Rossetti's Giorgione and the Victorian 'Cult of Vagueness'

novo pensiero dentro a me si mise,
del qual più altri nacquero e diversi;
e tanto d'uno in altro vaneggiai
che li occhi per vaghezza ricopersi,
e 'l pensamento in sogno trasmutai.

Purgatorio XVIII: 141–45[1]

Towards the end of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's prose tale 'Hand and Soul' (1849) the narrator stands transfixed for a second day before an early medieval painting in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. A gaggle of art students hovers nearby, copying the celebrated Raphael that hangs above it. Taking the visiting Englishman for a monoglot, the students mock his interest in the older picture: 'roba mistica', gibes one; ''st'Inglesi son matti sul misticismo: somiglia alle nebbie di lá. Li fa pensare alla patria' ('mystic stuff; these English are mad about mysticism – it's like those fogs they have over there. It makes them think of their country').[2] The Italian student's good humour gives way to Gallic disdain: 'Je tiens que quand on ne comprend pas une chose, c'est qu'elle ne signifie rien' ('I hold that when one can't understand a thing it's of no importance').[3] This closing dialogue to what is commonly acknowledged to be one of Rossetti's most important works – Jerome McGann calls it his 'aesthetic manifesto' – has

[1] 'A new thought came into me, / from which a number of other, different ones / were born; and from one to the other I so / wandered on, that I closed my eyes in drowsiness / and transmuted thinking into dream.' Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio,* ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford 2004), pp. 298–99.

[2] Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Hand and Soul', in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Jerome McGann (New Haven 2003), pp. 309–17: 318.

[3] Ibid.

attracted relatively little notice.[4] The longest and most detailed examination of Rossetti's parable about sincerity and self-expression in art dispenses with this climactic passage with the terse observation that 'there are few who like' such art and 'fewer who understand it'.[5] Yet the terms of the students' dialogue rehearse one of the central motifs in the reception (both contemporary and subsequent) of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics, and Rossetti's in particular.

Ford Madox Ford spoke for a generation of Modernist sceptics when he accused Rossetti of 'the idea, amounting to an obsession, that Poetry is a matter of mists hiding, of glamours confusing the outlines of things', a view at one with T. E. Hulme's wider condemnation of the principle he detected underlying much late Victorian verse: the communication of 'some vague mood'.[6] One might, of course, communicate a 'vague mood' very precisely: Edgar Allan Poe believed that poetry should aspire to 'a suggestive indefinitiveness of meaning, with the view of bringing about a definitiveness of vague and therefore of spiritual *effect*'.[7] Rossetti himself criticised some of Arthur O'Shaughnessy's poems for producing 'a certain vagueness of impression' (as distinguished from an impression of vagueness).[8] Conversely, John Ruskin had insisted on 'the mystery of

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[4] McGann, *Collected*, p. 409.

[5] John Pfordresher, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "Hand and Soul": Sources and Significance', *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 19, no. 2 (1982), pp. 103–32: 131.

[6] Ford Madox Hueffer, *Rossetti: A Critical Essay on His Art* (London 1902), p. 85; T. E. Hulme, *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, ed. Karen Csengeri (Oxford 1994), p. 53. See also his remark that 'So much has romanticism debauched us, that, without some form of vagueness, we deny the highest' (ibid., p. 66).

[7] Edgar Allan Poe, 'Marginalia', in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, vol. 16: *Marginalia, Eureka, Bibliography*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York 1902), p. 28.

[8] Rossetti to Arthur O'Shaughnessy, 25 Apr. 1874, in *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William E. Fredeman, 10 vols (Cambridge 2010), vol. 6, p. 443.

clearness': as in 'an Italian twilight, when, sixty or eighty miles away, the ridge of the Western Alps rises in its dark and serrated blue against the crystalline vermilion, there is . . . an unsearchableness without cloud or concealment'.[9] Remarks such as these, from two of the writers who most engaged Rossetti, suggest the intricacy of the issues raised by the conclusion of 'Hand and Soul'. Situating Rossetti's poetry within the discourse of vagueness in nineteenth-century aesthetics is one way of connecting the various subjects raised by the students' dialogue – mysticism, mistiness, and the relation of art to understanding – and hence of beginning to apprehend its significance. It may also show why it has been possible to characterise Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry both by its 'antagonism to all mist and deception' (in Ruskin's classic statement) and by what William Empson called 'ambiguity by vagueness, such as was used to excess by the Pre-Raphaelites'.[10] Empson's suggestion that such a resource could be used 'to excess' implies it is not in itself objectionable. Indeed, he acknowledged that, while the 'wavering and suggestive indefiniteness of nineteenth-century poetry' was 'often merely weak', it could also be the condition of 'extreme beauty'.[11] Megan Quigley therefore misrepresents his stance when she ranks him among those for whom (like Rossetti's fictional art students) vagueness can mean nothing but muddled thinking and lack of substance, flimsiness of object and slackness of execution.[12] Comparing illustrations of

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[9] John Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Mystery: – Secondly, Wilful', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 6: *Modern Painters IV*, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Cambridge 1904), pp. 88–105: 103. That mystery and clarity need not be opposites is suggested by Rossetti's naming his fictional painter 'Chiaro' ('clear').

[10] Ruskin, 'Of Turnerian Mystery: – First, as Essential', in *Modern Painters IV*, pp. 73–87: 75; William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London 1947), p. 26.

[11] Empson, *Seven Types*, p. 190, 187.

[12] According to Quigley, vagueness for Empson represented a 'weak refusal of the concrete alternatives of ambiguity'. See Megan Quigley, *Modernist Fiction and Vagueness: Philosophy, Form,*

Dante in 1872, John Addington Symonds was careful to discriminate between different uses and degrees of artistic vagueness: ‘The absence of vagueness in Blake prevents our calling his designs sublime in the highest sense: they startle our imagination, rather than dilate it. On the other hand the vagueness of Fuseli is excessive: it degenerates into feebleness.’[13] In this essay, I want to suggest that engaging seriously with vagueness, both as a critical term and as a particular type of affect, may allow for a kind of reading that is more, not less, theoretically sophisticated and historically alert.

Specifically, I want to propose that Rossetti’s sonnet ‘A Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione; in the Louvre’ (composed in the same year as ‘Hand and Soul’) models a way of responding to qualities of vagueness – at the various levels of subject, form, and figure – that is best understood in terms of the Renaissance art-theoretical concept of *vaghezza*. This concept, particularly associated with the Venetian tradition dear to Rossetti, constellates notions of haziness, beauty, mutability, and indefinability which lie at the heart of his poetic technique and artistic ambitions, and which orient his contribution to what Empson termed the Victorian ‘cult of vagueness’.[14] Rossetti’s picture-poem both exemplifies a certain kind of engagement with a work of art and aspires to the same wanderingly evocative qualities to

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and Language (Cambridge 2015), p. 7.

[13] John Addington Symonds, *An Introduction to the Study of Dante* (London 1872), p. 234. Compare also Ruskin’s earlier remark: ‘Perfection in chiaroscuro drawing lies between these two masters, Rembrandt and Dürer. Rembrandt is often too loose and vague; and Dürer has little or no effect of mist or uncertainty.’ (*The Elements of Drawing*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 15, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Cambridge 1904), pp. 1–232: 79).

[14] Empson himself is rather vague about what he means by vagueness, although he associates it closely with his sixth type of ambiguity (by contradiction or irrelevance). The example he gives is Thomas Nashe’s ‘Brightness falls from the air’; see *Seven Types*, p. 26.

which it responds, seeking for itself the status which Rossetti attributed to another of Giorgione's canvases: 'a thing to dream before'.[15]

I

The collective title which Rossetti gave to his 'Sonnets for Pictures' leaves provocatively open the question of how the relation between painting and poem ought to be conceptualized. That these are sonnets 'for' pictures could mean a number of things: that they are intended as a gift (the poems presumably supplying something lacking in the paintings), a tribute (acts of homage to loftier works), and/or a substitute (sonnets *in place of* pictures, which could imply they are being offered as approximations – or alternatives). The poems have traditionally been read within the ekphrastic tradition, indeed as typifiying that tradition: that is, as verbal representations of visual representations (in James Heffernan's usefully inclusive definition).[16] One of the most striking things about them, however – which passes almost wholly unremarked in the critical literature – is the lack of correspondence between these two fields of representation. As William Money Hardinge observed of Rossetti's sonnet for Mantegna's *Parnassus* in 1891, 'were it not for the fact that this is the only one of the three pictures by Mantegna in the Louvre to which this sonnet could possibly apply . . . I should even now be scarcely convinced that they were fellows'.[17] The sonnet for Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre*, on the other hand, with its reference to waves and vessels, had the same individual (a wholly sincere and sympathetic reader) combing the galleries in vain for a

[15] Rossetti to Charles Eliot Norton, Jul. 1858, in *Correspondence*, vol. 2, p. 226.

[16] See James Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago 1993), p. 3.

[17] William Money Hardinge, 'A Note on the Louvre Sonnets of Rossetti', *Temple Bar*, 91 (Mar. 1891), pp. 433–43: 439.

lagoonscape with gondolas.[18] Rossetti's own titles for these pictures tend to obscure their content by removing them to the furthest horizon of generic expectations: 'An Allegorical Dance for Women', 'A Venetian Pastoral'.[19] Moreover, on their original appearance in *The Germ* they even came appended with prose descriptions of the paintings, as if in acknowledgment of their referential vagueness; that Rossetti later cut these paratexts from the published editions of his work suggests he did not regard this quality as altogether a weakness.[20]

The history of the valorization of vagueness in nineteenth-century aesthetics remains to be written. Here it must suffice to note that in the realm of Victorian literary culture – in addition to the writings of Poe and Ruskin already mentioned – it emerges with particular force in the criticism of E. S. Dallas and James Sully, published as Rossetti's reputation continued to rise, and as he continued to revise his work, through the second half of the century.[21] For Dallas, writing in the 1860s, 'all good poetry and art will . . . set innumerable

[18] Hardinge, 'Louvre Sonnets', p. 437. The painting is now generally attributed to Titian (see Elizabeth K. Helsinger's discussion in *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts: Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris* (New Haven 2008), p. 33).

[19] Rossetti equivocated about even this, referring to a 'pastoral – at least, a kind of pastoral – by Giorgione which is so intensely fine that I condescended to sit down before it and write a sonnet' (Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 8 Oct. 1849, in *Correspondence*, vol. 1, p. 114). The painting had been catalogued as a 'Pastorale' in Charles Lebrun's 1683 inventory drawn up for Louis XIV and acquired its present name in the early nineteenth century (see Francis Haskell, 'Giorgione's *Concert Champêtre* and its Admirers', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 119, no. 5180 (1971), pp. 543–55: 548–49).

[20] Hardinge was using the text of the 1870 *Poems*.

[21] For an illuminating discussion of links between eighteenth-century aesthetics of vagueness and English Romanticism, see Thomas H. Ford, *Wordsworth and the Poetics of Air* (Cambridge 2018), especially pp. 127–48.

trains of thought astir in the mind, fill us with their suggestiveness, and charm us with an indefinable sense of pleasure', being imbued with that 'unknown something . . . which we are in the habit of signalising as in a peculiar sense poetical'.[22] A decade later, Sully too accords a central place to the 'effect of vague suggestion', observing that 'Contemporary English art, including painting and poetry, illustrates an impulse among some of the most cultivated lovers of art to make prominent this ingredient of the vague and undefined'.[23]

Dallas's and Sully's interventions enlist developments in modern psychology to lend support to William Hazlitt's earlier claim that 'The province of the imagination . . . is the unknown and undefined'.[24] Hazlitt's assertion in turn channels one of the fundamental principles of eighteenth-century aesthetics, embodied in Kant's notion of vague beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*, more commonly translated as 'free' or 'pure' beauty) as the proper object of a judgement of taste, unencumbered by pre-determined ends and desires.[25] Alternatively, one might trace an ancestor in the seventeenth-century French idea of the *je ne sais quoi*, formulated by the Abbé Dominique Bouhours in 1671 to describe what James Elkins calls 'a state of unfocus, of unresolvable meaning', or more precisely 'the pleasure of such a state'.[26] Further inquiry might ultimately root these traditions in mystical-theological ideas about the way in which God transcends every attempt at positive definition.[27] Rossetti's poetics emerges out of and contributes towards this long legacy of reflection, but I want to suggest an

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[22] E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science*, 2 vols (London 1866), vol. 1, p. 318; vol. 2, p. 135.

[23] James Sully, 'The Undefinable in Art', *Cornhill Magazine*, 38 (Nov. 1878), pp. 559–72: 560.

[24] William Hazlitt, 'On Poetry in General', in *The Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, vol. 2, ed. Duncan Wu (London 1998), pp. 165–80: 172.

[25] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, tr. James Creed Meredith, rev. Nicholas Walker (Oxford 2007), p. 60.

[26] James Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?: The Modern Origins of Pictorial Complexity* (New York 1999), p. 161.

alternative genealogy for his preoccupation with the vague which leads back not to France, Germany, or the ancient world, but to late medieval and Renaissance Italy – to Petrarch, Dante, and the Venetian artists he most admired.

Rossetti's choice of Giorgione's painting as a poetic subject is particularly significant from this point of view because Giorgione's reception history is bound up with questions about reference and interpretability. The sixteenth-century critic Giorgio Vasari suggested that, in Giorgione's frescoes for the Fondaco dei Tedeschi in Venice, the painter 'set to work . . . with no other purpose than to make figures at fancy to display his art, for I cannot discover what they mean, whether they represent some ancient or modern story, and no one has been able to tell me.'[28] In the nineteenth century this lack of narratability was increasingly revalued as the possession of a 'lyrical' quality, as for example in Anna Jameson's account of Giorgione in her *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters* (1845), a book Rossetti is known to have studied closely.[29] Jameson characterises Giorgione as 'essentially a poet, and a

[27] For an introduction to these ideas, see Andrew Louth, 'Apophatic and Cataphatic Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, ed. Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (Cambridge 2012), pp. 137–46.

[28] Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. William Gaunt (New York 1963), p. 170. Vasari's comment is coloured by his broader antipathy to the Venetian tradition, which, as James Elkins observes, is widely credited with 'a fundamental possibility that Western art has had since the 1470s: to declare, however ineffectually, that a painting might fall outside of any genre, symbolization, or primary meaning' (Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?*, p. 128).

[29] On the particular challenge Giorgione's paintings have posed to interpretation, see Elkins, *Why Are Our Pictures Puzzles?*, pp. 98–122. On Rossetti's use of Jameson, see David A. Ludley, 'Anna Jameson and D. G. Rossetti: His Use of Her Histories', *Woman's Art Journal*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1991), pp. 29–33. On the particular valences of 'lyric' in the Victorian period, see Angela Leighton, 'Lyric and the Lyrical', in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge 2012), pp. 149–71.

subjective poet', whose works were 'in painting what idyls and lyrics are in poetry'.[30] The 'mysterious allegorical significance' of a painting like the *Concert Champêtre* being irrecoverable, Jameson suggests that its 'particular charm' for a modern viewer arises from the vague feeling of melancholy mixed with enjoyment which it seems to express, as though vagueness of subject made possible a rich vagueness of feeling.[31] The Pre-Raphaelite critic F. G. Stephens placed Rossetti's own later paintings explicitly in the 'lyrical' tradition of Titian and Giorgione, being 'so indefinite' that 'there is nothing to suggest subject, time, or place'.[32] In the same decade, Théophile Gautier praised the *Concert Champêtre* as 'a painting which has no subject and tells no story', and ten years later, in his celebrated essay 'The School of Giorgione' (1877), Walter Pater would claim that the perfection of lyrical poetry depended upon 'a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject' epitomized in the work of the Venetian master, whose paintings could thus be said to 'belong to a sort of poetry which tells itself without an articulated story'.[33] This latter expression is more than simply a definition of lyric by what it is not (epic, drama, narrative). Though it may lack the self-conscious resonance of Pater's italicized and much discussed tag from the same essay ('*All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music*'), it hints at a comparably bold and

[30] Anna Jameson, *Memoirs of the Early Italian Painters* (London 1845), vol. 1, p. 212, 220.

[31] Jameson, *Memoirs*, p. 220.

[32] F. G. Stephens, 'Mr Rossetti's Pictures', *Athenaeum*, no. 1982 (21 Oct. 1865), pp. 545–46: 545, 546.

[33] Théophile Gautier, *The Louvre*, in *The Works of Théophile Gautier*, vol. 5, ed. and trans. F. C. de Sumichrast (Boston 1901), pp. 1–322: 72; Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione', in *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley 1980), pp. 102–22: 108, 117.

tantalizing idea – that a painting might be its own ekphrasis (from *ek* + *phrazein*, to tell out).[34] Vagueness, then, as the essence of eloquence.

This could be taken to imply that there is simply nothing to be said about the picture; that, in the paradoxical phrase of the leading nineteenth-century critic of the Renaissance, Jacob Burckhardt, the 'inexpressible poetry' of such painting is 'perhaps only desecrated by words'.[35] The inadequacy of words to measure up to the image has always been a key point of debate in the *paragone* between the sister arts (as in Ruskin's famously dishonest statement about Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*: 'I will not insult this marvellous picture by an effort at a verbal account of it').[36] In Burckhardt, however, as elsewhere in nineteenth-century discourse, the eclipse of the expressible is ascribed to poetry as well as painting. Their ancient rivalry thus takes on a new and unexpected twist in Victorian discourse, each medium competing to be, not the more vividly delineative (in pursuit of the traditional ideals of *enargeia* or *descriptio*), but the more profoundly vague.[37] James Sully conducted just such a

[34] Pater, 'Giorgione', p. 106; see *OED*, 'ekphrasis, *n.*'. One art historian has suggested just this of Giorgione's *Concert*, after discussing the search for a poem which the picture might be taken to illustrate: 'It seems to me to be more in the nature of the subject that the picture itself be the poem, the painter the poet.' (Philipp Fehl, 'The Hidden Genre: A Study of the *Concert Champêtre* in the Louvre', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1957), pp. 153–68: 159).

[35] Burckhardt, *The Cicerone: An Art Guide to Painting in Italy*, trans. Mrs. A. H. Clough, ed. J. A. Crowe (London 1879), p. 196, 197. Titian referred to his mythological paintings as *poesie*, a term used in contradistinction to *istorie* which came to be associated with paintings lacking 'moral content'. See Patricia Emison, 'Poesia', in *Grove Art Online*, https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T068247 (entry published 2003).

[36] Ruskin, 'Of Imagination Penetrative', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, vol. 4: *Modern Painters II*, ed. Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Cambridge 1903), pp. 249–88: 270.

[37] For the best history of these traditional ideals, see Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore 1992).

comparison of the different arts 'in respect of their capability of supplying the peculiar modes of vague delight', and instances of this inverted *paragone* may be found throughout the Victorian period.[38] After visiting Rossetti's own studio, for example, Elizabeth Gaskell refused to 'define & shape my feelings & thoughts' about his pictures into so 'coarse' a material as 'words', while for *Middlemarch*'s Will Ladislaw, on the other hand, 'Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague'.[39]

Rossetti's sonnet seems to follow this logic to its transcendent Burckhardtian conclusion, withdrawing from its own expressiveness and pleading for silence in the name of the painting's 'solemn poetry'. If, after all, the painting itself is a poem, what further need for poetry?

> Water, for anguish of the solstice, – yea,
>   Over the vessel's mouth still widening
>   Listlessly dipt to let the water in
> With slow vague gurgle. Blue, and deep away,
> The heat lies silent at the brink of day.
>   Now the hand trails upon the viol-string

[38] Sully, 'Undefinable', p. 567. Such arguments always run the risk of essentializing the potentialities of each medium. As W. J. T. Mitchell points out, while we may be tempted to think – following Lessing's famous distinction in the *Laocöon* – that 'the visual arts are inherently spatial, static, corporeal, and shapely' while supposing that 'arguments, addresses, ideas, and narratives are in some sense *proper* to verbal communication', in fact 'paintings can tell stories, make arguments, and signify abstract ideas', while 'words can describe or embody static, spatial states of affairs . . . without any deformation of their "natural" vocation (whatever that may be)' (W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory* (Chicago 1994), p. 160).

[39] Elizabeth Gaskell to Charles Eliot Norton (25 and 30 Oct. 1859), in *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester 1997), p. 580; George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (London 2003), p. 191.

That sobs; and the brown faces cease to sing,
Mournful with complete pleasure. Her eyes stray
In distance; through her lips the pipe doth creep
And leaves them pouting; the green shadowed grass
Is cool against her naked flesh. Let be:
Do not now speak unto her lest she weep, –
Nor name this ever. Be it as it was: –
Silence of heat, and solemn poetry.[40]

Rossetti was moved to retract this identification of the fragile mystery evoked in the poem with 'poetry' in his 1870 revision, worrying that it was 'intellectually incestuous, – poetry seeking to beget its emotional offspring on its own identity'.[41] You may call a painting poetic, Rossetti implies, but not in a poem. It is perhaps more than coincidental that the other word to disappear in this revision was 'vague' (the water's 'slow vague gurgle' becoming the wave that 'sighs in / Reluctant'), since denominating something as 'vague' tends to blunt whatever sense of vagueness it may otherwise diffuse, exchanging evocation for assertion.[42]

Existing commentary on the poem nonetheless tends to treat it as an allegory about the transcendent and autonomous nature of art. Richard Stein, for example, characterises the final triplet as 'releasing the painting from the ritual of interpretation and returning art to its own, powerful, self-contained existence'.[43] Yet only in the loosest sense could the first eleven lines be considered an 'interpretation', while the poem's one grandly interpretive gesture arrives in the very last line of the revised version ('Life touching lips with Immortality').[44] Jonathan Freedman presses the opposite view that the poem's self-silencing is a cunning

[40] Rossetti, 'A Venetian Pastoral, by Giorgione; in the Louvre', *The Germ*, no. 4 (Apr. 1850), p. 181.

[41] Rossetti to William Michael Rossetti, 27 Aug. 1869, in *Correspondence*, vol. 4, pp. 252–53.

[42] Rossetti, 'For a Venetian Pastoral by Giorgione (In the Louvre)', in *Collected*, p. 183.

[43] Richard L. Stein, *The Ritual of Interpretation: The Fine Arts as Literature in Ruskin, Rossetti, and Pater* (Cambridge 1975), p. 22.

[44] Rossetti, 'Venetian Pastoral', p. 183.

proof of the power of words to master the image: even as the injunction to ‘Let be’ seems to rob the speaker of power, it testifies to his previously demonstrated capacity to bring the painting alive (by ushering it into the world of temporality), as well as to ‘create a timeless icon in the very medium that seems bound most irrevocably to time’.[45] Both readings, however, seem out of touch with the poem’s tone, which is neither cringing nor despotic. Worse, they neglect the dramatic and rhetorical context of the speaker’s plea, which only a full reading of the sonnet can provide.

The speaker’s defence against definition cannot be abstracted from its wider setting without losing much of the sonnet’s poetic playfulness as well as what Rossetti might have called its ‘fundamental brainwork’.[46] For the injunction to ‘Let be’ looks very different depending on what we take to be the relations between reader, speaker, and painting. The first question to be asked of the poem concerns the immediate ambiguity about who is speaking, and whether this voice comes from inside or outside the picture. On a first reading it is tempting to take the opening line as dramatic speech spoken by a figure in the painting: ‘Water, for anguish of the solstice’ sounds like a rather theatrical cry of thirst, an impression only reinforced by the ensuing ‘yea’, which might be heard either as pleading (a plea addressed to another figure in the picture, or to the viewer?) or perhaps as nodding confirmation to a proffered draught. This illusion is all but quashed by line three, in which it transpires that ‘water’ is the subject of a descriptive sentence rather than an exclamation; the voice then (unless we take it to be that of a figure speaking about its own actions in the third person) seems rather to be that of a curious observer outside the picture frame, someone who

[45] Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford 1990), p. 19.

[46] Rossetti used the phrase in a letter to Hall Caine shortly before his death: ‘Conception, my boy, FUNDAMENTAL BRAINWORK, that is what makes the difference in all art’ (Rossetti to Hall Caine, Mar. 1881, in *Correspondence*, vol. 9, p. 429).

appears to be puzzling out the picture's subject. 'Yea' is then a kind of 'Now I see! The water is for the anguishing heat of the solstice'. Where the reader may have thought she had access to the world depicted in the painting, she now realises that she stands at one remove, witness only to an act of witnessing.

When the speaker issues his sudden call to 'Let be', therefore, the reader is startled: unless this call is taken to be addressed to another figure in the painting, it appears that the naked woman is suddenly aware of the speech of those exterior to the picture (the observer-speaker's, or ours, depending on whom we take him to be hailing). The injunction to not *now* speak to her is especially odd since there has been no suggestion of anyone speaking to her up to this point.[47] Although ostensibly a call to back off, when situated within the wider rhythm of involvement which the poem constructs – whereby the reader is first drawn into the world of the painting, then held back from it, then abruptly drawn in once again – it emerges as a kind of salutation, an acknowledgement of the reader's imaginative participation in the depicted scene. This dramatic fluctuation of perspective mirrors the rhythm of intimacy and distance which characterises the constantly shifting visual field, which travels from the interior of the cup to the horizon 'deep away' back to the closeness of hands and eyes, before withdrawing again to the 'distance'. T. J. Clark has written that painting's 'deepest game' is the question of 'where the implied "we" are finally (provisionally) placed in relation to any one of the implied points of view in the picture, and particularly in relation to *all* of them – to all the possibilities of identification, of being somewhere and someone specific'.[48] This is the painterly question which Rossetti's poem raises; while he may polemically have termed his poetry an 'art of the inner standing point',

[47] This line is less puzzling in the revised version, which opens with a direct address to a figure in the painting (albeit a different one from the seated woman).

[48] T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven 2006), p. 134.

this sonnet relies for the complexity of its effect upon a continuous tussle between inner and outer perspectives.[49]

Within this play of immersion and detachment it makes little sense to speak of the poem's resistance to definition as a question of ineffability. The vagueness it wishes to preserve must be vulnerable rather than transcendent, otherwise there would be no occasion for the poem's anxiety about forestalling speech. Heffernan associates the sonnet with an entire 'ideology of transcendence' supposedly inherited from precursors such as Keats, only without the latter's dialectical edge of scepticism.[50] Yet until Rossetti introduced the idea of 'Immortality' in the final line of the revised version, the sonnet bore no suggestion of the transcendence of time, mortality, or the material world. *Pace* Rossetti's second thoughts, the vagueness which the poem's drama honours and seeks to protect is not something grandiose or unearthly but fragile, tangible, near at hand – qualities articulated in the deixis with which the poem refers to it ('Nor name *this*') and the intimate yet obscure relationship 'it' seems to bear to the reclining woman.

II

The question remains, then, of what to make of the poem's protective, almost apotropaic, turn. Its spirit might be compared with that of Rilke's lyric 'Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort', whose speaker is 'so afraid of the words of men'. Such words proclaim that 'this is called dog and that is called house, / And here is the beginning and there is the end'

[49] Rossetti first used this phrase in 1869 (see the note to 'Ave' in *The Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London 1911), p. 167) and then reiterated it in his response to Robert Buchanan's attack in order to underline the fictionality of the speaker in 'Jenny' (Rossetti, 'The Stealthy School of Criticism', in *Collected*, pp. 335–40: 337).

[50] Heffernan, *Museum of Words*, p. 140.

('dieses heisst Hund und jenes heisst Haus, / und hier ist Beginn und das Ende ist dort').[51] Like Rossetti's speaker, Rilke's seeks to 'warn and ward off' ('warnen und wehren') such knowing naming, concluding with his own plea to 'Let be' for the sake of a lyricism threatened by words: 'Bleibt fern. / Die Dinge singen hör ich so gern': 'I so like to hear the singing of things'.[52] The comparison is, I hope, instructive rather than merely whimsical, since it directs attention to a different way of thinking about the invitation to listen which is etched all through Rossetti's poem: from the focus on the water's slow (originally 'low') gurgle to the repeatedly invoked silence which lends an impressive plenitude to the extinguished vibrations of viol, pipe, and song.[53] For all the poem's luxuriant sensuousness (the richness of its rhyme, for instance, or the profusion of labials which focus the production of sound at the lips, a zone towards which this poem is continually drawn), it is possible to overstate the significance of its appeal to the sensorium. As Rilke's poem suggests, there may be other kinds of listening than the purely aural: to listen to the singing of things is perhaps not merely to sharpen one's physical faculties of perception but also to engage in a rich and deliberately undirected experience of contemplation, a form of close listening to that which our impressions provoke in us. Such experience is at odds with, and hence may render taboo, any decisive act of naming which threatens to subsume these impressions and limit their resonance.[54]

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[51] Rainer Maria Rilke, 'Ich fürchte mich so vor der Menschen Wort', in *Die frühen Gedichte* (Leipzig 1913), p. 91 (translation mine).

[52] Ibid.

[53] For the variation see Rossetti's letter to William Michael Rossetti, 8 Oct. 1849, in *Correspondence*, vol. 1, p. 114.

[54] On Rossetti's privileging of involuntary, dreamlike states of awareness see Fergus McGhee, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Déjà Vu', *Victorian Studies*, vol. 62, no. 1 (2019), pp. 61–84.

The poem's repetitions of words and phrases ('Water' / 'water', 'The heat lies silent' / 'silence of heat'), risky in a poem so short, are illustratively redundant in respect of the painting, but give the impression of a mind haunted by the reverberations of its own thoughts and impressions, allowing them to open up new trains of association, as Sully and Dallas suggested. Sensory stimulation is valued not merely for its own sake, therefore, but for its role in prompting new thought: note, for instance, how the shift in attention from water to sky seems to arise out of their mutual associations with the colour 'Blue', on which the syntax of these reflections pivots; and how another of blue's associations with the natural world flames out in the return of thought towards 'heat'. The way the speaker's thought then bends towards the horizon ('deep away') seems to be as much responsible for inspiring the re-setting of the scene at the 'brink of day' – rather than the late afternoon it is generally taken to represent – as Rossetti's wish to 'make the setting consistent with the general sense of expectancy in the figures'.[55]

The waywardness of such transitions of thought is further embodied in the poem in the way dependent clauses could apply backwards or forwards: absent the written punctuation, 'Blue and deep away' could refer either to the water or the sky, while 'Mournful with complete pleasure' might apply equally to the 'faces' which precede it or the straying 'eyes' which follow. The sobbing viol-strings may be what prompts the speaker to fear that the human figure who hears them may break into a tearful echo (a misgiving which lacks any narrative explanation); the 'creep[ing]' of her 'pipe', meanwhile, provides an associative rationale for the lateral move in focus towards the 'shadowed grass', the dwelling-place of creeping things. The suggestiveness of sound, too, seems to lead the poem's thought along paths of association unmapped by any paraphrase: the feeling for how 'The *h*eat lies' seems to beget the perception of how 'the *h*and trails', while the terminal word 'string' breaks apart

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[55] Stein, *Ritual*, p. 21.

phonemically into the following two end-words ‘sing’ and ‘stray’, as though the sound were midwife to the thought.

That the sonnet’s volta occurs on the verb ‘stray’ is therefore especially significant, since the poem’s method of engagement with the picture consists in such a process of mental straying, or what Rossetti elsewhere called ‘Thought-wandering’.[56] The seated woman’s straying eyes are a model of what the art historian Michael Fried influentially termed ‘absorption’, by which he meant any image of ‘engrossment, reflection, reverie’.[57] Such representations, Fried argued, offer themselves as a ‘proleptic mirroring of what [the artist] trusted would be the absorption of the beholder’.[58] The specific kind of absorption suggested by Rossetti’s poem, I propose, is that encompassed in the Renaissance concept of *vaghezza*.

Italo Calvino has reflected that

> Italian is the only language in which the word *vago* (vague) also means ‘lovely, attractive’. Starting out from the original meaning of ‘wandering’, the word *vago* still carries an idea of movement and mutability, which in Italian is associated both with uncertainty and indefiniteness and with gracefulness and pleasure.[59]

As Calvino notes, the foremost Italian poet of the nineteenth century – Giacomo Leopardi – made *vaghezza* the cornerstone of his poetics.[60] In the posthumously published *Zibaldone* (1898), Leopardi made a distinction between different orders of vagueness that articulates Rossetti’s sympathies with a sense of vagueness rooted in the material and sensible world, as against more transcendental and theological varieties: for ‘the pleasure of variety and

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[56] Rossetti, ‘William Blake’, in *Ballads and Sonnets* (London 1881), p. 314.

[57] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley 1980), p. 45.

[58] Fried, *Absorption*, p. 51.

[59] Italo Calvino, ‘Exactitude’, in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London 1992), pp. 55–80: 57.

[60] Ibid.

uncertainty', Leopardi wrote, 'is greater than that of apparent infinity and immense uniformity'.[61] A point of origin for Rossetti's attraction to this highly sensuous style of vagueness may be found in the writings of the Renaissance poet and critic Agnolo Firenzuola, whose dialogue *On the Beauty of Women* (1548) was to become the single most important source for early modern understandings of *vaghezza*, as recognised in the heavy dependence upon Firenzuola's definition in the Accademia della Crusca's *Vocabolario* of 1612.[62] Rossetti owned a copy of Firenzuola's dialogue, in which the central figure Celso draws on examples in Petrarch, Dante, and Boccaccio to suggest that *vaghezza*

> indicates that special beauty that has within it all those elements whereby anyone who looks upon it is obliged to become charmed (*vago*), that is, desirous; and having become desirous, his heart is always wandering to pursue it and enjoy it, his thoughts travel to her, and he becomes a vagabond in his mind.[63]

The wandering, vagabond qualities of *vaghezza* derived ultimately from Aristotelian notions of women as 'inconstant, vacillating, and unstable', as Philip Sohm points out; what Firenzuola did was to excavate the ambivalences lurking in earlier usages in order to transform these defects into virtues. Hence Firenzuola exalts a beauty which is indefinable

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[61] Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone*, ed. Michael Caesar and Franco D'Intino, trans. Kathleen Bladwin et al. (New York 2013), p. 794.

[62] See Philip Sohm, 'Gendered Style in Italian Art Criticism from Michelangelo to Malvasia', *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 48, no. 4 (1995), pp. 759–808: 767.

[63] The catalogue of his library compiled in 1866 by his brother lists 'Firenzuola, Agnolo / Opere – 3 vol. / 1723' among its contents. See Vancouver, University of British Columbia MS RBSC-ARC-1009 ('Books belonging to Dante G. Rossetti'), f. xv. Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women*, trans. and ed. Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (Philadelphia 1992), p. 36.

and incommensurate: beyond reason, measure, and verbal elucidation.[64] The subsequent adoption of *vaghezza* into the discourse of art criticism in the sixteenth century, particularly in relation to Venetian art, was made all the easier by its affiliation with the ocular verb *vagheggiare*, meaning 'to gaze fondly' – a word which harbours an erotic edge but which Dante used in the *Paradiso* to describe God's loving contemplation of creation.[65]

'For a Venetian Pastoral' energetically responds to Firenzuola's revalued conception of indefinable beauty, wandering among the painting's evocative components with the aim to 'pursue and enjoy'. The sense that the poem is pursuing something elusive comes through not only in the speaker's dramatic hostility to naming but in the sonnet's grammatical structure, the essential joints of its grammar being prepositions – 'Over', 'in', 'With', 'at', 'upon', 'with', 'In', 'through', 'unto' – and co-ordinating conjunctions ('and', 'and', 'And') rather than connectors with correlative or subordinating force. In this respect, as in those other aspects of the poem's form examined above, it may be read against the grain of those who would take it as a paradigmatic example of 'ekphrastic hope', that is, 'the shaping of language into formal patterns that "still" the movement of linguistic temporality into a spatial, formal array'.[66] The hope in this poem, on the contrary, is kept alive in the ongoing encounter with the speaker's own process of response to Giorgione's picture rather than in the realization of an iconic verbal equivalent. For as Michael Baxendall points out, 'if a picture is simultaneously available in its entirety, *looking* at a picture is as temporally linear as

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[64] See Sohm, 'Gendered Style', p. 767.

[65] See Stuart Lingo for an account of this adoption, in *Federico Barocci: Allure and Devotion in Late Renaissance Painting* (New Haven 2008), p. 126; on Dante's usage, see Piero Boitani, 'The poetry and poetics of the creation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge 2007), pp. 218–35: 222.

[66] Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p 154. See for example Heffernan's citation of the poem as representing 'movement slowed to eternal calm' (*Museum of Words*, p. 140).

language'.[67] An impression of vivid temporality is something which the poem both inhabits and hands on to the reader, from its rhythmical unruliness (only three lines are not wrenched one way or another out of regular pentameter) to the rippling sense of movement suggested by its serpentine indentations on the page.

Rossetti himself alludes to the deep-rooted philological connections between vagueness and wandering in his poem 'Dante at Verona', written in the same period as the Giorgione sonnet, some time between 1848 and 1850. Towards the end of the poem, as Dante receives his vision of Beatrice, those surrounding the poet perceive his 'strong features bound in thought; / The vagueness gaining gait and mien'.[68] Thought here may bind Dante's features, but its vagueness ensures a bursting of mental bonds: it turns thought into vision, a face to gaze upon (*vagheggiare*), while at the same time setting it in motion (*vagare*). Vagueness thus allows thought to be something more than the guilty other of sensory perception, a role often accorded it in readings of another poem about a figure bent in 'fixedness of thought': Rossetti's 'For an Allegorical Dance of Women'. This poem forms a companion or pendant to the Giorgione sonnet in the 1870 *Poems*, appearing on the facing page.[69] Much ink has been spilt over the meaning of 'meaning' in this poem, which 'filleth' Mantegna's painting, the consensus being that it is to be taken as altogether opposed to thought: for Jerome McGann it refers to a categorically 'nonconceptual aesthetic perception', while for Elizabeth Helsinger 'meaning' simply '*is* "sense"', that is, 'sensation and emotion'.[70] Yet if thought itself is conceived as something sensuous and mobile – that is, as *vago* – the need for such rigid oppositions disappears. Such artworks might then be

[67] Michael Baxendall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven 1985), p. 3.

[68] Rossetti, 'Dante at Verona', pp. 27–40: 39.

[69] Rossetti, 'For an Allegorical Dance of Women, by Andrea Mantegna (In the Louvre)', in *Poems* (London 1870), p. 261.

approached in terms similar to those which Angela Leighton has proposed for poetry, that is, as 'an invitation to a voyage of thinking', which may offer little 'to take away as final thoughts' but engenders a continual process of 're-hearing' and 're-discovering'.[71] Or as Derek Attridge suggests in another context, interpretation may recede in favour of 'an experience of meaning *in process*, of "meaning" understood as a participle of the verb "to mean" rather than as a noun'.[72]

Pater is again helpful here, not least because his words in 'The School of Giorgione' draw upon Rossetti's own in the Mantegna sonnet, though the allusion has not previously been recognised. The pendant sonnet must have lain open on the page as Pater composed his essay in the 1870s, since it explicitly mentions the 'delightful sonnet by a poet whose own painted work often comes to mind as one ponders over these precious things' – an allusion made explicit in Pater's own footnote, which names Rossetti as the poet in question.[73] Rossetti had written (whether of Apollo, Mantegna, or the viewer himself being part of the poem's complex resonance),

> Scarcely, I think; yet it indeed *may* be
> The meaning reached him, when this music rang

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[70] Jerome McGann, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Game That Must Be Lost* (New Haven 2000), p. 79; Helsinger, *Pre-Raphaelite*, p. 33.

[71] Angela Leighton, 'About About: On Poetry and Paraphrase', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2009), pp. 167–76: 175. See also Michael Hurley's incisive account of how 'The instrumental capacity of language to signify stable knowledge is, through the experience of the poem's aesthetic qualities, suspended in favor of a constantly evolving experience of knowing.' ('How Philosophers Trivialize Art: *Bleak House*, *Oedipus Rex*, "Leda and the Swan"', *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 33, no. 1 (2009), pp. 107–25: 119).

[72] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London 2017), p. 58.

[73] Pater, 'Giorgione', p. 114.

Clear through his frame, a sweet possessive pang,
And he beheld these rocks and that ridged sea.[74]

Echoing Rossetti, Pater in turn writes that ‘the very perfection of [lyrical] poetry often appears to depend, in part, on a certain suppression or vagueness of mere subject, so that *the meaning reaches us* through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding’.[75] Pater’s idea of meaning as something in transit, which seems always about to elude the observer’s grasp even as he is possessed by the sight and sound which are its only vehicles, goes to the heart of Rossetti’s attachment to *vaghezza* as structure of feeling and literary principle.[76] Pater’s ‘vagueness of subject’ is only the beginning of that story which I have attempted to trace here in the marrow of form, feeling, history, and theory. But his emphasis on how meaning may reach us ‘through ways not distinctly traceable by the understanding’ contests Rossetti’s fictional art student head-on: on the contrary, Pater suggests, those thoughts which slip our understanding may be of the very first importance.

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[74] Rossetti, ‘Allegorical’, p. 261.

[75] Pater, ‘Giorgione’, p. 108 (emphasis mine).

[76] The art historian Johannes Grave has suggested something similar of Giorgione’s paintings in his recent monograph on Giovanni Bellini – namely, that in the works of both artists ‘it is no longer . . . a matter of reproducing specific meanings, but rather of experiencing how, in the process of seeing, meaning emerges and develops, and yet at the same time remains fragile and revisable’ (*Giovanni Bellini: The Art of Contemplation* (Munich 2018), p. 26).