

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S GHOSTS, SOUL-SLEEP, AND VICTORIAN DEATH CULTURE

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GHOSTS HAUNT CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S POETRY. Amidst the lyrics, devotional poems, and children's verse, poems about ghosts and hauntings recur as material evidence of Rossetti's fascination with spectral presences. That fascination poses a particular interpretive puzzle in light of her religious convictions and piety. We might be tempted to identify the recurring ghosts as just another nineteenth-century flirtation with spiritualism – the spiritualism by which her brothers William and Gabriel were intrigued, attending séances and testing the validity of communications from the dead. Rossetti, however, clearly dismissed spiritualism as false belief and a means to sin.¹ We might also be tempted to divide Rossetti's poetry into the secular and the sacred and to categorize the ghost poems as the former, yet much recent criticism on Rossetti has argued successfully for the pervasiveness of her religious voice even in works that seem not to be religious.² Finally, in seeking to hear a religious resonance, we might be tempted to interpret her ghosts as representative of the Holy Ghost, yet that interpretation could only be asserted at the expense of the poems themselves; as narrative poems, most of them involve ghosts of dead lovers, desired by the living for themselves – not as experiences of God's presence. Rossetti's use of ghosts within short narrative or dialogic poems of the late 1850s and 60s concerning human desire for lost love invites closer inspection, especially when such poems overtly treat her religious beliefs.³

Rossetti provides us with a means to begin such inspection in her brief discussion of an “intermediate state” between life and life everlasting in *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicite*, one of her devotional prose works, published in 1879 by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (154). In writing about the state of souls prior to Judgment Day, when the faithful will be resurrected into a new heaven and new earth, she first points to the Old Testament's imprecise references to this matter, mentioning briefly the ghost of Samuel and then using single passages from Job and the Psalms to characterize the place of the “elect soul[s]” as one of rest and silence. Her commentary on 1 Sam. 28.15 admits the Old Testament's imprecision:

Once and once only do we behold a saint reappear from his grave: “An old man cometh up; and he is covered with a mantle. And Saul perceived that it was Samuel. . . . And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?” (1 Sam. xxviii. 14, 15). From these words we gather, yet at

most by implication, that the elect soul was dwelling in a quiet abode and cared not to be disquieted. (153)

Rather than view such minimal insight into death as a darkness in which the believer desperately seeks clarity of vision, Rossetti interprets it through the “final beatitude” so that it becomes an influx of light, “not dubious though partly undefined”; Rossetti’s response, then, is to affirm the faith held by generations of believers – the “hope of immortality” (154) – as sufficient and, in fact, glorious:

We know that this mortal life is the sufficient period of our probation, we know that the life immortal is the sufficing period – if we may call eternity a period – of our reward: let us not fret our hearts by a too anxious curiosity as to that intermediate state which hides for the moment so many whom we love and whom we hope to rejoin, for even now we know that “the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them” (Wisdom iii.1). (154–55)

She returns to this subject later in this text and suggests that the New Testament offers no more clarity than the Old Testament about the state of souls after death but prior to the final judgment. The people miraculously restored to life by Jesus (Nain’s son, Jairus’s daughter, Lazarus of Bethany) are silent about their experiences of death, as is Jesus about his own three days in the grave. Yet Rossetti sees one instance of Jesus’s speaking “directly of the intermediate state” (317). In Jesus’s words to the penitent thief on the cross next to him, “‘To-day shall thou be with Me in paradise,’” she claims that “‘with Me’ is a greater promise than ‘in paradise’” and “is enough” (316). While we may never know what paradise entails, she suggests, Jesus’s promise to the faithful of an existence with Him in death is both concrete and comforting.

Standing firmly in the Protestant tradition, Rossetti believes in an “intermediate state” after death – the soul’s existence between mortality and immortality, which means being protected “in the hand of God” and not being in torment or in doubt while waiting for the Judgment Day. She asserts here the doctrine of psychopannichism or what Martin Luther called soul-sleep: a state in which the soul yet lives.⁴ At the forefront of the critical turn to Rossetti’s religious imagination, Jerome J. McGann has claimed that soul-sleep “is the single most important enabling principle in Rossetti’s religious poetry,” and certainly it informs many of her poems directly (135).⁵ While mortal life is “the sufficient period” and immortal life is “the sufficing period” for Rossetti, soul-sleep is a “moment” or the briefest of temporal divisions – not yet beyond human time but not of significant duration (*Seek and Find* 154, 155).⁶ Within that moment, Rossetti’s poetic ghosts arise.

The Old Testament story of the ghost of Samuel from 1 Sam. 28, to which Rossetti refers in this brief section of *Seek and Find*, functions as a key to Rossetti’s ghosts while also illuminating her different focus. Particularly in two poems from 1863 and 1864, “The Poor Ghost” and “The Ghost’s Petition,” certain details and language from that Old Testament story are transported into the domestic sphere, where the speakers converse with the ghosts of dead lovers about loss and desire. Using her typical polysemic method of biblical allusion and a recontextualization of biblical tropes and passages, Rossetti here revises the 1 Sam. focus on a faithlessness to God into a focus on the misplaced, yet still powerful, faithfulness to a lover; thus, her conceptualization of soul-sleep in these poems accrues an element of attachment to the physical body that 1 Sam. does not contain. The living desire the physical return of the

dead, and the centrality and power of their desire defies its condemnation in religious terms. Whereas in *Seek and Find* she admonishes herself and her fellow Christians not to “fret our hearts by a too anxious curiosity,” in her ghost poems, she indulges precisely that curiosity (155). She may inscribe her ghosts with the means to discipline desire through her allusion to 1 Sam., but she more powerfully suggests the spectral body as the repository of desire; therefore, most of her ghosts have a cultural as well as theological resonance, functioning as relics for the living similarly to those common relics of mid-century Victorian death culture – photographs, hair jewelry, transcriptions of deathbed scenes – that substituted for the decaying bodies of loved ones and became “materialized secret[s],” to use Deborah Lutz’s phrase (“Dead” 129).⁷ Unlike the synecdochic relic, however, the spectral body minimizes the distance between living and dead, subject and object, presence and absence; as testimony to an “intermediate state” between life and life everlasting, it exposes not only Rossetti’s belief in a bodily resurrection but also her understanding of an eroticism that defies spiritual sublimation.⁸

In the Old Testament story, the appearance of Samuel’s ghost interrupts a larger narrative of David’s rise to power as king of Israel, as told in 1 and 2 Sam. According to P. Kyle McCarter, the ghost interlude was likely revised and relocated within the narrative to suggest that the direct cause of King Saul’s death was his disobedience to God, and the relocation created narrative incongruities, such as the medium’s unexplained recognition of Saul (422–23). The ghostly appearance not only interrupts but disrupts, then, working against textual as well as narrative continuity. The interlude in 1 Sam. 28 concerns Samuel’s return from the grave at Saul’s bidding. Although Saul has driven out “those that had familiar spirits, and the wizards” from Israel, his own desperate fear of the Philistine armies readying for an attack motivates him to seek out the remaining “woman that hath a familiar spirit in Endor.”⁹ He visits her, disguised and under cover of darkness, to ask for assistance in calling up the ghost of the dead Samuel – the last judge of Israel and the one who had anointed him king – so that he can seek counsel. Saul has already prayed to God, but God has provided no answer through the usual means; God has, in fact, deserted the faithless Saul. The Authorized Version of the Bible – the translation used by Rossetti – underscores Saul’s unrighteousness in verse 10, in which he swears “by the Lord” that the medium will not be punished for doing what he asks; in other words, he claims the authority of God for his actions while not trusting in God. As McCarter suggests, although the ghost interlude works against both textual and narrative continuity, its “prophetic reworking” provides a contrast between Saul and David, strengthening the representation of David as righteous despite his service to the Philistine army and solidifying the representation of Saul as godless (423).

Surprisingly, the figure who appears most faithful in the interlude is the woman with the familiar spirit, traditionally known as the Witch of Endor – the medium who does not proclaim a faith in God but who recognizes and serves the king. At Saul’s request, she succeeds in calling up the ghost of Samuel, who not only offers a prophetic word to Saul but also conveys information about his own state of being. In verse 15, Samuel asks Saul why he has called him from the grave or “disquieted” him when even God has turned away; he implies that Saul has interrupted not only his silence but also his peaceful mental state, offering the biblical insight into soul-sleep that Rossetti discusses in *Seek and Find*. Samuel remains righteous even from the grave, telling Saul that God has transferred favor to David because Saul was not obedient to God. He goes on to prophesy that Saul and his sons will join him in the realm of the dead “tomorrow” and that Israel will fall to the Philistines (1 Sam. 15.19). The medium

models obedience and sacrifice in this story by not only fulfilling the king's request to call up the ghost but also offering Saul food when she notes his weakness. She kills a fatted calf for him so that he might have strength for battle. Saul is punished for his disobedience and his defiance of God's commandments; he is defeated in battle and dies along with his sons, just as Samuel prophesied. The medium seems to go unpunished for her pagan practices and instead stands counter to Saul as obedient, albeit to civil and not religious authority.

The most interesting narrative traces of Saul's encounter with Samuel's ghost appear in Rossetti's dialogic poem "The Poor Ghost," composed in 1863 and published in *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (1866). Its opening stanza is an address by a male speaker to the ghost of his female lover, accusatory in tone for her return to the earthly world, as though he had no part in her appearance; however, its final stanza makes clear that she has been disturbed by his weeping from a "sleep," to which she will now return "till the Judgment Day" (36).¹⁰ She asks him in the final stanza, "'But why did your tears soak thro' the clay, / And why did your sobs wake me where I lay?'" (33–34). These lines resonate with Samuel's words to Saul, when he asks, "Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up?" (1 Sam. 28.15). Although the male lover has not needed a medium to call forth the ghost, in both texts the emotions of the living prompt a waking or a disquieting of the dead. The second stanza of the poem contains a more direct allusion to the Old Testament story when the ghost implies that "tomorrow" her lover will die, just as Samuel prophesied that Saul would die "tomorrow": "You know the old, whilst I know the new: / But tomorrow you shall know this too" (7–8). The ghost's appearance attests to the state of soul-sleep for the living in the poem as well as in the biblical story, but that attestation is not the primary communication. The ghost's speech in each text instead condemns the living for his faithlessness, toward either God or the dead lover.

Even though the female figure in the poem speaks prophetically, her plaintive response to her lover's rejection distinguishes her from the ghost of Samuel, who speaks unambiguously for the absent God. Immediately in the first stanza, the male speaker notes her physical alteration – her hair is uncurled and "fallen," her face white, and her voice "hollow" (2, 4). When he pleads for more time before losing his earthly life, she interprets his clinging to that life as a rejection of her physical body rather than as a fear of the unknown:

"Am I so changed in a day and a night
That mine own only love shrinks from me with fright,
Is fain to turn away to left or right
And cover up his eyes from the sight?" (13–16)

He holds a power over her as judge of her physical body that seems to trump the power that she holds in her knowledge of the afterlife, which aligns her with the obedient Witch of Endor, whose power is also directed by the male. On the one hand, Rossetti gives the ghost the key role in this revised biblical story; the dead Samuel, righteous before God, has been refigured into a dead woman who knows the secrets of the grave and who states confidently that her former lover will know those same secrets soon. On the other hand, even as Rossetti grants the female this authority, the ghost feels pain at being spurned by her former lover, bitterly accusing him of no longer desiring her. By stanza four, the conflict is no longer between the male's desire for life against the pull of death but is rather between lovers, one of whom no longer desires the other. In that stanza, the movement between iambic and anapestic meter is

interrupted by the two opening spondees of its second line, giving force to the ghost's claim on the male even as she speaks of his betrayal. He not only expresses a faithlessness akin to Saul's as he pleads for more time on earth, but he also shows a faithlessness to his lover – a double signification that conflates godly and human love.

The poem's shifting conflict and this double signification destabilize the boundary between sanctified body and eroticized body, and the second half of "The Poor Ghost" is dominated by the male's forceful statement that his promise of love does not extend into the afterlife. For the male, love can only continue to exist after the lover's death if it is transformed into a weaker type – like the violet of line 23, "frail and vulnerable to the elements" – and made benign by the ghost's return to sleep. Within the first four stanzas, each second line has five accents rather than the established four, emphasizing the ghost's altered appearance and extending the male's horror. The final five stanzas, however, do not incorporate this variation. As the speaker locates his desire in the past and revises his commitment to the female, the poem's movement becomes more uniform and signals his rejection not only of difficult demands but also of the female body – both sanctified and eroticized.

His rejection apparently unsettles even the ghost's soul-sleep, and she sounds petulant in her final vows never to haunt him, never to wake him "rattling bone with bone," even though she has not been the instigator of this return (28):

"I go home alone to my bed,
Dug deep at the foot and deep at the head,
Roofed in with a load of lead,
Warm enough for the forgotten dead. (29–32)

The ghost's description of her resting place here serves to critique her lover's faithlessness in both respects. Her love for him extends into the state of soul-sleep, which, while it is not the Christian heaven, extends bodily desire into that intermediate state, where "the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God" (*Seek and Find* 154). One interpretation of the poem's title would identify the ghost as "poor" in faith as she clings to the mutable, wrongly leaning on "a reed" for support, but an equally viable interpretation would suggest that she is "poor" in devotion from others and the victim of a betrayal, deserving of sympathy (26). The poor ghost returns to the grave to await the Judgment Day, but Rossetti does not condemn her. The female's love for the male – her "own only love" – has not changed, disproving his statement that love is only for earthly life (14); when she says that "love too is gone," she points to his love that has gone, not hers (25). In two recent studies of Rossetti and the gothic, both critics examine at least some of the poems that treat ghosts or soul-sleep, yet they do not grant primacy to such theological meaning. Serena Trowbridge argues that the gothic corresponds to a fallen world that is finally "irreconcilable" with the Christian God even as she locates Rossetti's work within that tradition (175). Suzanne Waldman does not see the gothic as foreign to the religious because her psychoanalytic criticism subsumes the theological into the psychological, in which the divided self of these gothic poems struggles to resist "pre-symbolic experience" and "narcissistic regression to claim the benefits of symbolic transcendence" (56, 57). By not subsuming the poetry's theological meaning into the psychological, however, we can understand the gothic elements as fundamental to Rossetti's faith rather than as formalizing what Waldman calls "her most confusing and contaminating impulses" (57). The biblical narrative of Samuel's ghost provides a faithful

context for Rossetti's examination of spectral presences, while the vital role of the Witch of Endor in that narrative makes a transgressive obedience imaginatively available to Rossetti in her treatment of gender. To focus on the ghosts' psychological or even moral significance as removed from their theological meaning diminishes their import within her oeuvre.

In her poetic exploration of the shadowy realm of the grave, with little guidance offered by the biblical text on the details of "that intermediate state," Rossetti exploits her own intermediate position as an Anglo-Catholic in validating the physical body in death more firmly than most Protestant theology. Whereas the title of "The Poor Ghost" resonates with the Roman Catholic lay term for souls in Purgatory, Rossetti uses it to suggest instead a continuity between earthly life and heaven that does not deny the physical body. As historian Craig Koslofsky has argued, the modern Western understanding of memory developed significantly during the Protestant Reformation when the social presence of the dead – so important to the medieval church – was replaced by the dead's existence only in the memory of the past. He explains that prior to the Reformation, "late medieval eschatology channel[ed] the manifold hopes, fears, superstitions, and apparitions which connected the dead and the living into an acceptable understanding of Heaven, Hell, and the cult of Purgatory" (28). In the reformers' denouncement of the doctrine of Purgatory, and thus of all forms of intercession for the dead, and in their support for the creation of de-centralized burial grounds that removed the physical presence of the dead from daily life, they facilitated a complete separation of the dead from the living. The dead no longer had theological means to appear in the present to interact with the living, demanding justice or seeking assistance; Luther's doctrine of psychopannichism denied souls in their state of sleep the ability to appear when he asserted their lack of knowledge of the living (147; vol. 15). Koslofsky argues that the concept of death changed with the Reformation to be a "barrier which demarcated both the sovereignty of God (since neither individuals nor the church could intercede for the dead) and the historical formation of the individual (who alone could have the faith essential for salvation)" (29). One result of this revised concept of death was the transformation of "purgatorial spirits into dangerous ghosts" because, as Luther wrote, any ghost must be "diabolical" (Koslofsky 32). Rossetti adheres to the Anglican rejection of beliefs in Purgatory and in intercession for the dead, yet she creates a social presence for the dead in her ghost poems that hearkens back to late medieval practices and that does not typically signify evil.¹¹ She brings the dead back among the living to connect grief and desire to bodies and to suggest the continuity between "this mortal life" and "life immortal" (*Seek and Find* 154).

Even when she envisions a female asleep in the grave in "Dream-Land," composed in 1849 and first published in the Pre-Raphaelite magazine, *The Germ*, the following year, Rossetti hints at a continuity between the living and the dead that challenges the speaker's admonition to "[a]wake her not" (27). "Dream-Land" is not a ghost poem, yet it offers significant insight into Rossetti's theology in its brief four stanzas, especially into her beliefs in psychopannichism and the resurrection of the body. We understand that this soul sleeps under God's protection through Rossetti's biblical allusions to her earthly life as a journey similar to the Magi seeking the Messiah in the Gospels: "Led by a single star, / She came from very far / To seek where shadows are / Her pleasant lot" (6–8). The star alludes to the star guiding the Magi to the place of Christ's birth as does the "coming from afar," and that "pleasant lot" is underscored by the tightly controlled rhyme and the dominant iambic trimeter and its truncation in every fourth line. Although Rossetti repeatedly uses the word "pleasant" to describe soul-sleep, this "pleasant lot" located within "shadows" suggests that

the sleeper's salvation is inseparable from suffering and death, just like Christ's. The repetition of the spondaic "rest, rest" in the second half of the poem underscores the peacefulness of the soul-sleep, but it also interrupts the easy metrical movement and, by the final stanza, seems an ambiguous blessing implying the possibility of the ghost's unrest. The speaker's admonition in the fourth line has already suggested that the soul could be awakened by the living – that her "charmed sleep" could be broken as easily as a spell – and the poet goes on in the final stanza to petition that she not wake until "time shall cease," when the "joy" of eternity will replace the peace of this temporary sleep (28, 31). Tellingly, this petition is for rest "at the heart's core," as though the female's desire needs tempering or her affections need calming (27). Even as the poet admonishes the observer not to wake her, she also prays that the soul's own heart be calmed, suggesting that her rest could be broken by either self or others.

Further indication of the tenuousness of the psychopannichistic state in this poem is the soul's attention to the earthly existence from which she is separated; as she rests, she can see the sky and hear the nightingale "as thro' a veil," although she cannot see the grain or feel the rain (13). Her limited perspective seems appropriate to her lying in a grave, but it also echoes 1 Cor. 12.13 ("For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."), revised so that her vision of earth is limited rather than her vision of heaven as in Paul's letter. Coming in the second stanza, her sensory participation in earthly experience suggests not only that the barrier between the living and the dead is tenuous but also that she longs for that experience; the "rosy morn" and "fields of corn" have been replaced by "twilight cold and lorn," so her seeing dimly in the next lines of that stanza indicates, through the direction of her gaze, her longing for her past life and its beauty (10–11). Rather than suggesting an immaterial soul, the lyrical power of this poem comes from the female body as a material harbor for that soul. Even in her faithfulness, in her seeking for this "pleasant lot," she desires a physical existence that seems in the past but yet has a continuity with the present and, thus, possibly with the future. Although the body in this poem does not awaken and become a spectral relic for the living, Rossetti implies the soul's latent desire for such awakening. Susan Conley argues that poems like this one with a dead or dying speaker "undermine the optimistic religious faith of the living," and she points to the limitations of interpreting them primarily through a theological lens (267). By considering the doctrine of soul-sleep, however, we see that Rossetti's focus on the dead body and the grave is not a disavowal of or even disinterest in the hope of heaven but is rather an exploration of a theological understanding of body in relation to soul. Rossetti creates a tension in this poem between the "joy" of the new heaven and new earth for the Christian believer and the desire for the beauty of the earth and its sensory pleasures. Both are present in the "heart's core" ("Dream-Land" 27).

A second dialogic poem of the 1860s published in *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, "The Ghost's Petition," also alludes to 1 Sam. 28, albeit more faintly. Its premise is similarly the return of a lover – here a husband – from his soul-sleep, held by his promise to his wife to come home and called forth from the grave by her weeping. The first six tercets contain a dialogue between sisters, but after the wife instructs Jane to go to sleep while she continues to wait for her husband, Robin, a new dialogue between wife and ghost-husband replaces the one between women. As in the earlier poem, the bitter moaning and weeping of the living prompt the ghost's return, although Robin's gentle reproach of his wife for disturbing him is a pale shadow of Samuel's criticism of Saul: "I could rest if you would

not moan / Hour after hour; I have no power / To shut my ears where I lie alone” (46–48). The anapestic substitutions and the internal rhyme of each tercet’s second line, contribute to the gentleness. The poem also echoes the Old Testament story when the wife exclaims, “‘oh night of sorrow! – oh black tomorrow!’” suggesting that Robin has only recently died and that “tomorrow” will bring more pain just as it does for Saul (53). Unlike Samuel’s prophecy, however, the pain that the wife foresees here seems to be the pain of loss and what she perceives as Robin’s broken promise to come home. And unlike Saul, who thinks solely of the immanent battle and his fear of death, the wife expresses her curiosity about Robin’s state of being: “‘What do you do there, underground, / In the dark hollow? I’m fain to follow, / What do you do there? – what have you found?’ –” (61–63). Robin’s response to his wife echoes the quotation from the apocrypha that Rossetti uses in *Seek and Find*, that “‘the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them’ (Wisdom iii.1)”; he assures her that “‘Tender hand hath made our nest; / Our fear is ended, our hope is blended / With present pleasure, and we have rest.’ –” (67–69). As much as she is “fain” to follow him to the grave and as much as she desires to know about his experience, she heeds the ghost’s counsel to be “content” (62, 65).

Again, Rossetti complicates her religious position in this poem by the physical desire expressed by the living and by the presence of the sister in the opening six tercets. As in her sister poems, of which *Goblin Market* is the most significant, Rossetti distinguishes between the pure and the fallen while at the same time suggesting the interchangeability of the female figures that undermines such a moral dichotomy. In her discussion of the Victorian trope of sisterhood and repeated representations of sexual difference between the fallen and unfallen, Helena Michie argues that they allow female sexuality to be “explored and reabsorbed within the teleology of family” (404). Particularly in the first two tercets of “The Ghost’s Petition,” the lack of dialogue tags in their exchange makes it difficult to identify the speakers, effectively conflating the two women; however, they are marked by a difference in knowledge and experience, so “sweet sister Jane” will sleep easily because she does not feel the “doubt and pain” that her sister feels (13, 15). The wife’s emotions certainly arise from Robin’s absence, yet they also indicate a sexual desire like Laura’s in *Goblin Market*, expressed similarly through an impatient nocturnal watching for the male even though experienced differently here within marriage. Like the female in “The Poor Ghost,” this female is obedient even as she seems to transgress the bounds of a proper purity, which also aligns her with the Witch of Endor, who is both obedient and transgressive. The wife’s desire to lay her head on her ghost-husband and to be physically held places her over and against the innocent female who seems not to know sexual desire, yet the interchangeability of the two females in the opening lines suggests a moral ambiguity. Robin’s knowledge – of what goes on “underground, / In the dark hollow” – also ambiguously implies a loss of innocence even as it signals his salvation in Christian terms (61–62). He is both the patient, loving husband and the demon-lover of the traditional ballads, causing the flame to burn blue when he approaches. Finally, like the title of “The Poor Ghost,” which hearkens to the Roman Catholic language for the souls in Purgatory, the title of “The Ghost’s Petition” suggests the language of intercession; as in the earlier poem, however, the ghost in this poem has a peaceful and pleasurable “nest” in which the “shadow[s]” lie and “rest” in a soul-sleep that corresponds with the Protestant doctrine of psychopannichism (67, 41, 69). With the return of the spectral body, heavenly love and earthly love intermingle just as Protestant doctrine and Roman Catholic language intermingle.

Rossetti wrote, and her ghosts recur, within what critics have described as Victorian death culture – a culture that sought to remember the dead through material relics and thus make present synecdochically the absent, dead body. Rossetti's ghosts function as relics for the living in her poems. Informed by the Anglican Church and its practices, Victorian death culture adhered to the Protestant tradition of separating the dead from the living as Koslofsky has argued, represented most significantly by the development of private cemeteries around London during the 1830s. At the same time, however, Victorians sought to draw the dead nearer emotionally and symbolically, lessening the impact of a physical separation through elaborate mourning conventions and objects. Given that Rossetti was writing in London during the decades of cemetery reform, her public and private worlds would have been permeated by death. Like her contemporaries, she lived constantly with the ill and the dying; her letters recount almost weekly the state of her own, her family members', and her friends' health, and many of her surviving letters are edged in black, which offers us a rare glimpse into her own participation in death culture. John Morley describes this atmosphere as a "congealed romanticism that encapsulated Victorian family life"; that normalized the creation and circulation of memorial cards, samplers of epitaphs, ceramic memorials, mourning clothes, hair jewelry, and photographs set in jet; and that produced new heights of theatricality at funeral services (14). With Queen Victoria's excessive mourning rituals for Prince Albert as a standard in the 1860s and with social respectability tied firmly to class positions extending even beyond death, the working and middle classes aspired to a gentility gauged by the display of mourning and funerary goods. James Curl also connects such elaborate funeral displays to "residual survival of pre-Reformation religious beliefs," by which he means an attachment to custom and to consecrated burial ground (198). Rossetti's repudiation of much of her culture's excesses was not a repudiation of its mourning rituals and attendant objects, nor was it a repudiation of a concern for the physical body in death.

Deborah Lutz argues in her recent study of relics in this period that the death memento, "having no 'use value,' kept the thing as thing enchanted" and remained unmediated as a good. She claims that relics are defined by their "closeness not only to a once-alive human body, but also to a still-alive body that venerates its tactility," and connects them historically to the medieval cult of saints. Lutz is interested in their "lyrical" power more than any religious significance, however, so the question of what connection these Victorian death relics may have to Anglican beliefs or practices does not arise for her (*Relics* 4). Lutz's argument about a relic's lyrical power is both appropriate and insufficient when directed at Rossetti, then, even granting the hermeneutic leap from relic as physical object to relic as spectral body. Rossetti claims such a lyrical power for a prophetic voice in these poems.

In the nineteenth century, the popularity of death relics peaked from the 1850s to the 1880s. The high demand for hair jewelry and art in particular stimulated a bustling hairwork industry in London, regular advertisements for jewelry in the newspapers, and multiple displays at the Great Exhibition. Using the hair from a loved one, either living or dead, to weave into jewelry and bequeathing locks of hair set in lockets or in mourning rings as remembrances had been common since the seventeenth century, and Pat Jalland describes such objects as "therapeutic aids" in the grief process (299). These practices were extensions of the previously established practices of treasuring the hair of saints and of keeping and exchanging hair mementoes from royalty and famous figures. In the poetry of the mid-Victorian period, however, the hair of a deceased lover often symbolizes a present sexual desire that complicates any attempt to interpret it simply as an aid in remembering and grieving

the dead. Certainly, hair jewelry and locks of hair facilitate an eroticizing of death for the Pre-Raphaelites, the dead woman in particular. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "The Blessed Damozel," composed in 1847, offers perhaps the most obvious example of such an eroticization during the period. In that poem, the female leans out of heaven with her golden hair streaming, while the male speaker remembers that same hair falling over his face when she was alive. Heaven seems to have made her even more physically desirable than in life, and she yearns for her lover to join her there in a kind of erotic worship. Rossetti's brother's poem assumes a common mid-century understanding of heaven and the afterlife as a place to rejoin loved ones. The female looking down from heaven believes that her lover could join her and continue their earthly happiness if he would reform his behavior, which reflects what Jalland describes as a common conditional expression of the period, a "hope for reunion only if their behavior in this world merited it" (272). It also elides the need to wait for Judgment Day and thus for the doctrine of psychopannichism. For D. G. Rossetti, the continuation of earthly happiness in heaven seems to include continued sexual relations, implied by the eroticized body – especially the hair – of the female, who is more desirable than pious.

In Rossetti's ghost poems, the living desire intimacy with the dead through the lyrical power of the object, to echo Lutz, but at the same time they desire assurance of the Christian promise of eternal life from the dead through the prophetic power of the subjectified object: the ghost that speaks. Although not literal objects like death relics, the ghosts have a material appearance that can be called forth for examination and even utility; they provide a material regulation of grief and loss while having only a façade of materiality. Each replaces a body while also being that body, like hair jewelry, yet the ghost is more than an object of mourning; it is the locus of stories that can be expressed even if in fragmentary form – stories about the ghost's past relationships, about the experience of the grave, and about what the future holds for the living. The ghosts remain secretive about much of their new knowledge and experience, yet because they are subjectified objects or relics that speak, they also attest to the existence of soul-sleep for the believer. "The Ghost's Petition" serves as the best example because we see both the female's continued physical desire for her dead husband in her attempt to embrace him and her vow to curb her bitter mourning for his sake. The ambiguity of that vow puts Rossetti's conflation of sexual love and heavenly love into relief. The poem concludes with the wife's saying, "'Yet I'll dry my tears for your sake: / Why should I tease you, who cannot please you / Any more with the pains I take?'" (73–75). Although she is "fain to follow" him to the grave because he has pleasure and she does not, she seeks to allow him the rest that has been interrupted by her weeping because she loves him (62). She makes no mention of God or of any Christian belief, but her care for her dead husband's rest becomes an attestation of God's care for the dead in their soul-sleep; indirectly, she is obedient both to her dead husband and to the "hand" of God who has made a "nest" for the dead (67). She desires her husband even in death, but what seems to be her renouncing of that desire at the poem's conclusion is rather its rechanneling toward God under the ghost's guidance.

In "The Poor Ghost," Rossetti creates a male lover who notices the female ghost's hair in the vein of D. G. Rossetti's speaker in "The Blessed Damozel." She gives this ghost particular significance as a spectral relic whose body seems fragmented by the male's shocked litany of her changed parts – hair, face, voice – when she appears before him. He is faithless both to God and the dead, however, so her hair symbolizes a desire solely for the mortal body and its pleasures that has dissolved with death. The lover notices her hair first, couching his description of its unkemptness in his question about her origins: "'Oh whence do you come,

my dear friend, to me, / With your golden hair all fallen below your knee” (1–2). The male fears her body – her loose, uncurled and thus uncontrolled hair, in particular – as well as her desire that extends beyond the grave. Stanzas five and six both open with his claim to have loved her, and each time, his claim is followed by conditions and qualifications that seek to prompt her return to the grave. “Death mars all, which we cannot mend,” he says, implying that the body’s condition is “all” and no longer worthy of love (20). She returns to the grave to be alone, just as Robin in “The Ghost’s Petition” does, yet the petulance of the ghost’s final speech in this poem shows that her lover’s faithlessness alters her soul-sleep; her bed is deep and cold, and she does not speak of either pleasure or hope. Even though her former lover will no longer weep and disquiet her, she seems not to be assured of rest in God’s hand, as though her salvation is not solely dependent on her faith but on the constancy of earthly affections and commitments. Even when Rossetti’s female characters act obediently like the Witch of Endor, their redemption is called into question when they are bound to males who are not worthy of their obedience. Rossetti upholds a patriarchal authority here, but her critique of the faithless male lover is sharp.

In a fascinating poem about a female who is bound to two men – her bridegroom and the ghost of her former lover – we see this female role of obedience undercut not only by her own transgressive desire but also by her double obligation. “The Hour and the Ghost,” composed in 1856 and published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), is structured as a double dialogue with the bride speaking only to her bridegroom yet receiving responses both from him and from the ghost of her dead lover, although only she can hear the latter. The nine stanzas can thus be understood as three exchanges of three stanzas each: one speech from the bride and one response from each of the male figures. While the speeches by the bride and the ghost lengthen in each exchange, underscoring their strengthening union, the bridegroom’s speeches are limited to tercets throughout the poem. In the first stanza, the bride pleads with the bridegroom to hold her tightly because she cannot stop herself from physically moving toward the ghost and toward a distant light that is “lit for [her]” (7). In the fourth stanza, her next utterance, she suggests that both men are physically holding her when she asks the bridegroom to “hold [her] one moment longer” while also exclaiming that the ghost’s “clutch is waxing stronger” (18, 20). So while the ghost “bids [her] *spirit* depart,” her body is the site of the struggle (24; emphasis mine). Both she and the ghost refer to their past vows, so whether that means private promises made to one another or a legal marriage, those earlier vows take precedence over the later vows that she has made to her bridegroom. She calls the earlier vows “bitter,” while the ghost understands them as worthy of being “crown[ed]” through her making a home with him in death (26, 37). In her last speech, now a ten-line stanza, she admits that she had “forsake[n]” and “forg[otten]” her previous lover (42–43); she says this with what she understands to be her final breaths and heartbeats, and we see that such forsaking of her earthly love has led to an untimely death. The soul of the female is at stake here, but her death becomes a transaction between males who pass her body from one to the other so that the afterlife of this bride can only be understood as encompassing the physical as well as spiritual. “Come,” the ghost says to her, “for house and bed are ready” (33). Her inconstancy means that her earthly life has been a “sufficient period” to show her as unrighteous, to use Rossetti’s language from *Seek and Find*, so she does not have the sleep of the elect ahead of her (154). Promising herself to an unworthy male might have made the bride’s life miserable had he lived, but in death, his claim on her means an eternity of restlessness as punishment for her inconstancy.

The radicality of the poem lies in its suggestion that the end of unrighteousness is a reaffirmed faithfulness to a corrupt human love – even to the demonic – rather than to God. This poem’s ghost has not awakened from a psychopannichistic state, which distinguishes it from the ghost poems of the 1860s. In her note to “The Hour and the Ghost,” Betty S. Flowers aligns the poem with traditional demon-lover ballads, particularly one by Walter Scott about a woman who was false to one man and paid the price of eternal unrest when his ghost returned to steal her from her husband (894). Rossetti’s use of biblical messianic language to identify two of the characters – the Bride and Bridegroom – positions the ghost as a satanic figure that comes between the believer and God, between the Church and Christ. By portraying the bride as bound to the ghost, however, Rossetti does not offer her the Christian promise of forgiveness; the bride becomes both the faithful, obedient wife-lover and the fallen woman in her physical and spiritual return to her previous love. Her final word to her bridegroom is a warning: If he breaks his vows to her and loves another woman, then she will return to him just as the ghost has returned to her. The bride foresees, and Rossetti asks us to foresee, her transformation into demon-lover. The ghost’s final speech opens with the ambiguous line, “O fair frail sin,” which could refer to the bride’s past vows that attached her to the demonic or to her warning to her bridegroom, which reflects her willingness – her “fainting will” that has not yet expired and that allows her to speak one last time – to embrace the demonic (51, 41). The ghost prophesies that she will be “outcast” just as the weather, to “[t]oss and howl and spin” with him as her constant companion (61–62). The erotic power here defies Christian redemption. Perhaps the bride of this poem comes closest to embodying the Witch of Endor, harboring a pagan power while yet obeying and sacrificing for male authority.

Another poem that describes a state of unrest in the afterlife rather than a psychopannichistic state is “A Coast-Nightmare,” composed in 1857 and unpublished during Rossetti’s lifetime. The ghost in this poem also seems to be a dead lover not only because of the speaker’s use of the appellation “friend” – Rossetti’s typical euphemism for lover – but also because of his erotically charged nighttime visitations. Most fascinating, however, is the poem’s focus on a “secret” transmitted from ghost to speaker because it evidences Rossetti’s interest in exploring the realm of the dead and presages, without overt reference to the ghost of Samuel, the 1860s ghost poems. The more complicated meter and varying rhyme of these linked quatrains signal a more serious and complicated subject. The dead lover returns with secrets to share, and while the later poems show the preservation of those secrets by the dead, this poem indicates the transgression of the epistemological boundary between living and dead; hence, its ghost is diabolical rather than prophetic. Trowbridge interprets such transgression in psychological terms so that the ghost exists only in the speaker’s mind, perhaps indicating her madness, yet the poem’s exploration of the eroticized “secret” of the grave has theological meaning if we consider the full corpus of Rossetti’s ghost poems (35). Acknowledging Rossetti’s belief in the doctrine of psychopannichism also helps us not mistakenly identify the “ghostland” in “A Coast-Nightmare,” or other representations of the afterlife in her ghost poems, as heaven (1). This ghost returns from the grave to share his knowledge, and the reception of such knowledge by the living signifies her sin – the sin of desiring what has been prohibited by God in the story of Genesis and preserved for the dead by the ghost of Samuel.

Like the bride of “The Hour and the Ghost,” this speaker also seems beyond redemption, although we glimpse only her haunted life and not her imminent torment. Most unusual is her description of the ghostland from what we infer is information relayed by the ghost. She offers

a vision of towns with towers and gates, in which ghosts are “[c]ivilians, soldiers, seamen,” as though they have civic responsibilities and vocational commitments in the afterlife (23). This is not a representation of soul-sleep, yet it is also not a vision founded in the biblical description of heaven with which Rossetti was well-versed and would go on to explicate in *Seek and Find* as well as in her final devotional prose work, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1892). As the speaker answers an unidentified interlocutor, whose questions are repeated in her own voice as in a dramatic monologue, she offers such a vivid description of this coastland’s harboring “hazy ghosts” in a scene of perpetual twilight that she seems to have witnessed it herself (15). She does not hesitate in her answers to the questions, concluding the description of the towns with the hope that “[s]uch a sight may you not see,” implying she has seen it firsthand (26). Not everything she says comes from visionary experience, however, and the interlocutor’s final question – “How know you that your lover / Of death’s tideless waters stoops to drink? –” (27–28) – must be answered by appealing to a different sensory experience:

Me by night doth mouldy darkness cover,
It makes me quake to think:
All night long I feel his presence hover
Thro’ the darkness black as ink. (29–32)

No words are exchanged with her lover in these visitations, but the speaker identifies him with the “mouldy darkness,” and, without corporal body, he can “cover” hers intimately as darkness, both “mouldy” from the grave and molding to her physical shape. Unable to see, she yet knows that he is present. Her fear here is not of death but rather of the ghost and his torturous haunting. He comes not from a peaceful rest in God’s hand but from a place with no promise – a place beyond temporality with “neither night nor day,” where no one will reap the “[u]nripe harvest,” and no one will keep the “[u]nripe vineyard” (9, 11).

This particular stanza of “A Coast-Nightmare” alludes indirectly to prophetic descriptions in the Old Testament of God’s destruction of sinners (Ezek. 32 and Isa. 13–14, for example). With her polysemic method of biblical allusion, Rossetti exports certain descriptions or words from scripture and reorders and recontextualizes them so that the biblical meaning is both extended and altered. While the Old Testament prophets condemn earthly kings and their lands, they also attest to God’s mercy on the faithful; in this poem, however, Rossetti uses the prophets’ language of destruction without also exporting their language of mercy. Her allusions thus underscore the lack of God’s presence or promise in her speaker’s nightmare; she offers a vision of an apocalyptic wasteland never to be redeemed by God’s grace. In the Old Testament, Ezekiel records God’s command to tell Pharaoh that God will “water with thy blood the land wherein thou swimst, even to the mountains; and the rivers shall be full of thee. And when I shall put thee out, I will cover the heaven, and make the stars thereof dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give her light.” (Ezek. 32. 6–7).¹² While the blood is less extensive in the poetic landscape of “A Coast-Nightmare,” its sea does toss up “[b]lood-red seaweeds” and each bay and creek has a “dead man’s islet” (3, 5). And while the ghosts exist collectively in a perpetual twilight, implying a source of light, the speaker encounters one of them only in a pitch darkness void of stars and moon as though she participates in a landscape destroyed by God’s power. Ezek. 32 goes on to list the cities that God has destroyed and whose people are now in hell, and, while Rossetti’s speaker’s

vision is not of hell, she does describe a constellation of towns that have been transported from the world of the living to a sleepwalking death beyond God's mercy – a counter to the psychopannichistic state for the righteous. In her Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead, Rossetti perhaps accounts here for the state in which the unrighteous may find themselves after death, awaiting the final judgment.

"A Coast-Nightmare" stands out among Rossetti's ghost poems, then, in its representation of a diabolical ghost whose relationship with the female speaker suggests not erotic desire but rather an intellectual and sexual violation. In the darkness that is also the ghost's presence, he conveys to her without speaking the "wordless secrets of death's deep," but even these secrets seem different from the final, singular secret of the last line of the poem (34). The speaker who has transgressed and witnessed ghostland is not willing to convey all she knows, which is made clear in the final stanza. She holds a "secret" that she "must keep" (40). Beyond language, the secrets conveyed wordlessly by the ghost about "death's deep" suggest a knowledge of death beyond and below ghostland. This phrase echoes the opening of Genesis, where "the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep," which Rossetti alludes to in the title of her prose work on the Book of Revelation (Gen. 1.2). The "deep" signifies an unknown space or entity from or over which God forms the earth and all of creation, and Rossetti's connection of the phrase to Revelation furthers its meaning to signify the unknown space or entity from or over which God will form the new heavens and the new earth when the old have passed away.¹³ The poem's final lines transform the audible secrets conveyed from the demon-lover into a "blasting sight," a visual secret that imposes itself violently on the speaker despite the surrounding darkness (39). No medium is needed for her to know; she sees directly what no mortal should be able to see. Rossetti leaves the sight undescribed so the speaker does indeed keep her secret from us, but we understand that we could not see and live.

Rossetti's diabolical ghosts in both "The Hour and the Ghost" and "A Coast-Nightmare" are neither resting in the protection of God nor disturbed from that rest by the female, so their similarity to Samuel's ghost lies in their knowledge of and prophesying of death. They do not serve as spectral relics in the same way as the ghosts of the later poems because they seem unbidden by the female figures and thus beyond their regulation. Rather than remaining silent about the secrets of the grave, they transmit a knowledge of future torment. Rather than making the dead present synechdochically and maintaining a figurative distance between them and the living, these two ghost poems from the 1850s convey direct, physical encounters between dead and living; thus, the ghosts do not have the lyrical power of spectral relics but rather have the demonic power that Rossetti, in her Anglican belief, ascribed to the devil. Of the two poems, "The Hours and the Ghost" is more similar to the later poems in its double dialogue. The speaker can converse with both the living and the dead even if she cannot control the ghost, signifying an erotic permeability between realms through linguistic exchange that weakens the concept of eternal torment. Although the ghost says they will "[t]oss and howl and spin" together, he also describes their reunification as a "com[ing] home" to "house and bed," echoing his past wooing of her in life (62, 12, 33). Rossetti often uses "home" to figure heaven, so even in the ghost's promise of unrest here, his language implies a kind of comfort and companionship that mitigates its pain.¹⁴ While she will be torn from warmth and love and bound to coldness and bitterness, the faithless female will also receive a kind of power in the continued erotic relationship beyond death and through her new dark vow to the Bridegroom: to return and claim him if he breaks his vow to her.

The speaker in "A Coast-Nightmare" has no such power, and the demon-lover victimizes her completely. By communicating with the speaker seemingly outside of language, the ghost has no linguistic currency and no prophetic communication. In her study of death relics, Lutz discusses "the literariness of remains" for the Victorians, who clung to mementoes as the source of stories about their loved ones (Relics 2–3). She states, "[c]orpses, texts, stories, and poems interknit; they inform us of Victorian practices of making meaning in the face of – and *with the face of* – death" (3; emphasis original). When Rossetti's speakers call up ghosts in the vein of Saul's calling up the ghost of Samuel, they are searching for meaningful death; the poet makes that meaning through her biblical allusion to soul-sleep, through the lyrical power of the Christian narrative told anew. The face of death is a face distanced from earthly life, the face as representational object. When Rossetti's speakers are visited by ghosts that transmit knowledge of a death beyond such sleep – most significantly the speaker of "A Coast-Nightmare" – they are convicted by their sin and thus positioned outside the Christian narrative; the poet suggests a meaning beyond linguistic expression, hearkening to the apocalyptic narratives, perhaps the most obscure of the Christian scriptures. The face of death for the unrighteous is "the face of the deep," which cannot be comprehended but only feared. The demon-lovers may appear as ghosts, but they are encountered bodily, coming into contact with the living, and they transmit terror – the terror of damnation – through their defiance of representation. The horror of "A Coast-Nightmare" is the absence of home, the absence of the promise of the New Jerusalem for the believer, as refuge for both body and soul.

Perhaps the most disturbing ghost poem in Rossetti's oeuvre from a theological perspective is "A Chilly Night," composed in 1856 and also unpublished during her lifetime, because it seems to portray ghosts in a psychopannichistic state without offering the same comfort as the later poems. Similar to the speakers of those poems, the speaker of "A Chilly Night" seeks an encounter with a ghost without the aid of a medium, but it is the ghost of her mother, not of a former lover; the first line of the poem suggests that the speaker rises intentionally "at the dead of night" to look for her mother's ghost (1). Also unlike the later poems, she is isolated from any social life or attachments to others. After stating that she rose to look for the ghost through the latticed window, she describes her isolation in the second quatrain as though it explains the cause of her search; her friends have all "failed one by one," and the ghosts "are warmer" to her than those friends (5, 7). Here, "friend" has a broader meaning than is typical for Rossetti, defined as "[m]iddleaged, young, and old" rather than as the singular lover of other poems (6). These friends share a common faithlessness, which is also unusual; instead of suggesting a faithlessness that extends across the boundary between life and death, this poem surrounds the living with the faithlessness of the rest of the living. Her isolation, then, is profound.¹⁵

The poem's four middle quatrains and the following longer stanza bring together characteristics of Rossetti's demon-lover poems on the one hand and those that allude to the ghost of Samuel and psychopannichism on the other, thus posing a particular interpretive problem. The speaker's mother is one of many ghosts that appear across the landscape outside her window, and as a group, they are uncannily silent despite speaking: "They spoke without a voice / And they leapt without a sound" (13–14). Perhaps their silence can be explained by the physical distance between the speaker who stands at her window and the ghosts "dotting plain and mound" outside, yet it bears a resemblance to the silence of the demon-lover of "A Coast-Nightmare," who communicates wordlessly and voicelessly (10). While almost all of

Rossetti's ghosts inspire the creeping of flesh and the standing up of hair in their witnesses, this ghost-mother's appearance is more disturbing than those of the other ghosts who have been desired and raised by the living. When she raises her eyes so that the speaker can see them from her window, they are "blank and could not see" while at the same time staring and "seem[ing] to look at [her]" (24–26). The moonlight shining on the landscape is also described as "blank," and both uses of the word signify a void of meaningful exchange either from her surroundings or from the emissary of the afterlife (11). Yet the ghost-mother is not diabolical. Not only does the speaker sobbingly call for her "Mother dear" and "Mother kind" – not fearful of the ghost at all – but she also expresses a confidence in her mother's care for her (15, 16). Both female figures are "straining" to communicate – not just the speaker – and the substance of their desired communication is the speaker's time of death (37, 38):

She knew that I could not hear
The message that she told
Whether I had long to wait
Or soon should sleep in the mould:
I saw her toss her shadowless hair
And wring her hands in the cold. (31–36)

As indicated by the colon concluding line 34, the speaker's confidence that she knows what her mother knows is founded in the sight of the ghost's "toss[ing] her shadowless hair / And wring[ing] her hands in the cold." The ghost-mother expresses her distress that she cannot communicate her daughter's time of death in the manner of Samuel's ghost telling Saul that he would die "tomorrow." This ghost is neither diabolical nor prophetic, then, and the ambiguity of the ghost's source lends an ambiguity to the poem's representation of the intermediate "sleep" between earthly life and heaven.

The poem's concluding stanza suggests that the speaker has little faith in her joining the ghosts upon death for she sees their return to their graves as a desertion: "Living had failed and dead had failed / And I was indeed alone" (49–50). If we use 1 Sam. 28 as a gloss for Rossetti's belief in and understanding of psychopannichism, then we see that the speaker in "A Chilly Night" desires, like Saul, to know her future, but no prophetic word can successfully be transmitted, good or bad. The speaker, like the Witch of Endor, has the power to approach the ghosts of the dead for guidance, and her ghost-mother has the knowledge of the grave, like Samuel, but neither power is efficacious. The three six-line stanzas, appearing cyclically in the poem, offer no resolution, and thus the encounter offers no satisfaction to the characters or to the reader. A significant dissimilarity between this poem and the story of Samuel's ghost lies in Rossetti's portrayal of the speaker as sympathetic even though she seeks neither a knowledge that seems forbidden nor a sure faith in God. She believes that her ghost-mother can make a "lonely bed" for her in the earth, sheltered and safe, and can command the other ghosts to leave her alone when she sleeps there (17). She has faith here in her mother, yet it proves a misguided faith as even her mother must desert her. The only evidence for the speaker's Christian faith lies in her assumption that death will bring her sleep and not unrest; however, given the ambiguous sleep of the dead in "A Coast Night-mare," the word "sleep" does not always mean peace for Rossetti. Without the voice of assurance like Robin provides in "The Ghost's Petition," the ghost-mother cannot stand firmly as God's emissary, and without a reciprocal care from the living to the dead that is present in the female

figure's promise to stop her disruptive weeping in the later poem, the speaker is not called to be obedient. The pathos in the speaker's wish to die while accepting that she must live at the end of "A Chilly Night," however, directs our attention to her loneliness rather than to her insubstantial Christian faith. We hear no voice of condemnation.

That lack of condemnation seems tied to the speaker's faithfulness to her dead mother even though she shows slight evidence of Christian faith. Rossetti does not sexualize the relationship between women, keeping them physically distanced from one another and shaping the speaker's desire only for a "lonely bed" that has been prepared, not shared, by her. Unlike the poems about dead lovers, this poem does not portray the living as seeking the physical return of the dead. Yet just as the bodies of dead lovers form the locuses of desire in other poems, the body of the mother here draws the speaker's gaze and prompts her deepest longing. She trusts her mother to respond to her longing, and an attachment to the mother's physical body is present in her belief that the ghost can care for her in death by preparing a safe place. Their "straining" towards one another, if only to hear across the distance, indicates a pull of bodies, an attachment to the body of the other that connects the living with the dead and that is not condemned as godlessness (37, 38).¹⁶ What this poem holds in common with the other ghost poems is its suggestion that the spectral relic functions as a material regulation of grief and loss, just as death mementoes functioned for the Victorians who cherished and circulated them. The speaker calls up a manifestation of her dead mother's body, offers a litany of body parts – eyes, mouth, hair, hands – that fragments the body like a material relic made of body parts, and, despite a "pain" that does not dissipate during her night watch, seems no longer to be sobbing in the final stanza (42). She has no assurance of eternal life from the ghost, but she achieves a kind control over her desire through her examination of its form. Without prophetic power, however, this spectral relic does not lead her to any new affirmation of life.

The absence of direct affirmation may not mean the absence of redemptive love. In *Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination: The Devotional Poetry and Prose*, Dinah Roe opens by asserting that Rossetti's "devotional work, like the Bible, is meant for contemplation, not resolution," and goes on to say that this "process of contemplation is not just a means to come to understanding, but is understanding itself" (9, 15). Many critics have connected Rossetti's seeming obscurity with Tractarian poetics, that outgrowth of the Oxford Movement whose dominant tenets of analogy, typology, and reserve offered indirect means of speaking about the divine. Responding to this critical tradition, Roe underscores the existence of the divine and of redemption in the mystery itself and implies that, for Rossetti, the process of contemplation within devotional work is the contemplation of "God's love" (29). Although the ghost poems do not fit neatly into the category of devotional work and are not addressed in Roe's study, their biblical allusions and incorporation of religious language invite theological interpretation as much as those of the devotional poetry. The poems' central trope of the ghost defies a fixed position, offering a particularly apt vehicle to prompt a contemplation that is never resolved. With the exception of "A Chilly Night" with its silent, distanced ghost, the presence of Samuel's ghost as urtext makes present a redemption for the faithful.

Such an interpretive possibility is supported by Rossetti's discussion of the difference between biblical miracle and mystery in her study entitled "Children of Men" in *Seek and Find*. There she suggests that Jesus's miracles to alleviate suffering were natural outpourings of his being "Very Love," so they were miraculous not because He chose to perform them but

rather because they were each a “suspension and contravention of established law.” “What He did not is mysterious,” she goes on to say, speaking of miracles that he did not perform:

Mysteries lie deeper than miracles: they address and they tax a higher faculty in whoso would apprehend them. Many a miracle could in its own day be estimated and attested by the senses: all mysteries ever have been and at this day continue inappreciable except by faith and love. (292)

In Rossetti’s explication, the mysterious is what could have been done – the mercy that could have been extended – but was not. Thus, the absent mercy yet attests to mercy within the Christian narrative to which she contributes.

Rossetti’s prophetic ghosts are not typically diabolical, but even the most gentle inspire fear of their prophetic power. As we encounter them within poems that convey her Christian faith, readers can see a theological danger as well because of their erotic pull on the living. The ghosts – not pure body yet not pure spirit – support Rossetti’s religiously orthodox belief in the resurrection of the body as she portrays their awaiting the Judgment Day in sleep, but they also signify her grappling with the difficulty of that bodily redemption, given the body’s physical dependence on others – a dependence that does not cease with this life and is thus far less orthodox. Through her ghosts, Rossetti refigures the Victorian culture of death marked by relics such as hair jewelry and deathbed gatherings, imagining that the dead themselves are not lost; however, when she raises her spectral relics, she exposes a heightened anxiety about death in the living that popular relic culture functioned to ameliorate. Despite her religious orthodoxy in trusting to the resurrection, her ghostly explorations of death’s meaning in tandem with the desire for the bodies of the dead bring her to the brink of mystery. Like the Witch of Endor, Rossetti mediates between the living and the dead. Unlike the Witch of Endor, she knows that any secret in which she participates will require an accounting (*Seek and Find* 293). A contemplation of the mystery of the grave must be, for Rossetti and for a faithful interpretation of her poetry, a contemplation of God’s love, unattested by the senses yet appreciable by faith to which we will be held accountable.

The College of St. Scholastica

NOTES

1. Morley briefly mentions that Tractarianism or Anglo-Catholicism could have been understood as “an ally of Spiritualism,” and he suggests that the following excerpt from the *Weekly Despatch* (May 1868) could have been written by an adherent of either group: “we denounce as infidels all who cast doubt on miracles or inspiration. Spirit-raising pervades the whole of the Old Testament; every writer of the New devoutly believes in it” (106). The “corporeal nature of Victorian religion,” including the corporeal truth of the devil, angels, and God, he claims, made the leap from orthodox belief to a belief in Spiritualism possible (104). Rossetti resists that leap, however. In her commentary on Rev. 9.21 in *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse*, she prays never to have anything to do with spiritualism, mesmerism, or hypnotism, suggesting that they are forms of devil-worship (271).
2. For recent studies that argue for this pervasiveness, see Arseneau, Ludlow, Palazzo, and Roe.
3. The dialogic ghost poems in order of composition are “A Chilly Night” (1856), “The Hour and the Ghost” (1856), “A Coast-Nightmare” (1857), “The Poor Ghost” (1863), and “The Ghost’s Petition” (1864). Ghosts are also suggested or appear in less direct ways in “Shut Out” (1856), “The

- Convent Threshold" (1858), "Jessie Cameron" (1864), and "Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets" (unknown). "At Home" (1858) is unusual in that the dead speaker returns to her earthly house as a spirit without notice by the living.
4. Luther discusses the doctrine of psychopannichism most extensively in his lecture on Gen. 25, published in Vol. 4 of *Luther's Works*, when he explicates and interprets the death of Abraham in verses 7–10. By citing Matt. 22.32, Isa. 57.1–2, and Rev. 14.13 as well, he asserts that we can be sure "our souls are living and are sleeping in peace, and that they are not being racked by any tortures" after earthly life (312). He rebuts Rome's assertion that five immediate locations after death exist, including hell, heaven, and purgatory, and asserts instead the biblical grounds for all souls appearing before the judgment seat to receive good or evil (314). While we do not know from Scripture if the ungodly go to damnation immediately or not, he argues, it is "most certain that [the godly] live and enter into peace" (316). While Luther believed that God does not want humans to know the particulars of soul-sleep, God's ability to wake Elijah and Moses shows that "God preserves the waking soul" during this sleep and that "the soul lives before God" (313). In his notes on Eccl. 9.5–6, published in Vol. 15, Luther explicates the experience of the dead as being "asleep in such a way that they know nothing whatever" and claims that there is no more powerful passage than this one "in opposition to the invocation of the saints and the fiction of purgatory" (147). Rossetti diverges slightly from Luther's description of soul-sleep as a state of unknowing because she ascribes to soul-sleep a kind of awareness of earthly life in some of her ghost poems.
 5. Marshall corrects McGann's attribution of the doctrine of soul-sleep to nineteenth-century premillennarianism and instead attributes it to Anglican eschatology. She also argues that after 1858, soul-sleep becomes "more peaceful and humanized" in Rossetti's poetry and that the ghost poems of the late 1850s and 60s concern the "theme of human relationships here and beyond" (58). Poems published in Rossetti's lifetime that treat soul-sleep without appearances of ghosts in order of composition include "Lady Isabella" ("Lady Isabella") (1846), "Song" ("When I am dead, my dearest") (1848), "After Death" (1849), "Dream-Land" (1849), "Rest" (1849), "Sound Sleep" (1849), "Dream-Love" (1854), "Echo" (1854), "My Friend" (1857), "Up-Hill" (1858), and "Life & Death" (1863). A number of unpublished poems also concern soul-sleep, including "Sleeping at Last," which her brother William Michael Rossetti speculated to be the final poem composed before her death in 1894.
 6. Rossetti is not consistent in her descriptions. In *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, a poem about soul-sleep comprises the entry for May 28, and she uses the phrase "sufficient sleep" in the third tercet to describe the heavy sleep of the grave: "When shall our slumber sink so deep, / And eyes that wept and eyes that weep / Weep not in the sufficient sleep?" (102). The use of "sufficient" here to describe soul-sleep and in *Seek and Find* to describe mortal life supports my argument that Rossetti creates a permeable barrier between the living and the dead in her poetry despite her clear Protestant beliefs.
 7. Lutz attributes this phrase to Susan Stewart in her discussion of dollhouses in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993).
 8. Marsh follows McGann and Marshall in noting Rossetti's belief in soul-sleep, ascribing it to the strong "Adventist teaching" of her youth, but concludes that the ghosts must be figures of "metaphorical imagination—ghosts symbolically speaking for and from the heart and the past" (341). While Rossetti rejected the possibility of literal ghosts, to emphasize the metonymic heart as source of the ghostly visitations does not account for the physical desire of both the living and the dead in the ghostly encounters. The synecdochic relic as figure takes such desire into account.
 9. 1 Sam. 28.3, 7. All references to the biblical text are to the Authorized King James Version, which is the translation most often used by Rossetti, and all subsequent references will cite chapter and verse.
 10. "The Poor Ghost," line 36. All quotations from Rossetti's poetry are from *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, and all subsequent references will cite line numbers or, in the case of a sonnet sequence, sonnet number and line numbers.
- In her notes to Crump's text of the complete poems, Flowers connects "The Poor Ghost" to the theological doctrine of "soul-sleep" via her note on "Dream-Land" and includes not only the passage

from *Seek and Find* already quoted in this essay as evidence of Rossetti's belief in this doctrine but also an additional passage from that same text referring to "them which sleep in Jesus (1 Thes. iv: 14)" (889).

11. *Tracts for the Times*, written by leaders of the Oxford Movement to publicize Anglo-Catholic doctrinal positions in an accessible and inexpensive way, includes a tract on the subject of Roman Catholic belief in Purgatory. Written by Newman and published in 1837, Tract 79: "On Purgatory (Against Romanism – No 3)" examines the changing and often contradictory positions of early church fathers on the subject and then rejects the doctrine on biblical grounds: "It seems then the doctrine is not taught in *Scripture*" (318).
12. A similar passage appears in Isa. 13 about the destruction of Babylon: "For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine" (Isa. 13.10).
13. Job 38.30 uses this phrase as well: "the waters are hid as with a stone, and the face of the deep is frozen." In this section of the Book of Job, Job has requested a trial from God to vindicate himself, and this verse is from the middle of God's reply, which largely consists of questions that Job cannot answer, such as in the previous verse: "Out of whose womb came the ice? and the hoary frost of heaven, who hath gendered it?" Job 38.30 emphasizes not only humans' inability to know or understand divine justice but also, and more significantly, humans' lack of standing to bring any case before the divine court.
14. Rossetti uses "home" as a figure for heaven or the New Jerusalem in her devotional work, but for examples from poems not typically identified as devotional, see "From House to Home," "Advent" ("Come, Thou dost say to Angels"), "Luscious and Sorrowful," "A Prodigal Son," "An Old-World Thicket," and "A Song of Flight." In "Advent," she uses both "home" and "house" in adjacent lines (4–5).
Her use of "home" as a metaphor for heaven revises the dominant New Testament metaphor of "house," as in John 14.2: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you"; and in 2 Cor. 5.1: "For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." Furthermore, 2 Cor. 5 goes on to use the word "home" as a metaphor for the body rather than for heaven: "Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (for we walk by faith, not by sight:) we are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5.6–7). Thus, while Paul rejects being "at home in the body," Rossetti incorporates the body into the being-at-home of God's heavenly house. In "The Hour and the Ghost," she uses both "home" and "house" in the ghost's speeches to the Bride, for he says later, "Come, for house and bed are ready" (33). This interchangeability in the poem supports my argument that Rossetti understands the eroticized body as sanctified since neither metaphor is identified solely with eternal life or heaven.
15. Rossetti treats a similar isolation in "Shut Out," also composed in 1856 and published in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, although its spectre is a gatekeeper who shuts her out from her home. Because her desire in that poem is for her former life and home rather than for a loved one who has died, it does not elicit fear in the same way. The speaker's isolation is tempered, too, by her surroundings outside the gated and walled home, which are "good" if not "the best," sustaining violets and the lark (27). Interestingly, Rossetti lends an ambiguity to her use of the figure of "home" since in this poem she seems to reverse her typical usage: home here means earthly and sinful attachments rather than the eternal resting place prepared for the faithful by God.
16. The final sonnet of "Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets," composition date unknown, envisions a multiplicity of such figures, surrounding the living while unable to communicate. The dead "friend" of that poem returns to hear what the living say, although they cannot hear him or see his face. Rossetti concludes the sequence with lines attesting to the love of the dead for the living, a love that overflows

and seems expressed through “eyes and heart” and that does not distress the speaker as in “A Coast-Nightmare” (28: 11):

The dead may be around us, dear and dead;
 The unforgotten dearest dead may be
 Watching us with unslumbering eyes and heart;
 Brimful of words which cannot yet be said,
 Brimful of knowledge they may not impart,
 Brimful of love for you and love for me. (28: 9–14)

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