

A Poem's Flight: Reprints of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Sunset Wings" in the American Newspaper Press

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti is beyond doubt one of the best known and most studied British poets of the nineteenth century. By virtue of the recently completed *Rossetti Archive*, digital images of "every surviving documentary state of [his] works"^[1]—manuscripts, sketches, editions, paintings—are now easily accessible online, accompanied by extensive editorial comments, notes, and transcriptions. This edition of Rossetti's brief lyric poem "Sunset Wings" deals with a type of text that falls outside the scope of the *Rossetti Archive*: the transatlantic reprint. In the four months following its first publication in the *Athenaeum* on May 24, 1873, "Sunset Wings" was reprinted at least fourteen times in American newspapers and weekly miscellanies, more than any other of his original poetical contributions to the periodical press. On June 8 it appeared in the *New York Times*, followed by the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (June 9), *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* (June 12), *Albion* (June 14), *Springfield Republican* (June 18), *Every Saturday*, *Buffalo Daily Courier*, *Massachusetts Ploughman*, and *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin* (all on June 28), *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* and *Newport Mercury* (both on July 5), *New-Hampshire Patriot* (July 9), *Youth's Companion* (August 28), and the *Independent Statesman* of Concord, New Hampshire (September 4).

After the poem was collected in Rossetti's 1881 *Ballads and Sonnets*, reprints kept appearing sporadically in the American press—in the 1890s through the 1930s there were at least fifteen in twelve different newspapers: *Morning Oregonian* (March 20, 1898), *Philadelphia Enquirer* (May 23, 1902), *Dallas Morning News* (June 9, 1902, November 29, 1918, and March 6, 1920), *Sunday Oregonian* (July 13, 1902), *Yuma Pioneer* (August 22, 1902), *Kansas City Star* (July 5, 1911), *Arizona Republican* (October 25, 1911), *Daily Oklahoman* (August 19, 1912), *Christian Science Monitor* (April 6, 1916, and February 23, 1920), *Springfield Republican* (April 28, 1921), *Albany Evening News* (July 19, 1927), and *Omaha World-Herald* (May 14, 1935).

Given the relatively little scholarly attention that the poem has received in the past few decades, these are surprising numbers. "Sunset Wings" was, in fact, Rossetti's most frequently reprinted poem in the United States, appearing in local newspapers from places as geographically and socioculturally different as New York, Dallas, and San Francisco. This digital edition traces the poem's journey (or journeys) through various segments of the American press, allowing readers to explore its shifting contexts and meanings as well as Rossetti's changing position in the American literary marketplace.

The edition contains twenty-nine reprints of "Sunset Wings" published in twenty-five different newspapers between 1873 and 1935. I collected the poems exclusively from fully searchable online digital newspaper and periodical archives, both free and subscription-based.^[2] I searched each database systematically using a set of search terms that included not only "Sunset Wings" and "Rossetti" (and common misspellings like "Rosetti" and "Rosseti") but also, in case the title had been omitted, various characteristic phrases from the poem such as "two golden wings," "wrangling rout," and "mustered rooks." These searches returned

eleven versions in GenealogyBank's historical newspaper archive (v6, v12, v13, v17, v18, v21, v23, v25, v27, v28, v30), six in Gale's *19th Century U.S. Newspapers* (v3, v4, v8, v11, v15, v16), four in ProQuest's *American Periodicals Series* (v5, v9, v10, v14), two in ProQuest's *Historical Newspapers* (v24, v26), two in *Old Fulton New York Post Cards*, a somewhat quirky website offering access to a wealth of New York State historical newspapers (v7, v29), and one each in *Chronicling America* (Library of Congress, v22), *Historic Oregon Newspapers* (v19), the *Colorado Historical Newspaper Project* (v20), and the *New York Times Article Archive* (v2). The original *Athenaeum poem* (v1) was digitized by ProQuest in its *British Periodicals* collection.

The edition makes no pretense of being exhaustive. One of the greatest advantages of these fully searchable digital databases is that they make it possible to search millions of newspaper and magazine pages in a matter of seconds, revealing evolutions, patterns, and dynamics that through manual browsing of the original copies would perhaps never have come to light. Yet they also have their limitations. Some reprints may have failed to appear in the search results due to poor OCR (Optical Character Recognition) or missing pages. No doubt, even more reprints remain to be discovered in digital collections unknown to me and in nondigitized newspapers.

The edition is an offshoot of the digital project "The Rossettis' Periodical Poetry," funded by the Research Foundation–Flanders, that I am directing in association with the Centre for Scholarly Editing and Document Studies at Ghent, Belgium. When completed, this digital archive will provide access to all poems published by Dante Gabriel and Christina Rossetti in the British and American periodical press, as well as numerous unauthorized reprints in newspaper and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic. The archive currently contains forty-three original poems by Dante Gabriel and eighty-seven by Christina. For the period 1862–1900, I have so far identified a total of 207 Rossetti reprints in 114 American newspapers published in thirty-four different states. These poems comprise only a fraction of the vast numbers of unauthorized transatlantic reprints of British poetry that appeared in the United States throughout most of the nineteenth century. With no international copyright law to regulate what Meredith McGill has called the "transatlantic traffic in poems,"^[3] miscellaneous magazines on the East Coast like the *Living Age*, *Eclectic Magazine*, *Albion*, and *Every Saturday* copied liberally from British periodicals and poetry volumes. They in turn often served as harvesting ground for local and regional newspapers across the country.

The edition consists of three parts: a textual edition of the individual poems, a comparative edition, and a map. For the two editions, I encoded the twenty-nine identified reprints of "Sunset Wings" and the original *Athenaeum* version in a single TEI-P5 XML file using the parallel segmentation method. The textual edition is accompanied by images of the original newspaper pages to enable direct comparison between the source and the encoded text and to allow readers to explore the immediate context in which the poems first appeared. The [Juxta Commons](#) interface of the comparative edition enables readers to compare and collate different versions of the poems. Because one of my main objectives as editor was to encode as much as possible of the typographical idiosyncrasies of each reprint, I have preserved all original spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. Spelling mistakes and word variants in particular deserve closer attention, not only because they may offer us valuable clues as to the source of a reprint but also because they act as silent witnesses to the rush of the nineteenth-century daily news industry, where typesetters and proofreaders, under constant pressure to meet deadlines, either failed to spot or omitted to correct compositing errors. To facilitate comparison between versions, however, I have removed indentation and any extra line breaks

adjusting the poem to newspaper column width. For the same reason, I have chosen not to preserve the different stanzaic structure used by the *Albany Evening News*, with four lines in the first and six lines in the final stanza rather than the usual five.

The textual edition is accompanied by a historical map that enables users to visualize geographically the reprint history of "Sunset Wings." I have created the map using the [Neatline](#) plugin for [Omeka](#). The base layer is a static image in TIFF format of an 1873 map of the United States from the [David Rumsey Map Collection](#). Reprints v2–v30 are represented on the map by means of clickable blue points (1873 reprints) and gray points (later reprints). Mousing over or clicking on a reprint listed in the menu on the right will locate that reprint on the map.

While this edition aims to provide insight into the reprinting of "Sunset Wings," it does not constitute a publishing history in the strictest sense of the term. I have included Rossetti's original *Athenaeum* version not as a place of origin but rather as a starting point for exploring the long, rich life of the poem in the periodical and newspaper press. All 1873 reprints (numbered v2–v15 in this edition) beyond a doubt descend from the *Athenaeum* text (v1), because no other authorized version was available in print at the time, yet textual comparison suggests that some do so only indirectly. The June 9, 1873, reprint in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (v3) and the version that appeared three days later in the *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* (v4), for example, share two textual variants that may indicate close affiliation: both have "every edding flight" rather than "ever-eddyng flight" in line 16, and "on the earth" rather than "on the heart" in line 29. Similarly, the Boston-based *Massachusetts Ploughman* (v10, June 28) and the *Newport Mercury* (v12, July 5) both have "ever-eddyng night" in line 16 and "Sun-steeped to fire" instead of "Sun-steeped in fire" in line 6. Given Boston's leading position as a cultural and literary hub, it seems plausible that local newspapers in the northeastern United States would have relied on the Boston newspaper press for their daily dose of poetry as well as on the foreign circulation of British periodicals.

Identifying the sources of the later reprints (v16–v30), published between 1898 and 1935, is even more complicated, although a quick comparison with the most obvious candidates digitally available through *Google Books*, *Internet Archive*, and *HathiTrust* already reveals some of their interrelationships. By the late nineteenth century, the poem was available in several British and American editions of *Ballads and Sonnets* and *The Complete Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Later it also appeared in popular anthologies such as *The Home Book of Verse*, *The Golden Treasury*, and *Lights to Literature*. All later versions go back to Rossetti's *Ballads and Sonnets* text, which is identical to the *Athenaeum* version except for line 12 (now reading "Save for the whirr within" rather than "But for the whirr within") and the addition of an exclamation mark in the final stanza. Typographical variations such as "Wing'd," "Sun-steep'd," and "laugh'd" in the *Morning Oregonian* version (v16, March 20, 1898) suggest that this particular reprint was taken from an 1897 or 1898 edition of *The Golden Treasury*. Versions v17–v24, v26, and v27 offer only the first three stanzas of the poem. This could indicate that they were copied from the anthology *Lights to Literature*, where the three stanzas appeared as "From 'Sunset Wings,' by Dante Gabriel Rossetti."^[4] Moreover, versions v24 and v26 (*Christian Science Monitor*) and v27 (*Dallas Morning News*) all omit the final part of the first stanza. The three reprints may have an unknown common source, or perhaps the *Dallas Morning News* got its version from the *Christian Science Monitor*, which was published in Boston but circulated nationally.

By including only newspaper and magazine reprints in the edition of "Sunset Wings," I hope to call attention to the specific role of the press in the reception and dissemination of Rossetti's poetry across the Atlantic, and in particular to the ways in which the local and regional newspapers multiplied the readerships, contexts, and meanings of the original poem. Rossetti composed "Sunset Wings" in August 1871 at Kelmscott, Oxfordshire, where he was spending the summer with his new muse, Jane Morris, and her children while her husband, William Morris, was in Iceland. Three days before the poem was published in the *Athenaeum*, he wrote to his mother from Kelmscott: "The Athenæum people asked me for some verse the other day & I didn't like to refuse—so a little piece of mine will be in their next number." It was written "when first I came here, & embodies a habit of the starlings which quite amounts to a local phenomenon & is most beautiful & interesting daily towards sunset for months together in summer & autumn."^[5] To Thomas Purnell of the *Athenaeum* he explained: "the noise is [. . .] just like the wheels at a water-mill, or (more prosaically) like a factory in full spin."^[6]

Despite Rossetti's fear that it might seem strange to anyone who never witnessed the uncannily synchronized movements of starling flocks, "Sunset Wings" was an instant success even in the United States, where starlings do not naturally occur.^[7] The poem was reprinted throughout the summer of 1873, and it frequently returned in later years from the onset of spring to late August—only four of the reprints in this edition (v22, v25, v26, and v27) were published "out of season." The *Newport Mercury* even printed it alongside William Cullen Bryant's popular poem "The Old-World Sparrow," in which the American poet celebrated the introduction of the European sparrow into the New World:

A winged settler has taken his place
With Teutons and men of the Celtic race. He has
followed their path to our hemisphere: The Old-World sparrow at last is here. (lines 3–6)

If "Sunset Wings" did not spark readers' fascination with "Old World" birds, it must at least have struck a familiar chord because of its apolitical focus on nature, through which Rossetti explored universal themes of hope—"plumed [. . .] as 't were a fiery dart" (line 26)—and sorrow. In the *Christian Science Monitor* for April 6, 1916 (v24), it appeared on the same page as Laurence Binyon's "An April Day," which offered similar romantic musings on nature with its "Rosy sunset bathing all the vale below" and "Starry sadness filling the quiet eyes of night." Poems like these provided a momentary repose from more serious political and economic news reports and from the busy layout of advertisements for fire insurance, carriages, railway shares, pianofortes, and real estate. Headings such as "A Minute of Poetry" (*Albany Evening News*, v29), "A Minute's Chat" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, v17), and "The Poet's Corner" (*Massachusetts Ploughman*, v10) all hint at the escape function of poetry, as does the decision of the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (v3) and *Daily Evening Bulletin* (v8) to include "Sunset Wings" in the newspaper supplement rather than in the newspaper itself.

As Natalie Houston has argued, "the inclusion of poems [in newspapers] resists a simple definition of the page's contents as purely informational. In considering the reception history of newspaper poems, we have to wonder who actually read these pages and with what kind of attention."^[8] A particularly useful concept for understanding readers' interactions with both newspaper poetry and its immediate context is the practice described by Katie Lanning as "tessellated reading."^[9] Lanning introduces the concept in her lucid discussion of how readers of Victorian serial fiction, which was usually published alongside other types of periodical content, actively "fit texts or pieces of texts together to create a mosaic of meaning." The images accompanying this edition allow readers to explore similar processes

of tessellation in the newspapers that reprinted "Sunset Wings." At the same time, the edition also enables new tessellated readings of the poem by piecing together a new "mosaic" of texts long scattered across several electronic newspaper archives.

Because they are visually set off by white space and distinctive lineation, newspaper poems are easily spotted on the newspaper page. Still, the boundaries between poetic and other material are often blurred, not only on the material page but also by the reading process itself. In the *Dallas Morning News* for March 6, 1920 (v27), for instance, "Sunset Wings" is printed in the bottom left corner of the title page in a framed text box that also contains another piece of text in the same layout. Only upon closer inspection does it become clear that this item, despite the characteristic short lines and regular indentation, is not a poem but the local weather forecast. Thus, juxtaposed to the fiery sunset in Rossetti's "western sky" is a set of more prosaic descriptions of nature such as "East Texas: Saturday and Sunday generally cloudy, continued cold."

In the *Daily Oklahoman* for August 19, 1912, "Sunset Wings" (v23) was printed as part of a society column by one of the newspaper's editorial writers, Edith C. Johnson. Flanked by the "Daily Fashion Hint" and an advertisement for painless tooth extraction, it heads a column filled with gossipy reports on local high society: who was dining with whom, who was staying where, and who just returned from whence. Other items on the same page include articles on the upcoming presidential election, the prohibition law, the New Orleans cotton trade, and a storm that claimed two lives in Michigan as well as advertisements for the Hamburg-American Line, Fair Park Theater, Meadow Gold Butter, Wentworth Military Academy, and several women's colleges.

While newspaper poetry easily draws readers' attention with its typical layout, it is "just as likely," as Houston points out, that some "immediately turned away, to information of immediate, practical advantage."^[10] Readers of the *Independent Statesman* (v15) in Concord, New Hampshire, were perhaps more interested in the hurricane that hit Nova Scotia or in the latest news from the newspaper's New York correspondent, while the readers of *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* may have been too eager to read the new installment of Mrs. Oliphant's serial *Innocent: A Tale of Modern Life* (a reprint from the *Graphic*) to notice Rossetti's poem (v11) in the top left corner of the page.

Whether "Sunset Wings" was actually read and, if so, how it was read not only depended on the surrounding news articles and advertisements, and on readers' individual tastes and interests, but Rossetti's reputation also played a role. As the head of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, he had already made a name for himself in the American art world in the late 1850s and early 1860s. As a poet, however, he was only just beginning to be known by the American reading public when "Sunset Wings" first appeared. By the time of his death in 1882, Rossetti was a celebrated poet-painter whose Bohemian lifestyle, loves, and rivalries would regularly feature in gossip columns for decades to come. The reprints in this edition illustrate this evolution in several ways. First, misspellings and misattributions in the early 1873 reprints suggest the unfamiliarity of some newspapers with Rossetti's name. The *Newport Mercury* (v12) attributes the poem to "Daniel G. Rossetti"; in the *Independent Statesman* it is signed "Dante G. Rossetti" (v15). The most fascinating misattribution, however, is the one to "Christina G. Rosetti" (v13) in the *New-Hampshire Patriot* for July 9, 1873. While we can only speculate as to who was responsible for the mistake—a negligent typesetter, perhaps in combination with an overworked or simply nonexistent proofreader?—it is quite obvious why the poem was attributed to Rossetti's sister. By the early 1870s,

Christina was one of the most popular British poets in the United States, as her often short, deceptively simple poetry arguably lent itself even better to reprinting than her brother's.

There are no misattributions among the later reprints of "Sunset Wings," although "Gabriel" is misspelled "Gabrielle" in the *Dallas Morning News* for November 29, 1918 (v25). Many of these posthumous reprints presented a truncated version of the poem, omitting the final two stanzas. "Sunset Wings" (and Rossetti with it) had become part of the reading public's collective memory; readers did not need the complete poem anymore to have a meaningful reading experience. Many could rely on previous readings, and for those who could not, there were numerous anthologies offering the poem in its entirety. At the same time, by leaving out the dark conclusion with its swarming rooks and tolling death bell, newspaper editors were no doubt also catering to audiences less appreciative of the poem's slide into loss of hope and even irreligion. What remained an innocent evocation of nature at sunset that, while hinting at the deeper realities of the human condition, was unlikely to offend anyone.

Finally, the map accompanying this edition visualizes the growing geographical, cultural, and political diversity of Rossetti's reading public. In 1863 an anonymous contributor to *Fraser's Magazine* pointed out a "curious law" in the circulation of American periodicals:

As the staple of news and thought goes to the United States from Europe—as New York is really as provincial to London as Chicago is to New York—all papers go from east to west, with the sun, and never in the opposite direction. The best possible magazine or weekly paper, if published in Cincinnati or the Ohio Valley would never cross the Alleghanies; while the West is covered with publications from the Atlantic seaboard.[\[11\]](#)

Although recent research has shown that news often traveled both ways, there is some truth in the *Fraser's* article as far as the transatlantic dissemination of British poetry is concerned.[\[12\]](#) With the exception of the *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin* (v8), all newspapers and miscellaneous weeklies of the 1873 reprints of "Sunset Wings" were based in five states on the East Coast: New York (v2, v5, v7, v11), Massachusetts (v3, v6, v9, v10), New Hampshire (v13, v15), Maine (v4), and Rhode Island (v12). The locations of the later reprints, by contrast, are more diverse and widely spread across the country. In addition to Massachusetts (v24, v26, v28), New York (v29), and Pennsylvania (v17), states included Texas (v18, v25, v27), Oklahoma (v23), Colorado (v20), and Arizona (v22) in the southwest and south-central regions of the United States, and Oregon (v16, v19), Missouri (v21), and Nebraska (v30) in the Northwest and Midwest. Places of publication ranged from densely populated cities like Boston and New York to small towns like Yuma, Colorado.

The newspapers also differed widely in their political sympathies and target readerships. The *New York Times*, *Boston Daily Advertiser*, *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, *Springfield Republican*, *Daily Evening Bulletin*, and *Independent Statesman* were all Republican to a greater or lesser extent; the *Buffalo Daily Courier*, *New-Hampshire Patriot*, and *World-Herald* had a Democratic profile. *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* was largely aimed at urban, middle-class readers, while the *Massachusetts Ploughman* as an agricultural journal targeted local, rural readerships.

What unites these newspapers, for all their differences, is that they all at some point in their publication histories reprinted Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Sunset Wings." In doing so, they not only created a wide range of new material contexts for the poem but also presented it to a diverse and ever-changing reading public who, in turn, gave meaning to it in their individual

ways. By collecting twenty-nine transatlantic newspaper reprints of "Sunset Wings," this digital edition aims to line up some of the various perspectives from which several generations of readers may have looked at the poem in the decades following Rossetti's own spotting of the starling flocks at Kelmscott.

Notes

1. Jerome McGann, ed., *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/>. ↗
2. The [United States of America Directory of Newspaper Collections](#) on the website of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and the [Resources for Research: Periodicals](#) page on the website of the Research Society for American Periodicals were used as starting points. ↗
3. Meredith L. McGill, introduction to *The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. Meredith L. McGill (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 5. ↗
4. Abbey E. Lane, ed., *Lights to Literature, Revised: Book Four* (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1900), 67. ↗
5. Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti (May 20, 1873), *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 6: The Last Decade, 1873–1882; I. 1873–1874*, ed. William E. Fredeman (Cambridge: Brewer, 2006), 146–47. ↗
6. Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Thomas Purnell (May 9, 1873), *Correspondence*, 142. ↗
7. Legend has it that starlings were imported from Britain in 1890 by the New York pharmacist Eugene Schieffelin, who, in an attempt to introduce into the United States every bird mentioned in Shakespeare's plays, released a few dozen in Central Park. The North American starling population now numbers millions of birds. ↗
8. Natalie M. Houston, "Newspaper Poems: Material Texts in the Public Sphere," *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2008): 236. ↗
9. Katie Lanning, "Tessellating Texts: Reading *The Moonstone* in *All the Year Round*," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 45, no. 1 (2012): 1. ↗
10. Houston, "Newspaper Poems," 236. ↗
11. "The Periodical Press of the United States of American," *Fraser's Magazine* 68, no. 405 (1863): 326–27. ↗
12. See, for example, Sherilyn Cox Bennion, *Equal to the Occasion: Women Editors of the Nineteenth-Century West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1990), vii. ↗