historical context, on the other. Such an approach requires that we press pause on our engagement with the poem, in order to research its material circumstances. Verse itself often evaporates in this pressure-cooker of historical change: McGann for instance repeatedly praises the "exquisite [...] beauty" of Rossetti's *Song*, without reading a single line from the work.⁴ In contrast to the belated superimposition of historical theme or content, I wish rather to supplement formalism with a broader consideration of readerly *practice*: of the accompanying routines or protocols by which subjects have attended or do attend to individual works. Such practices are no less historical than the devotional considerations that form the crux of McGann's analysis, such as Rossetti's possible adherence to the millenarian notion of Soul Sleep. Historical subjects read through attentional routines, habits, regimes. Yet while the routines, habits and regimes that predominated in the late-nineteenth century differ in many regards from those that operate today, there also exists a substantial overlap, not only because subjects continue to get automated in recognisable ways, but also because certain corporeal or temporal constraints continue – for the time being at least – to operate. We do not need to "add" history to our "original" experience; that experience already is historical – albeit in ways that may require our turning to the past so as to perceive them more clearly (or at all). To attend to this similarity-indifference is to envisage a more fluid interaction between the experience of reading and the attentive practices that invariably condition it. It is to ask whether, if we expand our focus from the isolated, anthologised text, so as to consider more fully the cognitive and corporeal affordances and constraints that operate across larger temporal units, we may stand to learn something about both past and present culture.

Concretely, the structure of this essay is as follows. Of the various attentional routines in which the reading and composition of Rossetti's work is embedded, I isolate two in particular: the convention of poetic vigil, and the cognitive attitude of vigilance. These two foci are in reality two sides of the same coin: by concentrating upon them, I seek to enumerate an aesthetic attitude that goes beyond (or perhaps falls short of) absorption. Three salient features characterise the "pondering" spectator that a brief moment ago we witnessed Fried evoke: he pays attention as a singular subject, for a brief temporal moment, in a manner

4 Ibid., pp. 136, 137.

that does not require his body. The nineteenth-century culture of vigil(ance), by contrast, is significantly communal and corporeal; it enfolds across a temporal envelope whose length strains cognitive focus to the limit. I begin by demonstrating the ways in which poetry is embedded within, and contributes to, changing historical attitudes to attentional routine. I then segue into a brief discussion of the contemporary neurological concept of rhythmical vigilance, which grounds my subsequent reading of Rossetti's verse, returned not to a broad notion of "history", which in truth it never left, but to the more specific consideration of attentional routine.

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Émile Durkheim famously detected within modern culture a series of only partially sublimated religious attitudes and practices, which lived on through (rather than despite) increasing secularisation.⁵ The vigil is a curious example of this phenomenon, insofar as the sublimation is very partial indeed. Large groups of people who profess no fixed religious belief continue to gather frequently for activities (or non-activities) that Christians and other faith persuasions would find perfectly legible: to stay up through the night in an attitude of reverent watchfulness, with the mind turned towards a departed past entity or a future hoped-for event. On the morning that I began to write this article, while I was still attempting unsuccessfully to prevaricate my way away from the issue at hand, I read that protestors had occupied the Science Museum in London, with the intention of conducting a candlelit vigil in protest at the institution's continuing investment in fossil fuels.⁶

One of the reasons for the enduring cultural value of vigil is surely, as with so many such practices, that the partially-sublimated religious practice was itself a sublimation of earlier, non-Christian rites. The English term derives from Latin, as where Polybus, in speaking of the Third Punic War, divides the night into four watches, each lasting roughly three hours (*vigilia prima*, *vigilia secunda*, *vigilia tertia*, *vigilia quarta*). The developing Christian faith transformed but did not entirely eliminate this original military-political function: when Ambrose of Milan defended his Basilica from the siege of the Arian empress Justina, in the year 384, he employed both nightly vigil and antiphonal chant (a form of musical worship that he himself had done so much to establish) as a means of encouraging resoluteness and prospective martyrdom within his congregation.

⁵ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/27/climate-activists-occupy-science-museum-over-fossil-fuel-sponsors> [last accessed: 22 November 2021].

Given the enduring importance of these rites of watchfulness, in addition to the well-attested historical links between prayer, meditation and psalmody, it is perhaps surprising that there has been no effort to isolate poetic vigil as a specific trans-historical mode.⁷ Louis L. Martz's classic study, *The Poetry of Meditation*, reads seventeenth-century religious poets in accordance with the several forms of spiritual exercise that were then available: Saint Augustine's stipulations in Book XI of *The Confessions*, in addition to the vigilant routines and protocols that St. Bernard of Clairveaux and Ignatius Loyola established.⁸ Literary critics from later periods are accustomed to consider the lyric verse of Wordsworth and Coleridge under the rubric of "meditative" or "retirement" poetry. Yet little effort has been made to join the dots between these distinct historical episodes, or to ask how the individual works that belong to such a tradition might make more specific demands than a general meditative "introspection": that poetic vigil, that is to say, might seek to train (or retrain) readerly vigilance, often in an extended temporal period (the long night), and set to work the human tendency to distraction (by either attempting to overcome it, or acknowledging its inevitability).

If we define the genre or sub-genre of poetic vigil in this manner, we begin not only to connect otherwise historically disparate works, but also to foreground the way in which they make specific demands upon the minds and bodies of their readers. For such work not only reflects or expounds upon attentiveness as theme; it would also subject the alert (or distracted) body to cognitive demands, so as to train or test it. My line of approach here takes a large cue from Gary Kuchar's perceptive analysis of George Herbert's seventeenth-century "failed prayer" poems, which, on his reading, repeatedly enact the moment at which a pious subject cannot bestow upon God an uncompromised focus that God alone can discharge.⁹ A work such as Herbert's *Denial* offers a case-study in "distracted devotion", where distraction accrues a supernumerary association to its contemporary sense of cognitive dispersal, meaning also something like spiritual scattering. Crucially, *pace* Kuchar, Herbert's hymns do not only describe this failed rite. They also, to the extent that verse too is like a form of efficacious or inefficacious prayer, thwart a reader's own unifocal attentiveness, through the competing motley of imagery, prosody and variable theme.

As Kuchar points out, Herbert's failed-prayer-poems enjoy a rich and varied afterlife across Anglophone verse of the next two centuries. Yet I would like to

7 For an account of the early and abiding association between music, psalmody and vigil among the desert mystics, see McKinnon, *Desert Monasticism*, pp. 505–521.

8 Martz, *The Poetry of Meditation*.

9 Kuchar, *Distraction and the Ethics*, pp. 4–23.

focus now in greater depth upon one of his most self-conscious and self-proclaimed adepts, who did not only continue the Christian drama of (impossible) vigilance, but also substantially developed it through placing the individual poem within a broader context: the book, the body, time itself. The figure in question is Henry Vaughan, whose *Silex scintillans* (1650), written in the generation following Herbert's work, embodies the problem of distraction in the specific practice of vigil. This ongoing rite is here, as with the climate protestors who occupied the Science Museum, a significantly communal affair: Vaughan's collection is at one and the same time a series of private devotions and a wider mourning for a church that had been torn apart by the Civil War (Vaughan personally knew many of the Welsh bishops who had lost their positions during the Puritan ascendancy). Watchfulness, in this guise, is something that the devotional body performs, in addition to the attitude that the community adopts to a Church in ruins, whose return may one day arise. The three salient features that I identified in Fried's emblematic account of formalism – singular beholder, unspecified body, undistracted attention – are thus here present in negative form. Vaughan writes from a place and a time in which such absorption cannot ever be a natural attitude.

David Marno has written eloquently upon the shifting early modern cultures of attention, where *attentio* and *intentio* shift from being a spiritual condition necessary for the proper comprehension of God, to something far more like our contemporary understanding of cognitive function. Perfect vigilance was, according to different sources, either a special privilege reserved for God himself (as with Augustine, for whom distracted devotion was an inevitable consequence of the Fall); or a goal to which the pious subject could aspire (as with Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*, which some believed to be heretical for their alleged positing of a perfectible attentiveness); or as one crucial plank in a developing culture of scientific empiricism, in which indifferent looking – to the point of courting distraction itself – could secure knowledge of the natural world.¹⁰

That Vaughan was keenly aware of such spiritual and cognitive attentional routines is evident from his now seldom-read prose work, *Mount of Olives* (1652), which recommends to the pious reader a series of prayers that accompany each part of the day, from "When Thou Art Awake", to the moment of dressing, to the journey to church, to the journey from church, to the setting sun, to the evening, to the moment of climbing into bed.¹¹ None of these workmanlike, programmatic exhortations rises to the poetic level of Vaughan's verse proper,

¹⁰ Marno, *Death Not be Proud*.

¹¹ Christ slept beneath the mount of Olives on the night before Passover.

with the exception of “A Meditation at the setting of the sun, or the soul’s elevation to the true light”, which, as the subtitle suggests, engages in sustained dialectical play with daylight and night-dark. “Thou bright morning starre springing from on high, illuminate me”, pleads Vaughan, “who am now sitting in darknesse and in the shadow of death”.¹² Where the bright day often only encourages spiritual darkness, the eclipse of a day or life can give rise to true light. Vigil amounts to watching for this light.

This nocturnal watchfulness proves essential to any understanding of *Silex scintillans*. Equally essential, however, is the recognition that Vaughan’s collection does not simply retrace in verse the same steps that his spiritual exercises would two years stipulate in prose. His poetry takes the conventional interplay between darkness and light, watchfulness and weariness, and elevates it to a higher dialectical power, so that what ensues is a complex meditation not only upon the several varieties of religious experience, but also upon the ways in which all humans, whether pious, unbelieving, or somewhere in-between, shuttle between focus and dispersal, mourning and hope, pretension and retention. They eloquently illustrate what we might call the antinomy of vigilance: that the more we attempt to direct ourselves tirelessly upon a given object (whether God or any other), the more the question of distraction comes into play. The way in which single or communal subjects contend with this distraction constitutes a spiritual drama quite aside from the specific question of doctrinal belief.

To communicate something of this drama involves a somewhat different attitude to that which I exhibited above, in my reading of Rossetti’s *In Progress*. For Vaughan’s antinomy of vigilance unfolds across larger temporal units than the generally short individual lyrics that constitute *Silex scintillans*, and which remain – through such frequently-anthologised works as “The World”, “The Retreat”, or “Night” – the central form in which his poetic legacy endures. (In this respect, formalism shares a common approach with a modern culture that it otherwise often deplures: both work often with the extract, with the single digestible unit.) These individual works are embedded within the broader context both of the book (a two-volume entity that thwarts as much as it records the teleological growth of a soul), and of the embodied reader, who depending upon their relative state of alertness or weariness may detect or overlook or tire of rhymes across many pages, imagery and words that recur to the point of intentional redundancy.

¹² *The Mount of Olives* can be found in *The Works of Henry Vaughan*, ed. Leonard Cyril Martin, I, pp. 137–210; subsequent references to this collected are given parenthetically in the text as *WHV*.

Watchfulness is a watch-word of the Christian sacred texts. Saint Mark has no sooner told his version of the Parable of the Budding Fig Tree (whose buds foretell the coming summer), than he entertains a more radically unknowing form of vigilance, with regard to the Second Coming of Christ:

But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Take heed, watch and pray; for you do not know when the time is. It is like a man going to a far country, who left his house and gave authority to his servants, and to each his work, and commanded the doorkeeper to watch. Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming – in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning – lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch! (Mark, 13,32–37)¹³

The psalms meanwhile often exhort vigilance as a punctual act rather than an enduring state: a wake-up call rather than a call to remain wakeful. “Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I *myself* will awake early” (Psalm 108,1–3). Herbert’s *The Temple* frequently imports such exhortations from psalmody in poetry; in so doing, however, he generally minimises the specific setting of night and wakefulness so as to treat a more generic notion of spiritual buoyancy. “Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. / Sing his praise”, his “Easter” famously begins, in a manner that is both like and unlike Psalm 57,8.¹⁴ Later the same poem will (only metaphorically) ask his lute, rather than himself, to “awake”; yet there is little sense of a subject who struggles to get out of bed early.

Vaughan reintroduces the more temporally-delimited concept of nocturnal vigil as the prime setting and scope of his verse; this constitutes one of the few substantive ways in which he diverges from the poetic example of *The Temple*. Herbert’s passing references to night utilise it as a stock metaphor, or a Neoplatonist play of contraries, or a stock cognate for death; we never feel that the poet is *inside* it. For Vaughan, by contrast, the exemplary speaking subject is the wakeful subject, upon whose tired eyes the morning breaks, or who exhorts themselves to renewed vigilance. This contrasting personal setting almost certainly indicates far broader historical differences: where Herbert’s Anglicanism remains a constant source of support, Vaughan is forced to contend with the Church in ruins. This supra-personal significance helps to explain the remarkable variety of tonal effect that Vaughan generates from vigil, from nearly the very beginning of *Silex scintillans*. Night-time can be a moment of hallucinatory

¹³ Here as below I cite from the King James Version.

¹⁴ Herbert, *The Temple*, p. 36. Interestingly, Vaughan would later substitute the imperative “Awake” for “Rise” in his own poem *Easter-day*.

vividness, as when the subject, in “The Search” observes the breaking “clear day”, whose intensity however proves less distinct than what he has witnessed in the dark. “[A]ll night have I / Spent in a roving Extasie”, he declares, tempting us to lewd inference before enjambling into a more proper final cause, “To find my Saviour” (*WHV* II, p. 405). Yet though his nocturnal visions possess proper theological credentials (he “sees” in turn the Well of Sychar, the Hill of Calvary, the Cross upon which Jesus died, and so forth), the poem ends by calling such revelation into question. Mounting to a pitch of intensity, the “roving” dreams of God himself, accompanied by a dawning sun that may be the actual light through which the poem began, but may also be dreamed or hallucinated in exhaustion: from here the tired yet rhapsodic subject pictures forth “silent paths, what shades, and cells. / Faire, virgin-flowers, and hallowed Wells / I should rove in, and rest my head” (*WHV* II, p. 407). “The Search” concludes, finally, with a simple song, whose short disyllabic lines bring sudden relief to the racing decasyllabic couplets that had finally worn themselves out, lulling the poem almost to sleep with an admonishment not to seek God in exotic places, but rather dwell closer to home.

Many other individual works similarly trouble apparent distinctions between wakefulness and slumber, revelation and hallucination, dark and night. Shortly thereafter, the consecutive “Distraction” and “The Pursuite” offer sister-studies in the difficulty of remaining vigilant amid alarms of various kinds. Humans are invariably dispersed, according to the former, not through any cognitive shortfall, but rather just the opposite: an innate sensitivity and responsiveness to the world renders discrimination difficult (“The world / Is full of voices; Man is call’d, and hurl’d / By each; he answers all, / Knows every note and call” (*WHV* II, p. 413). This wanders dangerously far from the Augustinian line, according to which humans are distractable beings through lack rather than excess, redeemable only by the intercession of divine Grace. In Book X of the *Confessions*, Augustine berates himself for being distracted by a dog running in the fields, or a lizard catching flies, or a spider spinning its web, when the mind would be better-put inclining to God rather than to such putatively trivial sights.¹⁵ Within Vaughan’s verse, by contrast, restlessness simply is inseparable from the religious orientation. “The Pursuite” illustrates this amply, localising the dispersed subject, once again, within the precinct of night:

Lord! what a busy restless thing
Hast Thou made man!
Each day and hour he is on wing,

¹⁵ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 274–75.

Rests not a span;
 Then having lost the sun and light,
 By clouds surprised.
 He keeps a commerce in the night
 With air disguised. (WHV II, p. 414)

This might seem to dismiss nocturnal “commerce” as vain fancy: all that seems solid to the insomniac melts into air. Yet the other poems in *Silex scintillans* cannot ever fully renounce this pattern of striving: the subject has no longer announced his intention to give up such baubles, than he is again conducting another expectant vigil.

To perceive this, we need to proceed beyond the analysis of individual works, which has heretofore characterised my evocation of Vaughan’s collection, so as to consider the seams or joins that exist between them. “Distraction” and “The Pursuite” already existed as a pair, not only because of their common theme (the antinomy of vigilance), but also because rhymes endured from one to another: here, most significantly, the conventional echo of “light”, first with “sight”, then, in the second poem, with “night”. (Can one poem rhyme with another poem? Can yesterday rhyme with today?) This rhythmical patterning, which exists at the level of sequence and of prosody, similarly connects up other poems, forcing the reader that reads consecutively to experience, successively, vigilance, apprehension, hope and exhaustion.

Take the micro-sequence that runs from “Midnight”, another poetic vigil that begins by with the subject’s wakefulness “[w]ilst deep sleep others catches” (WHV II, p. 421). He watches the stars, “busy” like himself, waiting for divine premonition or sign. The following poems turn through several emotions, like a restless person tossing in bed for whom no position remains comfortable for more than a few minutes. “Content”, asserts modest self-sufficiency (WHV II: 422), before “Joy of my life while let me here!” returns us to the extended night:

Stars are of mighty use; the night
 Is dark, and long;
 The road foul, and where one goes right,
 Six may go wrong. (WHV II, p. 423)

Note the way in which Vaughan’s catalexis (the halving of the line from eight to four syllables) forces us to feel the “long” night, through the extra stress with which we accent these diminished words, and through the painful pause that we thereby observe. He does much the same thing later in the same poem, in the process transforming the nocturnal from endless sentence into final consummation. All this again by means of “long” catalexis:

God's saints are shining lights: who stays
 Here long must passe
 O're dark hills, swift streames, and steep ways
 As smooth as glasse;
 But these all night,
 Like Candles, shed
 Their beams, and light
 Us into Bed. (WHV II, p. 423)

The second half of this latest conventional “night” / “light” rhyme pivots from an adjective into a verb, lightening the subject’s passage into bed. But they cannot find lasting repose. “The Storm” unleashes “boiling streams that rave” and “Enlarg’d, enraged air” (WHV II, p. 424) – whose association with night we recall – that “[u]ncalms”. “The Morning-watch” subsequently glories in the dew that succeeds “All the long hours / Of night and Rest” (WHV II, p. 424). But by the following poem we are back, once again, at *The Evening-Watch*, where a colloquy between watchful soul and tired body leaves finally unresolved the question, “How many hours do you think till day?” (WHV II, p. 425).

In the course of five poems, then, Vaughan drags out his nocturnal conceit until we can no longer clearly distinguish illumination and eclipse. Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) taught us how to appreciate oxymorons as “darkness visible”, as a specific effect that poetry (unlike painting) could achieve.¹⁶ Yet Vaughan establishes such paradoxes not just through the simple act of writing verse, but through the employment of sustained repetition and restless prosodic variation that cumulatively tires the reader into a zone of indistinctness. This tension between the establishment and dissolution of temporal experience emerges not only through the unfolding of successive poems, as above, but also through the contention of different temporal attitudes across larger textual windows. “Rules and Lessons” tries, as did *The Mount of Olives*, to establish a vigilance grounded in the proper observance of time: the pious subject should rise early; give thanks when eating at the appointed time; settle their accounts; limit revelry with friends; “when night comes, list thy deeds”; and, before the day is out, spend an hour in the grave so as to familiarise herself with death (WHV II, pp. 436–439). All this continues in regular ABAB pentameters that balances the spiritual ledger.

Yet other works fatally undermine this processional order, in both theme and rhythm. The rather trite cheerfulness of the “Easter Hymn” – “Graves are beds

16 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*.

now for the weary. / Death a nap, to wake more merry” (*WHV* II, p. 457) – cannot abide, despite the forced rhyme. The later “Misery” disappoints such conceits in perhaps the fullest and most poignant manner: in couplets that ironically recall the earlier adamant laws of “Rules and Lessons”, the poem recounts a subject unable to stick to any single resolution, for whom pleasure-roving and sudden fits of penitence come to seem like much of a muchness. The distinction here is not between piety and profanity, but rather between inconsistency and impossible consistency: the subject can no more be a committed alcoholic than a steadfast penitent. The speaker retreats from the bright day of worldly excess into what only appears to be the quiet of vigil:

No man can more the world despise,
 Or Thy great mercies better prize;
 I school my eyes, and strictly dwell
 Within the circle of my cell;
 That calm and silence are my joys.
 Which to Thy peace are but mere noise;
 At length I feel my head to ache,
 My fingers itch, and burn to take
 Some new employment, I begin
 To swell and foam and fret within. (WHV II, p. 473)

This condensed passage offers one of the most remarkable poetic depiction of nervous tics, restless table-tapping, as the tightly end-stopped couplets burst free from their self-appointed bounds, to twitch into enjambment (“burn to take / Some new employment”). “Man”, one of the most beautiful of Vaughan’s lyrics, later phrases this more programmatically still: “God ordered motion, but ordained no rest” (*WHV* II, p. 477).

While the second and concluding part of *Silex Scintillans* does present a more collected pious subject, the anxiousness and variability of these earlier vigils precludes total self-possession. Indeed, when the nocturnal setting, which until this moment had proven strangely in abeyance, recurs, it does so with still greater and more unsettling force. “The Night” is one of Vaughan’s most-anthologised single poems. It departs from the story of Nicodemus, who visited Jesus at night (John 3,1–21). As before, Vaughan declares himself to have left off worldly things (the apostrophised night is “this world’s defeat; / The stop to busy fools; care’s check and curb”). Yet as throughout the whole first section, this self-declaration does not suffice to admit him into the secrets of night, so much as reinstall a tired restlessness:

But living where the Sun
 Doth all things wake, and where all mix and tire
 Themselves and others, I consent and run
 To eve'y myre;
 And by this worlds ill-guiding light,
 Err more than I can do by night. (WHV II, p. 523)

“The Night” thereby dissolves the boundaries between night and day, obscurity and clarity, into a distilled phrase that could serve as summary for the whole: the “deep, but dazzling darkness” that is God. The subject’s understandable inability to dwell in this nocturnal darkness makes *Silex Scintillans* a poem of continual relapse or rehab, whose pious revelations are continually counteracted by restlessness, or the fear that such visions may be no other than night-hallucinations. Even verse itself is a habit that the recovering subject is unable to kick, as in “Idle Verse” (“Go, go, quaint follies, sugared sin, / Shadow no more my door!” (WHV II, p. 446–447)), when a pure piety has to formulate itself in words that cannot but pick up rhythm. Through the recursiveness of his theme, the variability of his prosody, the purposeful redundancy of his imagery, Vaughan produces in the reader the very same restless searching or nervous vigilance that is his collection’s theme. To cognise this, we need to read on, beyond the original works that find their way into anthologies of the seventeenth century, over longer stretches that enable us to train our vigilance, and which allow us to be defeated by distraction.

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I earlier described how the practice vigil endures through long historical spans, notwithstanding the drastic shifts in belief that communities undergo. This does not mean, however, that the rite never comes under strain. At precisely the moment that Vaughan was writing his own poetic vigils, parliament was seeking to dispense with the *Book of Common Prayer*, in which night-watch continued to play a central role within the liturgical calendar. The *Book of Common Prayer*, first published in 1549 before undergoing several revisions, had been a compromise issuing from the Reformation: it sought to conciliate the newly-founded Anglican Church with established forms of communal worship. It stipulated the calendar of the church year, in addition to the prayers suitable for morning, noonday and evening: one of the morning prayers opens with a passage from the Gospel of Mark very similar to that which we observed above (“Watch, for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning, lest he come suddenly and find you asleep” (Mark 13,35–36)).

The Puritan movement against the prescription of liturgical time only intensified when King Charles I had been driven from the throne. A parliamentary subcommittee ultimately succeeded in proscribing the *Book of Common Prayer*, which was taken to have only superficially broken from Catholic ostentation, and to prescribe communal forms of worship that should remain at the discretion of the individual. Vigil was problematic in both these aspects: it both enforced liturgical time and forced individual bodies together. While it was seldom used in comparison to the Book of Common Prayer, the *Directory for Public Worship*, which replaced it through parliamentary ordinance in 1644, offers a significantly altered form of worship. It purposefully avoided liturgical prescription; bodily expression (genuflection, turning to the East); call-and-response; and communal uniformity of worship. Vigil is unsurprisingly entirely absent from its specifications. If we consider these theological emendations together, the corporeal, communal, dialogic and emphatically calendrical nature of Vaughan's vigil suddenly appears more controversial than it might otherwise seem to would-be secular modern eyes and ears. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* gives an evocative account of the suspicion with which nonconformism regarded vigil. Set within Puritan Massachusetts in the mid-seventeenth century, the novel's Chapter 12 ("The Minister's Vigil") demonstrates how night-time vigilance moves from communal practice into a private dark night of the soul. Buffeted by conscience, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale ascends to a scaffold, where "No eye could see him, save that ever-wakeful one"; tormented by his perceived sin, Dimmesdale shrieks aloud, only for his cry to go unheeded by the soundly sleeping townsfolk.¹⁷

Yet even this terrifying spectacle reveals a potential use for vigil, provided that it could be shorn of its excessively communal or corporeal aspects: the night-watch could reveal the conscience that was so essential to Puritanism. Following the Restoration, the practice returned, not only with the reintroduced Book of Common Prayer, but also through a series of works that sought to establish a less ostentatious and more individual form of vigilance. Robert Nelson's *Companion to the Fasts and Festivals of the Church of England* (1704) converts public ritual into private routine: "How [pious observers] spend the Vigils, in preparing their Minds for a due Celebration of the ensuing Solemnity, is more private but not less commendable. And the great care they take to suppress the Dawning of Enthusiasm, and to discountenance the first Appearances of any vicious Practices among their Members." Such practice constitutes "a preparation

¹⁷ Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, p. 178.

of the Minds of the Laity for the reception of that Discipline that is wanted in the Church".¹⁸

Across the eighteenth-century, this divide – between a privatised form of watchfulness, and a more public observation of vigil that can only occur under specified conditions – deepens. A good example of the former arrives with Edward Young's influential long poem *Night-Thoughts* (1742–1745), whose nocturnal subject is watchful in a very different manner to Vaughan's sequence. Where *Silex Scintillans*'s metrical variations communicate restless shifts both within the subject's states of mind and between subject and world, Young's unvarying blank verse communicates a private subject removed from communal practice. Where Vaughan's fingers "itch, to take up some new employment", *Night Thoughts* rather gives us a mind tying itself in knots; it was not for nothing that this long poem would so influence the blank verse meditations of Wordsworth and Coleridge.

John Wesley was sufficiently moved by Young's work to incorporate portions of it into his *Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems* (1744). (*Night Thoughts* was at that point still-unfinished; Young's publisher Robert Dodsley received a financial settlement, having complained at this breach of the copyright law that had been introduced in 1710.) Wesley chose those moments in Young's work where the poet assumed a lofty and pious tone: his introductory address to the reader specifies that he has overlooked "*childish conceits*", along with the more "*perplexed and obscure*" moments that allegedly often mar *Night-Thoughts*, in favour of "those motives of consolation, which alone may render certain griefs supportable".¹⁹ Night-poetry clearly sparked Wesley's imagination: his *Collection* also excerpted Thomas Parnell's *A Night-Piece on Death* (1722), which also adopts a lofty, contemplative attitude.

We cannot separate this poetic work from Wesley's own reforming religious practice, which among other things leads to the most significant re-envisioning of vigil in the post-Restoration era. As a figure suspicious (like Cromwell before him) of liturgical conformity, we might reasonably expect the founder of Methodism to be opposed to any prescription of night-worship. In reality the opposite proved the case: Wesley imported from the Moravians the concept of the "Watch Night", which – perhaps so as to stress its English character – he strikingly justified with an appeal to the Book of Common Prayer. "Sir", he wrote in a 1750 letter to Mr. Bailey, "did you never see the word *Vigil* in your Common-Prayer Book? [...] it was customary with the ancient Christians to spend whole

¹⁸ Nelson, *A Companion to the Fasts and Festivals*, pp. ix–x.

¹⁹ Wesley, *Collection of Moral and Sacred Poems*.

nights in prayer [...] we have not only the authority of our own national Church, but of the universal Church, in the earliest ages.”²⁰ This practice quickly became widespread throughout nonconformist forms of Christian worship. What began as an only semi-organised nightly meeting (tied to the full moon) soon became primarily associated with the New Year. In a fascinating twist of historical fate, the Watch Night became an essential commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation of 31 December 1862, where thousands of enslaved Afro-Americans gathered to await the dawn of their freedom.

Yet the Moravian and Methodist Watch Nights posited a different sort of wakeful subject to those earlier vigils that had preceded the feast-days of Saints. Vaughan’s collection, we recall, produced a dialectical play between self and world, renunciation and revelation, focus and distraction. Wesley, by contrast, postulated a subject defined above all else by its unerring *vigilance*. Hymnody translated the private mediations of Young or Parnell into a public worship that did not so much as watch over as *guard* the night. Matthew 24,43 (“But know this, that if the goodman of the house had known in what watch the thief would come, he would have watched, and would not have suffered his house to be broken up”) became an enduring biblical touchstone in this respect. The many hymns that John and Charles Wesley composed returned obsessively to this theme. The latter’s first “Hymn for the Watch-Night” undergoes a far smoother renunciation of the profane world than Vaughan’s subject was ever able to accomplish:

Oft have we pass’d the guilty night
 In revellings and frantick mirth:
 The creature was our sole delight,
 Our happiness the things of earth;
 But O! Suffice the season past,
 We choose the better part at last.²¹

Such works do not only thematise repentant watchfulness; they also enforce it, through an unwavering long metre that again contrasts with Vaughan’s metrical vicissitudes. Consolation is vouchsafed from a God whose infinite Grace redeems man’s littleness (“For this do we keep / A sad vigil, and weep, / The fruit of our tears that in joy we may reap; / While sent from above / The comfort we prove, / The unspeakable gift of thy ransoming love”). Charles Wesley’s “Sober Vigilance” (sometimes also anthologised as “For the Morning”) similarly borrows

²⁰ Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* IX, p. 81.

²¹ Wesley, *Hymns for the Watch-night*.

from Thessalonians 5,6 (“Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober”), so as to equate watchfulness with cognitive clarity:

This slumber from my spirit shake;
 Warned by the spirit’s inward call,
 Let me to righteousness awake,
 And pray that I may never fall;
 Or give to sin or Satan place,
 But walk in all thy righteous ways.²²

In short, the “distracted prayer” of Herbert and Vaughan has by the later eighteenth century given rise to cognitive vigilance. The micro-genre of the poetic vigil falls apart into the two poles that it once had mediated: private meditation and public worship, both of which enforce comparatively greater rhythmical consistency. However much a later work such as Bernard Barton’s *Poetic Vigils* (1824) may advertise itself as a successor to *Silex scintillans* (featuring as it does a quotation from Vaughan’s *The Night* as an epigraph), it is clear that the previous structure of nocturnal feeling – in which the restless subject also expresses the vicissitudes of the external world) has become unavailable.²³ The Quaker poet Barton’s *The Abbott Turned Anchorite*, cannot even begin to imaginatively reconstruct the fourteenth-century mystic John Grene, who renounced his abbacy (“A most impressive change it must, / Methinks, to such an one have been, / To abdicate the abbot’s trust’ / And seek this solitary scene”).²⁴ His “vigil”, in short, is little more than a metaphor. In its place comes an undivided and unconcerned vigilance, in which God redeems the terrors of night that a subject no longer can or must endure. As Barton’s appropriately titled “Call to Vigilance” breezily puts it:

If, in the fancied shades of night,
 Our souls have trusted, – Oh, display
 The dawning of that heavenly light,
 Which ushers in thy cloudless day!²⁵

* * *

²² Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* II, p. 244. It is interesting, as an aside, to speculate whether the opening line of Wordsworth’s great strange poem *A slumber did my spirit seal* borrows from (and reverses) the equivalent first line of Wesley’s own hymn.

²³ Barton, *Poetic Vigils*.

²⁴ Barton, *Poetic Vigils*, p. 36.

²⁵ Barton, *Devotional*, p. 203.

This episodic survey of theological and poetic vigil in Anglophone culture from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century enables us to resituate the poetry of Christina Rossetti that opened discussion. It does so in two ways, which are to my mind inseparable. On the one hand, there is the historical process by which the specific rite of vigil becomes unacceptable to the Puritan disposition, being bound up as it is with a form of liturgical prescription, before its redemption in a modified form, through the Watch Night of the Moravians and subsequently the Methodists. On the other, however, is the notion of corporeal *vigilance*, no less historical, but which also requires us to consider our own temporal phenomenology. Herbert, Vaughan, Wesley, Barton *et al* do not only describe watchfulness; they also seek to generate or train or exhaust it, across the temporal unit of the lyric, the book collection, or the sung hymn.

Christina Rossetti intuits this theological and phenomenological history as profoundly as any poet. As a sympathiser with the Tractarian movement, she knew well the fault-line between liturgical rite and private piety: Rossetti felt compelled to call off her engagement to James Collinson, upon his conversion to Catholicism in 1850. Even nineteenth-century works that attempted to stress a return to the liturgical calendar of the Book of Common Prayer, over against the increasingly individualistic reading habits of developing print media, such as John Keble's remarkably popular *Christian Year* (1827), reintroduce communal rite in a significantly guarded manner: vigil is entirely absent; night-time in general remains peripheral. (It is worth noting that Keble first published the work anonymously.)²⁶

Rossetti's verse represents the most concerted attempt to remodel poetic vigil, in wake of the fissure that had opened up between communal rite and private meditation. Her work does not in any simple way return to earlier practices that nonconformism had challenged: while her poem *The Convent Threshold* (1858) imaginative reconstructed the differing motivations that might lead an individual to retire from the world, she rarely writes from such subject-positions. Her work rather recovers Vaughan's sustained poetic vigil in a rather different manner: the watchful subject is made over into a watchful *reader*. Where for Keble the dissemination of print media risked an increasing atomisation of spiritual practice, Rossetti rather employed practices of sustained reading – her own sustained reading – as a means of recovering a vigilance that could be a common aspiration for all. She accomplished this most particularly in three works that have typically received less attention than her earlier more obviously arresting lyrics: *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885), *The Face of the Deep* (1892),

²⁶ Keble, *The Christian Year*.

which offered a sustained exegesis of the Book of Revelation, and *Verses* (1893), which collected the verse interludes of these prose works.

These texts, all of which were published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, return obsessively to vigil as both an anchor of the liturgical calendar, and as a personal experience. Yet Rossetti gives us something rather different to the voluble, restless, primary existential drama of *Silex scintillans*. Her watchful subject is quieter and more modest: yet the power of her rhythmical and expressive vicissitudes resides in their subtlety. This subtlety can easily escape us, if we extract individual poems and entries from the broader calendar of living in which they are embedded. It is for that reason that I seek to add some flesh to the bones of David A. Kent's perceptive contention, that Rossetti cared deeply about the sequencing of her poems (a preference that was not always properly respected by editors such as her brother William).²⁷

For a start, we should note that the ritual alternation of vigils and feasts – which Rossetti does, unlike Keble, mark explicitly – allows a similar dialectical play of contraries to that which we observed in Vaughan's own continuing sequence. In addition to other calendrical markers, *Time Flies* unfolds across the Vigils of the Annunciation, of the Ascension, and of many named saints. "A vigil", notes Rossetti on 31 October, the Vigil of All Saints, "is a period wherein to fast, pray, watch; repent of the past, amend the present, prepare and long for the future".²⁸ The definition seems clear enough: yet throughout this and other works, Rossetti puns on the word "long", which becomes both an anxious desire, and a present-tense endurance whose extension calls such deliverance into question. These sudden reversals are crucial to her thinking: on 24 July, she commemorate the Vigil of Saint James the Great by noting that, as vigils prepare for feasts, and feasts mark the death of a saint, that life itself is a vigil, and death a feast. "But when ourselves come into question", continues Rossetti, "we seem to see all reversed: our own life, that is, appears as something of a festival, though chequered; our own death as an appalling and beyond experience anxious vigil."²⁹

The question thus becomes how (or whether) the subject can experience life as a positive vigil. Several of the poems that intersperse *Time Flies* battle between the contrary impulse to bring the watch to a close, and so embrace the feast of death, and to continue in a steadfast vigilance that only half-conceals its desire to keep hold of life. What often results are productive experiments in

²⁷ Kent, *Sequence And Meaning*, pp. 259–264.

²⁸ Rossetti, *Time Flies*, p. 209.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

poetic boredom, of watching for something that never quite happens. Take this verse entry from 28 September:

Our life is long Not so wise Angels say,
Who watch us waste it, trembling while they weigh
Against eternity one squandered day.

Our life is long – Not so the Saints protest,
Filled full of consolation and of rest:
Short ill, long good, one long unending best.

Our life is long – Christ’s word sounds different:
Night cometh: no more work when day is spent.
Repent and work to-day, work and repent.

Lord, make us like Thy Host, who day nor night
Rest not from adoration, their delight,
Crying Holy, Holy, Holy, in the height.

Lord, make us like Thy Saints who wait and long
Contented: bound in hope and freed from wrong
They speed (may be) their vigil with a song.

Lord, make us like Thyself, for thirty-three
Slow years of toil seemed not too long to Thee
That where Thou art there Thy Beloved might be.³⁰

This poetry derives expressive force from sheer tedium. The “long” of the first line expresses a complaint, for the span of living with which the subject must contend. The day in fact is short, with “Night” near-at-hand. Yet while the angelic host might deliver this message, it is quite another matter to live through it. Notice, for instance, how when the Saints “long”, this third appearance of the word converts it into a verb of desire, which, however, comes to a sudden end with the enjambed “Contented” of the following line. The poem tempts us to seek to skip ahead to promised deliverance, before correcting us back into a steadfast vigilance whose process, rather than its object, represents the lesson to hand. It might be that the saints can “speed [...] their vigil with a song”. Yet this poem falls back into a length whose painfulness it wears as badge: Rossetti overloads the penultimate line (“Slow years of toil seemed not too long to thee”) with monosyllabic stress, where previously duple metre had prevailed. This consummate (if painful) evocation of the act of watching requires that we understand Rosset-

³⁰ Ibid., p. 187.

ti's vigil not, as Dolores Rosenblum asserts, in terms of vision, but rather in terms of temporal endurance.³¹

In many respects, this poetic vigil pursues a similar path to *In Progress*, only to finally take a separate path. That poem, we recall, also staged a false turn, before giving us a delayed and thereby more surprising *volta* with the woman who sprouts wings and takes fire. "Our life is long" similarly accrues a nervous energy through trudging monotony, only to then have nowhere to go, remaining by the close of the poem a promise deferred. Just as with *Silex scintillans*, we have to read such works not in isolation, but as they unfold across larger temporal units, in which the contention between compliant or frustrated vigilance emerges yet more powerfully. Take, for example, the poems that close the sequence of *Some Fasts and Feasts*, from within *Verses*, most of which are culled from *Time Flies*, but which accrue new force in this distilled form.³² "The Vigil of St. Bartholomew" begins in familiar guise, beseeching the Lord "to Thine own grant watchful hearts and eyes". Unruffled patience ("So rapt in prayer that half they dwell in heaven") might seem the end of the story, only for waiting to take on a more troubling aspect as it endures through other works. The feast-day of St. Bartholomew brings praise, only for the subject to return to a vigil – this time for all saints – that now feels significantly harder to endure. "Up, my drowsing eyes!" exhorts the speaker to herself, before concluding with a weary resolution ("Yet a little while, / Yet a little way, / Saints shall reap and rest and smile / All the day. Up! let's trudge another mile.") None of these works are exceptional in their own right: what distinguishes them, however, is their remarkable apprehension of a subject pushed to the limit of vigilance, who both desires and recoils from the end of her watch. After "All Saints: Martyr" asks another barrage of questions ("How Long?"), we finally, in the *Sunday Before Advent* with which the section closes, experience deliverance. Constance W. Hassett has written eloquently about the "patience" of Rossetti's style, its capacity for temporal withholding.³³ Here, however, it is not so much that patience pays off, as that the act of waiting involves a bodily exhaustion that ultimately overcomes the watchful subject: "We all / Stand in the balance trembling as we stand; / Or if not trembling, tottering to a fall."³⁴ This could be the Day of Judgment; but it could also be the legs of the sleepless subject (the sleepless reader) giving out from under her.

31 Rosenblum, *Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry*, pp. 33–49.

32 Rossetti, *Verses*, pp. 93–98

33 Hassett, *Christina Rossetti*.

34 Rossetti, *Verses*, p. 98.

Rossetti's verse thus both describes and itself tests corporeal vigilance. It does so not only through the repetition and transmutation of lexical items such as "long", but also through a rhythmical repertoire that again derives its force from smaller adjustments than those that we found in *Silex scintillans*. Rossetti's late devotional verse generally sticks to a metrical blueprint: its deviations are minor, as with the overloading of stress in the penultimate line of "Our life is long". Yet such micro-adjustments test our vigilance all the more keenly; test that it is true vigilance. Take for example a short lyric that first found its way into Rossetti's reading of the Book of Revelation:

The twig sprouteth,
 The moth outeth,
 The plant springeth,
 The bird singeth:
 Tho little we sing to-day,
 Yet are we better than they;
 Tho growing with scarce a showing,
 Yet, please God, we are growing.

The twig teacheth,
 The moth preacheth,
 The plant vaunteth,
 The bird chanteth,
 God's mercy overflowing
 Merciful past man's knowing.
 Please God to keep us growing
 Till the awful day of mowing.³⁵

The apocalypse of this poem is the more abrupt for the mundanity out of which it springs. The first stanza teaches a cute little story about the growth of things both large and small. We might almost overlook, in this context, how the appropriately swelling syllable-count (from four to six to seven to eight) retracts in the final line, where it not for that sudden truncation that curtails the poem as a whole ("Till the awful day of mowing"), which it thereby in retrospect foreshadows. The quietness of Rossetti's apocalypse is to a large part conditioned by the complex theological history to which her own life succeeded. This fact communicates a broader truth regarding rhythmical vigilance in general. Biology teaches us that individual responsiveness ("motor vigilance") varies according to the subject's biorhythms: a morning person will prove more alert in the morning, a night-worker more watchful at night. Yet recent research has also demonstrated

³⁵ Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 42.

that subjects can better perform certain tasks – tasks that involve creative or associational forms of thinking – when such biorhythms are disrupted.³⁶ Where Charles Wesley induced “sober vigilance” through metrical regularity, Rossetti’s verse tests the extent to which we notice small divergence. When it does not diverge from its own example, her poetry probes whether there might be certain states of mind – visionary, fearful, desirous – that arise precisely through, rather than despite, the exhaustion of watchfulness.

When at the top of this essay I read *In Progress*, I did through the seeming neutrality of “the formalist reader”. But I can now come out of the closet as a scholar with a body, who did not read that work for the first time from a vantage-point of objective absorption, but at the end of a “long” bout of reading Rossetti’s verse, fearing that it had nothing to say to me, struggling to digest a large lunch, realising only belatedly that the message of the poem lay precisely in its frustration, its postponement, its exhaustion, all of which I had been attempting to move beyond in order to get to its meaning. My over-extended vigilance was precisely the point. To admit that I was digesting my lunch might seem to introduce scandalously subjective contingencies into the serious business of literary criticism. But that is the thing with contingencies: they are never only our own. We know that judges sentence criminals more leniently, when they have already eaten lunch.³⁷

I believe that there are ways to mobilise Rossetti’s insight regarding the dialectic of vigilance, which she inherited and transfigured from Vaughan’s example, turning it in the process into a comment upon the experience of reading. We can imagine, that is to say, forms of pedagogy that do not only turn upon Freudian absorption, unifocal attention, the minimisation of the distracting browser tab, but which regard distraction or over-exertion not merely as inevitable, but also as potentially productive. These need not require students to wake themselves up in the pitch of night to read a poem (although this, too, could be of interest). I myself have been developing several such exercises, catalysed by the requirement to reform our pedagogical practice, which the ongoing pandemic places upon us.

In one of these, I ask my students to walk the short distance from my office to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge (now that it is once again open). There, they must look at a single art object (or artefact, or item of furniture), for twenty minutes. This already is hard enough: we know that museum attendees typically exhaust their finite cognitive capital on the earliest rooms of an exhibition,

³⁶ Wieth, *Time of day effects on problem solving*, pp. 387–401.

³⁷ Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*.

which tend also to be the busiest.³⁸ Following this period, they leave the museum, trying to remember or to reimagine the object or artefact or furniture item as they fall asleep. Two days later, they return to observe the same object, to see whether it accords with their recollections, or whether other factors (the light cast through the window, the footfall in the museum, what the beholder had for breakfast) change the experience in some way. They again leave the museum and again think of the object as they fall asleep (or try to). Finally, two days later, they prevail upon a friend to accompany them on the third and final observation of the same object, for the same length of time, to see whether the act of seeing varies when it is a communal undertaking. By so taking, they can take Vaughan and Rossetti's dialectic of vigilance, which mediates between self and world, focus and distraction, not merely as an object of enquiry, but as a manual for practice.

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³⁸ Fisher, Museum Distraction, pp. 189–200.

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