Perspectives
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Above all ideal personalities with which the poet must learn to identify himself, there is one supremely real which is the most imperative of all: namely the reader.
—D. G. Rossetti, Doughty and Wahl

Like Dante, he knows no region of spirit which shall not be sensuous also, or material.
—Walter Pater, “Dante Gabriel Rossetti,” 237

While at work on his first major painting, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, in 1848 (figure 1), Dante Gabriel Rossetti composed a sonnet on the same subject. In March 1849, when the painting was shown at the unjuried Hyde Park Corner Free Exhibition, Rossetti saw it printed in the exhibition booklet and affixed it and a second sonnet on gold leaf paper to the frame. The simultaneous presentation of reading and viewing materials on the general topic of Mary’s girlhood required a mobile gaze and a dialectical engagement by a viewer/reader between two kinds of art. Previous Rossetti critics have noted that as part of their topic and goal, both his paintings and his sonnets offer multiple perspectives within them. This chapter will build on that work, arguing that by exhibiting paintings with poems attached, Rossetti exposes the viewer/reader to a series of shifting perspectives—literal and conceptual—which further undermine traditional mimesis and its accompanying epistemology. Relying on an analytic understanding of how objects speak to and act on nonstationary viewer/readers, Rossetti explores a new relationship to the object being processed.
Rossetti’s numerous incarnations of a relationship between poetry and painting started in the 1840s and reached their highest point during the 1870s and 1880s, when his paired sonnets and massive paintings of women, most often his beloved Jane Burden Morris or Alexa Wilding, achieved a complexity that greatly surpassed his earlier experiments. This chapter will examine two late pairs, *Astarte Syriaca* and *The Day-Dream*, against the earliest example of such pairings, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, to see how Rossetti’s double art evolved and what it can teach us about Victorian alternatives to traditional visual perspective and accompanying metaphysics and epistemology.
The Girlhood of Mary Virgin (1849), the first painting to feature “PRB” alongside a painter’s signature, announces the Pre-Raphaelite movement as differing distinctively in subject, composition, and technique from paintings that had still supported the norms of unity, or the handling of content and perspective promoted by Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Royal Academy of Art. Previous critics have located this difference by stressing a pronounced dialectical rhythm which makes Rossetti’s paintings and sonnets alike (see Fredeman; Stein; McGann, Rossetti Archive). They have noted that his destruction of traditional geometric perspective, his separation of content into sections reinforced by his use of color, and his choice of the sonnet form all force the viewer/reader to value parts, rather than hierarchizing sections into an integrated composition. Other Pre-Raphaelites, too, were known for their commitment to units and for differing ways of manipulating sharp detail. As Chris Brooks aptly puts it, they practiced “a realism of parts, not wholes” (126).

Yet equally important is Rossetti’s concurrent shaping of an ambient viewer/reader who must repeatedly negotiate two art forms that differ remarkably in size, in semiotic language, and in location. Rossetti physically undoes the traditional relationship of a single, stable exchange in space between viewer’s eye and object. Even more to the point, within paintings and sonnets, Rossetti raises to consciousness struggle and translation among sign systems and interpretive methods. Materially, he forces the viewer/reader to move back and forth in space and in time between words and images.

The pairing of two art objects, requiring a complex dual response, was hardly new on the visual arts or literary scene. Companion pieces had long existed in the visual arts, literary, and sister arts traditions. In chapter 1, we have seen one example of Turner’s pendant paintings: Shade and Darkness—The Evening Before the Deluge and Light and Colour (Goethe’s Theory)—The Morning After the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis. While this is not the place for a full genealogy of pendantry, it is worth recalling earlier pairs of drawings by William Hogarth, among other visual artists, precisely because of their vast influence and because of their social analytics. In poetry, examples as diverse as paired sonnets within Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence or Milton’s “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” illustrate different uses and kinds of relationship. In seeking the origins of pairing within literature, we probably have to go as far back as strophe/antistrophe, which was part of the three-part ode form in Greece (and thus part of every chorus in Greek tragedy) and to the rhetorical strategy of parallelism found in Plutarch’s Lives.
Notably, such pendants had become increasingly attractive to poets in the 1830s and 1840s as they continued self-consciously to explore problems of representation and alternatives to Romantic lyric subjectivity and as they drew upon other discourses such as social analysis and historical writing. In 1833 Robert Browning had published the dramatic monologues “Johannes Agricola” and “Porphyria’s Lover” under the combined title “Madhouse Cells.” In 1842 Tennyson, in dramatically revising poems from his 1832 volume, set up alternating views on the same topic. His changes to “The Lady of Shalott,” for example, multiplied perspectives on a mythic story he had already exploited for issues of mirroring and point of view. His own “Ulysses” and “Tithonus” would eventually be published, also, as a pair of alternating points of view, even as Browning would go on to explore dramatic lyric more fully in fifty poems of *Men and Women* (1855). Both Browning and Tennyson were engaged in experimentations of form as serving social and political agendas that required renovating, if differently, how we read and feel. Both exploited different ways of multiplying views, through poetic forms chosen (a series of juxtaposed monologues, dramatic monologue), through content (poems about point of view, transmission, or translation), through images and symbols (mirrors, the processes of art), and presentation method (pairing poems).

The most important recent predecessor for Rossetti, however, probably would have been William Blake’s illuminated books, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, not only because of the visual and verbal connection, but more precisely because Blake deploys composite visual and verbal elements with and against each other to shift a viewer/reader’s perspective and understanding. Significantly, however, Rossetti does not make his visual and verbal art composite, like Blake’s. Most often he accentuates a division or bar, or what McGann calls a gap, as he illustrates literally in his most famous painting, *The Blessed Damozel*. It is a bar he perceives between the material and spiritual worlds, and hence not only a separation between art forms. Although Rossetti seeks to transcend this separation, to imitate the medieval art which he admired for unifying the physical and the spiritual, he engages the separation as part of the message of his double art.

A viewer/reader seeing Rossetti’s set of Marian materials displayed at the 1849 Free Exhibition would certainly have been exposed to just such a separation. He or she might have read the sonnets first and then turned his or her attention to the image, or could have read one sonnet in the exhibition booklet, looked at the painting, and only then have read the other sonnet.
Here are the two sonnets Rossetti invited viewers of *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* to connect to the painting before them:

This is that blessed Mary, pre-elect
  God’s Virgin. Gone is a great while, and she
  Was young in Nazareth of Galilee.
Her kin she cherished with devout respect:
Her gifts were simpleness of intellect
  And supreme patience. From her mother’s knee
Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;
Strong in grave peace; in duty circumspect

So held she through her girlhood; as it were
An angel-watered lily, that near God
  Grows, and is quiet. Till one dawn, at home
She woke in her white bed, and had no fear
  At all, yet wept till sunshine, and felt awed;
  Because the fullness of the time was come.

These are the symbols. On that cloth of red
  I’ the centre is the Tripoint: perfect each
  Except the second of its points, to teach
That Christ is not yet born. The books—whose head
Is golden Charity, as Paul hath said—
  Those virtues are wherein the soul is rich:
Therefore on them the lily standeth, which
Is innocence, being interpreted.

The seven-thorn’d briar and the palm seven-leaved
  Are her great sorrow and her great reward.
  Until the end be full, the Holy One
Abides without. She soon shall have achieved
Her perfect purity: yea, God the Lord
  Shall soon vouchsafe His Son to be her Son.

Did the viewers, however, pause to read these two texts first? I suspect, instead, that the brilliantly colorful image, imitating an illuminated medieval manuscript in order to evoke the Middle Ages during Victorian times, would have initially captivated the majority of viewers, though we have no documented reception history. In any case, the spectator
would have had choices to make about seeing and reading. She or he would have consciously or unconsciously had to move back and forth among small units, both linguistic and pictorial, for a full experience of double art. Such movement is precisely what Rossetti sets up by choosing to pair and even condense two art ‘languages.’ While his first sonnet describes his topic, Mary, his second calls attention to cognition and vision, when he directs the reader to look: “These are the symbols. On that cloth of red” (1). The fact that Rossetti’s directive sets out literally to move, involve, and educate a reader into becoming a viewer/reader is part of the very topic of the painting/sonnet set.

The painting compels attention, too, because, as several critics have noted, it doesn’t present a traditional education scene for Mary, as we might see it handled in a medieval manuscript or by Giotto or later painters. Rossetti offers something quite different with his new combination of sacred subject matter, intense color and handling, ordinary faces engaged in everyday activities, and disruption of traditional perspective. In this regard, he lives up to Holman Hunt’s expectations for the Brotherhood: “while artists must forever be beholden to examples from the past for their tuition, the theme that they treat must ever be new, or they must make it so by an infiltration of thoughts belonging to their own times.”

Mixing Christian art symbols and realistic detail, Rossetti was chastised by contemporary critics, on the grounds of poor technique and poor intentions. They thought he did not know how to master perspective and an appropriate handling of the Virgin or that he didn’t care about doing so. Yet, like much Victorian poetry, and the dramatic monologue in particular, double art goes beyond expressivity and beyond traditional form. It dramatizes how expression and commentary work dialectically in and on a perceiving, embodied mind. Rossetti’s painting, exploring figuration in its linguistic and pictorial registers, is far more complex than it initially appears.

Rossetti’s *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* operates on several levels at one time with several kinds of aesthetic intentions. It pays homage to traditional symbology in order to remind the nineteenth-century viewer of a lost past. Rossetti exploits color symbols for virtues: for instance, blue stands for faith, green for hope, gold for charity. Moreover, he draws on objects conveying widely known, Christian-inflected meanings, such as the dove for the Holy Spirit. In addition, he features objects that belong to a typological (predictive) reading of the teleological narrative of Christ’s redemptive death, such as the thorns for Christ’s martyrdom. Finally, he uses objects that are rarely invoked in these traditional scenes, for instance, a trellis, part of a grape arbor, which signifies the cross and
Christ’s passion. One assumes that the trellis isn’t original to Rossetti, but that there are precedents in early Christian art; indeed the Rossetti Archive cites a woodcut in the British library as possibly influencing the inclusion of a grape arbor. The treatment of the angel Gabriel is distinctive. He appears as a young boy, according to his proper age in the narrative Rossetti depicts, instead of as anything like the majestic figure with scepter and crown we might recognize from pre-fourteenth-century Annunciation scenes (see Ferguson). Rossetti pays homage not in order to reinstate aspects of institutionalized religion, however. In fact, this example of double art questions the relationship between approaches to the Christian scriptures and inherited ways of reading and assigning meaning. If it evokes a time when the artistic image was viscerally connected to devotion and thought and prayer, it also references—through its incorporation of symbols such as books—a history of scholasticism and commentary that has recorded, but also devitalized, devotion and faith (see McGann, Rossetti Archive).

With his sonnets, Rossetti explores the relationship between the physical body and the mystical one. The first sonnet stresses the secular, temporal realm from which Mary emerges into the moment of the Annunciation. It opens with “This is that blessed Mary”—as a pointer to the painting, but also as a stress on the presentness of childhood—and ends with “the fullness of the time was come.” The second sonnet, a holy sonnet, takes up the atemporal realm, reinforced by the conditional “These are the symbols” and more archaic language such as “standeth,” “hath said.” No longer about the secular, this sonnet focuses on the translation of the Virgin’s narrative into spiritual symbols and metaphor.

Only through visual symbolic systems, Rossetti suggests, can we best sense and know the Virgin’s mystical importance—through the lily, through the vase, through the lamp, or through the books with names of virtues. In addition, the physical reality of her mother St. Anne and her father St. Joachim in scenes of domestic and arbor work reassert the importance of materiality and literality. Rossetti updates the Christian narrative, while also putting it on trial, so to speak; Rossetti performs a complicated translation. The figures do not have idealized faces (Rossetti’s mother modeled for Saint Anne, sister Christina sat for Mary, a handyman Williams posed for Mary’s father, Saint Joachim). The setting is an everyday, if well-off, domestic scene; Saint Anne supervises Mary in embroidering a lily (the same lily embroidery that is completed in Rossetti’s 1849 *The Annunciation/Ecce Ancilla DOMINI*). The painting offers a predictive reading that also gives a retrospective deeper meaning to that childhood.
Indeed, Rossetti’s first example of double art importantly stresses the translation of a material reality into a symbolic one as it explores kinds of sign systems. At the same time, challenging traditional paradigms through transformation of them, Rossetti’s double art enacts a cultural critique, questioning the ideological structures and rituals under which an art of idolatry had been produced and consumed. Instead of creating an art that idolizes or makes static the female form or the viewer’s gaze, Rossetti uses a variety of cultural sign systems and languages to open up the process of reading and viewing.13

A questioning commentary on interpretation as much as a symbolic presentation of a legendary topic, then, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin thus exposes the reliance of the Christian narrative, in pictorial and linguistic form, on symbolic processes to keep the story of Christ alive. For instance, Rossetti’s use of St. Joachim and the grape arbor emphasizes the very process of mystical translation, a change from one state to a different form or substance. On a simple level, St. Joachim’s tending of the grapes stands for blood and refers to the future narrative of Christ’s physical sacrifice. In turn, the grape will be taken up as the wine of the Eucharist in the institutionalization of the sacrifice. In another instance, the symbolically colored books remind us perhaps of monastery libraries as well as the abstract virtues named, but also raise the idea that we have to go back and read old books to find out what the symbols mean. Thus, Rossetti explores not only kinds of symbology, but also cultural memory. He suggests varied historicized versions of symbols, and notes the process of how something becomes a symbol and can fall away from memory and require clear labeling (virtues on book spines, names on haloes, Latin phrases on the organ and scroll) and directives from sonnets.

The education of the naïve viewer/reader proves as important a topic here as St. Anne’s supervision of the innocent Mary in a sacred embroidery, whose import she will not understand until the Annunciation (i.e., the event and Rossetti’s painting of the event). Rossetti’s handling of the Christian narrative stresses both its power and its lost meanings and purchase in modern times. As long as myths are stable, Rossetti’s painting intimates, they last. Rossetti might have agreed with the later anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who claims a myth is “not merely a story told, but a reality lived. . . . It expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality” (78–79). When cultural values and assumptions alter, as they did with the nineteenth-century scientific worldview and capitalism, their meanings are diluted and they no longer have a firm hold on our attention. Then we need help to remember and understand them. But they will never resonate in
the same way again, Rossetti seems to say; they will remain distanced, unless writers and artists keep them alive and fresh.

Rossetti’s handling of perspective in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* recalls complexities that Leo Steinberg’s analysis of perspective uncovers in Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* of 1656. Rossetti’s shortened depth of field makes viewing a challenge. It is difficult to figure out the relationship of the floor to the wall to the space behind Mary and Anne, not because the painting is lacking in technique, but precisely because the technique forgoes visual hierarchy. We can’t be absolutely sure where the center lies. As Jerome McGann notes, “light in this painting has no source point” (2000, 107). As with Turner’s Polyphemus painting with its various light sources, so here, too, it is impossible to point to a single source.

Eyes, which often mark out angles of vision, do not help us fix a central position in this painting. Noticeably, most lead us not to dwell on one object or one body, but out of the frame, as if spirituality drove the gaze, not another person. Indeed, all members of the Holy Family pointedly avoid looking at each other or at the viewer; nor does God’s minister engage any human figure. Mary looks, rather glassy-eyed, over the angel’s head out of the frame to the left, not at her labor of embroidery. St. Joachim looks up out of the frame more than at the vine in his hand (for that his head would have to be adjusted). The only eyes concerned with the actual activity depicted within the painting are St. Anne’s. Although she supervises Mary’s embroidery, she also seems unengaged. Finally, the angel looks off out of the frame to the right, not at his lily watering.

If we address the width of Rossetti’s canvas as a physical object, taking a measurement side to side, the center of the painting is at the cruciform trellis. According to one kind of viewing, and on one level of meaning, a prediction of Christ’s crucifixion is the center, symbolically and literally, of this painting. Mary takes her meaning from that association. Relating that center to the title, her education in girlhood is ‘for’ something—it prepares her to birth the savior; her life will be shadowed by his death; her name will be honored by his deeds, martyrdom, and resurrection.

On the other hand, if we look to the vanishing point of traditional geometric perspective to find the center, attending to orthogonals, we discover that strong verticals and horizontals—the wall, the trellis, the embroidery, the curtain, drapery, the lily—keep perspective in doubt. The floorboards point us inward but do not align. To be sure, the embroidery stand’s foreshortened angle leads the eye back to the dove and what is beyond it, hills and purple shadows. There is some sense of a
vanishing point in the natural scene over which, or in front of which, the
dove hovers; yet perspective blends with pattern. The eye slows and is
arrested.

As James Elkins has pointed out, there are various ways to slow an
eye: organic forms (here the haloes or the tree’s arch or the white pool
shape bifurcated by St. Joachim’s middle) can slow the eye trying to
move backwards or deeply. He remarks: “when figures occlude lines, or
parallax disrupts orderly diminution, perspective is softened enough to
turn the eye loose” (1994, 177). He further explains that frontal planes
can affect the eye as it travels into fictive depth, perspective can blend
with pattern so the eye moves left and right along a surface, instead of
deply, or orthogonals can be shortened or eliminated (177). Linguistic
text within the pictorial text also reinforces this slowing down.

If one focuses on the foreground, where the central figure and edu-
cation event take place, we find not one but at least two centers, both
of which align with heavy verticals rather than with perspective angles
that lead the eye towards the background. The straight line of the curtain
edge and the embroidery stand pulls the eye to St. Anne. The second
strong vertical is the lily, reinforced by the standing position and the
wings of the angel Gabriel, which pulls the eye upward. We might think
we should dwell on Mary, since the title refers to her. But as in Hunt’s
Christ in the House of his Parents, where the important figure of Christ
has to compete for visual attention, composition in The Girlhood of Mary
Virgin challenges tradition by illustrating that “there are no a priori main
subjects” (Brooks 125). Mary is to the side, literally.

Viewers are left with an equality of objects in front, in back, and in
the middle as the eye travels group to group of details, figure to figure,
subspace to subspace. If one does choose a center, as some viewers,
including Jerome McGann, do—“the haloed dove locates a vortex, an
‘inner standing point’—a conceptual (in several senses) center for all
the actions represented in the picture,” that center is quickly shown to
be located “obliquely in a minor key.” The Dove is God’s point of view,
according to McGann (2000, 109), but also a witty nod to the disappear-
ance in the nineteenth century of God, whom one may yet continue to
apprehend through signs (see Miller 1963). So this ‘convergence’ point
is actually a sign and a metaphor pointing to an absence.

By offering a verbal text not only in the sonnets, and not only through
his title, but also on the pictorial representations of, for instance, the
book titles, the inscribed haloes, and a phrase on the organ to Mary’s
right—Rossetti also draws attention to multiple levels on which we
‘read’ and ‘translate’ cognitively what we see: via words, in an ancient
(or modern) language, and not only, as I have mentioned, via Christian color coding, or through material symbols of abstract elements in the Christian narrative. The verbal elements of the painting are designed to provoke thought. Yet the intricate composition and the shifting of literal and metaphorical meanings isolate elements of the scene instead of leading us to an integration and a unifying geometrical perspective.

Steinberg proposes that a profusion of visual centers in one painting creates a “scatter effect” (51) and explains that such multiplicity is often reinforced by groupings of colors in blocks. Rossetti uses the color of fabric to create such a pattern. Blocks of red framing the greens are further enclosed by blocks of white fabric serving to frame the reds and, in reverse, red wings framing the angel’s white gown. Yet the shadowed white of Mary’s dress, of the angel’s gown, and of St. Joachim’s sleeves pull our eyes back and forth across the wall separating foreground from background, as much as they may pull us deeply inward towards Joachim, as we work to make sense of the separate, divided units of this painting. The more washed-out colors of the background, in spite of the gold around the dove, seem to insist that the ‘real’ story (in both senses of the word) lies in the foreground, not in the background, not in the dividing plane of the trellis, not in the symbolics. The sheaf on the floor in front, calling to mind painter’s brushes or writer’s quills, and not only the palms held during Christ’s riding into Jerusalem, beautifully emblematises the scatter effect. Fronds lead the eye in various directions, while at the same time, they mimic but do not perfectly reproduce a cross. So, depending on how one judges the center, there are at least three or four or five of them.

But what do multiple centers of vision and a verbal profusion do in this painting, and why construct composition in this way? Considering the traditional power and meaning of perspective within the Christian narrative alluded to in this painting, it would appear that Rossetti’s disruptions deliberately invite competing centralities, time frames, thoughts, and visions. As Steinberg demonstrates, a painting such as Las Meninas is concerned with the role vision plays in self-definition (52), summoning a reader’s eye to look not at what the picture shows but at what it beholds outside the frame, a royal couple and the viewer. The Girlhood of Mary Virgin concerns itself with the role art plays in the construction of the identity of the sacred and with the sacred identity of the material everyday.

In this regard, it is highly significant that Rossetti not only alludes to levels of interpretation, but paints three levels of interpretation: a liv-
ing thing (lily), a depiction of that thing (embroidered lily), and that for which they stand, Mary, who is at the same time the artist of the depiction (of herself). The painting arrests and pleases the viewer/reader through its vibrant use of color, but also demands thought from the viewer/reader who must become a kind of translator. In this way, the artist Rossetti may have painted an image without depth, but he does not leave the viewer/reader pleasurably on the surface. Rather, the painting demands that one enter it fully—negotiating levels of meaning, dealing with ambiguous centers, rethinking the subject matter, deciding where to focus. In this way, the viewer/reader is, one might say, cornered. Like Mary, the viewer/reader, once in the scene, is kept busy stitching and being stitched into the visual and linguistic ‘story.’ This artistic method seems indebted in more ways than one to Browning’s interiorization of the reader in “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.”

The real world and the symbolic world, here the typological world, encounter each other in the space of the painting. The viewer/reader is invited into the encounter, but not offered a seat. We are asked to keep moving back and forth between sonnets and painting, and back and forth and all around within the image trying to put things together. We do not master this painting; for it constantly masters us. Rossetti shows the irreducibility of painting—and of the Marian materials—to an exploration of traditional vision and traditional interpretation where we face a painting, find the center, and award it meaning.

This is also to say that for Rossetti, this early in his career, painting is not a mere extension of vision. It is material. It calls attention to its own materiality, presenting itself as other than easily assimilable, to vision or to language. It is worrisome to some critics that Rossetti apparently believes in an “essence” of things apart from the mind that perceives them. Rather, the emphasis should fall, in my view, on his texts’ exposure of the fact that vision and interpretation are based in historical and cultural conventions.

Complex social operations are assigned to and appropriated by objects, especially objects on display, such as paintings and sonnets. The first sonnet identifies the subject and places Mary historically, geographically, and morally. The second sonnet concerns symbolic interpretation, references writing about Christ, and presents symbology, in McGann’s words, as an antique “form of artistic expression and style not a vehicle of religious concepts and ideas” (“Medieval” 98). The fact that these sonnets exist and are pinned to the painting is more important, finally, than their words, which is why they are so unmemorable as poetry and so memorable as directives.
By offering the painting to the viewer through a sonnet that concerns itself with the present moment of viewing, Rossetti shows that interpretation is contingent. Yet importantly, the cultural agency of double art is formed not only in relationship to aesthetics and education of a viewer/reader. Nor is it formed only in relationship to issues of class/capitalism/patronage or to gender in the collective worship of an iconic female figure, whether Mary or an image of Jane Burden Morris. Rather, we must ask how the relationship between poem and painting functions in particular settings.

In any setting, a sonnet pinned to a frame is an object that speaks, not only what it says, but its own objecthood, what it is and what it does. This is part of the point of double art. Poems challenge us with a sense of difficult access, but also, when read, of immediacy. A poem pinned to or written on a frame is more than an inert object; it shapes social relationships, delineates boundaries not only between painting and poem, but also between viewer/reader, language, and the visual. We can’t know what this pairing does or means in the gallery or the artist’s studio or the patron’s home without knowing more about historical processes that shape these places and spaces, differently designated as sites of consumption, creation, labor, leisure, or the domestic. We tend to think of poetry in a book or on a manuscript leaf or in a journal issue or declaimed. Yet what does poetry do when it leaves its ordinary or expected place?

For one thing, the position of the poem on the frame helps position people. And thus the placement encourages social acts in advance of reading it. The disjunction in size between painting and poem matters enormously. It demands an audience take up multiple viewing positions. The viewer/reader must go up close to the painting if he or she is going to read the poem. Later, he or she will likely step back again to see the painting whole. Or, more likely, especially given sonnet directives, the viewer/reader will move back and forth from one viewpoint to another in order to look at specific parts of the painting. Double art also establishes boundaries and connections among viewer/readers jockeying for space to see and read it.

Most readers of poems linger with the words, rhymes, syllables, figures. It is an involved, time-consuming process. Rossetti’s selection of the sonnet form is telling. This form itself is dialectical, requiring the reader to make sense of units, of propositions, and of turns and counterturns. Like the painting, it is built in sections. Moreover, influenced by fourteenth-century Italian sonneteers Dante and Petrarch and English Renaissance sonnet cycles, the poem references an entire cultural history
about love and the worship of a woman that it brings to the reading and viewing situation. In particular, the sonnet is the main poetic form that moves between the secular and the holy—addressed to a Laura, for example, living and dead, earthbound and spiritual.

Thus, placing a poem on a frame is a form of social communication, marking out the positions of persons who occupy the space, whether servant, guard, patron, guest, or gallery goer. It serves as an invitation and an information piece and an object to view in its own right and it, ideally at least, arrests a viewer/reader. The poem’s presence slows the pace of experience and interpretation and, unless the viewer chooses to ignore it, the poem heavily controls how, how long, and in what order one reads the image. Certainly, Rossetti’s strategy aids Holman Hunt’s idea to create in Pre-Raphaelite work an art requiring a viewer to look at detail, to consider small areas of interest, to produce a thoughtful and even a meditative response (Landow, victorianweb). Literally, the poem takes us into the realm of image. It slows time and demands that we encounter space. Although the poem does not fix meanings, it asks the viewer/reader to think about the image in particular ways, not just view it—and to view the poem as artifact also, not just read it—thus enforcing a mental engagement with image and a pictorial engagement with language.

Rossetti explored various kinds of image/text combinations. Sometimes working in the ekphrasis tradition, he responded to another artist’s painting, as in “Sonnets for Pictures,” which makes up a celebrated unit of Poems (1870). At other times he produced text/image pairings by illustrating another poet’s words, as in his contribution to the Moxon Tennyson (1858). But he also produced about thirty combinations with poems and painting by his own hand, combinations which are, for my purposes, the most important examples. Often poems appear written on the Rossetti-designed frames of these pictures or appear in a corner of the paintings themselves or, written on paper, they are attached to the corner of the frame or put on its back. In some cases, the doubles have been lost and, in other cases, texts are alluded to only by picture titles.

At different times, Rossetti seemed to prefer one art medium to the other, depending upon whether he was referring to sales or art. In an 1851 note to his aunt, for example, he labeled painting his “real career” and writing a “minor employment” (Doughty and Wahl 99). Following the famous advice of Leigh Hunt that poetry writing would not allow enough money for a man to “live upon while he is in the flesh” (Doughty 62), Rossetti had given up poetry in his twenties. Later, as is well known, he literally gave it up by burying his verse manuscripts...
with his wife Elizabeth Siddal in 1862, only to exhume them six years later. A shift in emphasis occurred after the (carefully orchestrated) success of Poems (1870): “My own belief is that I am a poet (within the limits of my powers) primarily, and that it is my poetic tendencies that chiefly give value to my pictures: only painting being—what poetry is not—a livelihood—I have put my poetry chiefly in that form” (Doughty and Wahl 749).

We might easily mistake Rossetti here as promoting an eighteenth-century notion of translatability between the sister arts or an ideal of unity. Entire nineteenth-century galleries had been devoted, after all, to pictorial translations of literary texts. It was possible, too, that pairings would offer a fuller, better, complementary imitation of reality. However, quite to the contrary, Rossetti is not promoting that ideal of translation. He offers symbolic recreations of ideas, a kind of antipictorialism and antinarrativizing akin to Blake’s and to Turner’s. For Rossetti, painting does not attain visionary quality by telling stories, nor does poetry by painting pictures.

If Blake wanted to challenge a dualistic, divided world of opposites as a fiction, including that of visual and verbal, by creating unity from contrariety and not complementarity, Rossetti realized unity was out of the question. The interaction could reference potential unity in which such categories no longer functioned, but never attain it. Where Blake made the reader rhetorically and hermeneutically connect the visual and verbal on the page in his illuminated books, to suture over the gap of a fallen world, Rossetti’s double art drew the reader into the painting and words on the wall. At the same time, each emphasizes the impossible gap between the contemporary viewer and situation and the content and form of the art painted and written.

Pairing a poem with a painting, whether side by side, affixed, or by writing on the painting itself, was not in itself an unusual practice. Within a long, expanding, and complex history of the sister arts, Rossetti’s double art holds a unique position. In some cases, he creates a set of textual and visual materials, rather than a single pair. Each instantiation of a figure/idea such as Mary, or of a particular style of art such as the Venetian, for instance, can serve as one individual perspective. Each dialogic pair or set is one view of what McGann calls in the Rossetti Archive section on doubleworks “an ideal visionary reality.” In some cases, two languages are involved, where Rossetti first writes a sonnet in Italian, which he then translates into English, as in the case of La Bella Mano and Proserpina (1872). Each offers part of a larger history of and commentary on forms of the ideal.
Complicating pendentry, Rossetti does not present pendants or pairs in relays (poem and painting, poem and poem, painting and poem and poem) just to offer multiple views. His very exploitation of two highly complex art forms militates against such a conclusion. Each set is a nineteenth-century attempt (self-consciously belated) to recover a certain historical awareness (early Christian, Roman, Greek, Venetian, Medieval, Elizabethan), in contrast to that of his contemporary moment.

Rossetti aims to bring poetry and painting closer together, without merging them, but also without making one form primary as an explicator of the other. In terms of form, he asks us to see words and letters as graphics and to read paintings as iconic signs. In terms of content, he aims to counterpoint and test major categories by which we order experience: the material and the spiritual, the body and the soul, the everyday and the supernatural, male and female. His texts foreground interpretive systems to pose questions about meaning making.

Perhaps most importantly, Rossetti’s art is social in orientation and function, partaking of a heightened self-consciousness, ambiguity, and daring self-exposure, but in the service of serious unmaskings rather than wit or critique. While seeming to universalize the artistic experience, Rossetti’s texts show it as a layered experience, that of experiential involvement and that of interpretive involvement, both enabled and limited by historical location, social identity, and embodied experience.

As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests in *Picture Theory*, when theorizing the relationship between verbal and visual languages, one cannot take the relationship for granted. Relations between the two “correspond to . . . an authentic critical desire to connect different aspects and dimensions of cultural experience” (87). We need ask not what the similarity or difference may be between image and text but to what end they are put together at all. Critics differ in how they describe Rossetti’s double art and its purpose. Lucien Agosta sees Rossetti as intending an organic whole. Linda Nochlin suggests that the forms explicate each other, but are not locked together in style or content (139–53). Maryan Ainsworth argues that they exist in a “symbiotic” relationship with one art “used to expand the viewer/reader’s experience of the other” (4). J. Hillis Miller comments: “each exceeds the other, however they may be deliberately matched.” “Each,” he goes on, “says more or less than the other, and says it differently, in ways which have only in part to do with the differences of medium. Either may be taken as the ‘original’ of which the other is the ‘illustration.’ But then the secondary version is always and can only be, in one way or another, a travesty, a misinterpretation, a distorted image in the mirror of the other art” (1991, 335–36). If we
contextualize Rossetti’s double art within Victorian poetry of the period and within a resistance to classical Renaissance perspective, we need to see them as interactions between kinds of meaning in which one exposes the other in a continual rearranging of materials and a raising of new questions.

By their assembling and reassembling of words and spaces, lines and colors in conversation with earlier art, Rossetti’s texts cultivate a point of view from within the assembled material that is skeptical of that very material. In this example, the scholarship and the iconography that institutionalized Mary as an idealized, or better a de-realized, icon practiced a deformation of feeling. Rossetti selects, instead, the fleshly, feeling girl Mary and carries through with that presentation in his *The Annunciation*.

In his resistance to a Romantic construction of subject and object, Rossetti crafts a poetics in which “the art object itself is drawn into the point of view taken towards the nominal subject” (McGann, Rossetti Archive, Introduction). He explores a dramatized point of view, what he calls the “inner standing point.” This is a position similar to what we familiarly know as the poetic space achieved by a dramatic monologue by Robert Browning from whom, McGann suggests, Rossetti learned the technique. In that literary form, the presence of a silent auditor opens a space of irony that dramatizes the speaker’s overheard self-revelation. The position of the auditor can be virtually shared by the reader. Rossetti’s inner standing point is thus very much related to work by Browning and Tennyson. However, there are significant differences as well.

Rossetti’s thoughts about the dramatic monologue, and the dramatized performativity of the lyric “I,” do not coincide with those of Robert Browning, despite his admiration for the older poet’s use of the form. Rossetti does not experiment with point of view in order to distance himself, as poet, from his material. Browning programmatically did so after the poor reception of his highly subjective *Pauline* (1833). Thinking of “Fra Lippo Lippi” (1855) and “Jenny” (1870) may be useful since both feature speakers with whom the author appears sympathetic on the basis of conflicting loyalties. The Browning text, about a fifteenth-century artist, includes the process of an artist making himself part of the artwork. At the end of the poem, Fra Lippo describes a painting he made, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, and notes that the portrait in the corner of the painting is himself “I!— / Mazed, motionless, and moonstruck—I’m the man!” (363–64) and he notes that the scroll with the Latin inscription, which translates to “This is the man who caused the work to be done,” refers to him. Although the actual portrait is now
thought to be that of the man who commissioned the painting, Browning took it to be the artist. While Browning creates distance between himself and “Fra Lippo,” the poem might be said, in expository terms, to describe the situation that Rossetti’s poem enacts. “Jenny,” set in a whore’s bedroom in Victorian London, co-opt the creator and his stand-in, the reader, into the poem’s staged action and a series of related moral and ethical problems about commodification of woman, class, separate spheres, and a number of other important social and personal issues of the day. Yet those issues, slightly masked, also can refer to the artist as whore, the commodification of women in Rossetti’s art, class divisions between artist and model, types of women in Rossetti’s life, and more. Any criticism of the young man in the poem may also be self-criticism; any questioning about goods, value, and money may also be self-questions.

Instead of sharing distance with Browning, Rossetti, according to McGann, reintroduces “the action of the subjective artist into the critical space of the work” (McGann, Archive, Rossetti Archive, Introduction, 6). Perhaps equally influenced by Turner, who paints so that his viewer experiences sea spray or storm or the center of the sun from within, as if in a vortex of waves or living within a ball of light, Rossetti suggests that “an inner standing point” is not the property of one form or one genre, but a requirement of all art. To narrativize, to see and know from without, to describe, is not, according to Rossetti, the function of art, either poetry or painting. As Turner’s paintings critique monocular vision in favor of confusions of shapes, color, and light—following more closely how we see and come to know—so Rossetti’s double art develops into a style of ornamentation in the 1860s and later that blends natural and supernatural into grotesque arrangements, but they carry a social import.

Ruskin’s ideas of gothic grotesque, as developed in The Stones of Venice and Modern Painters, influenced the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Rossetti. Ruskin noted in a critical statement in Modern Painters III: in the art of Turner, Watts, and Rossetti “there may be the dawn of a new era of art in a true union of the grotesque with the realistic power” (5: 137). As Isobel Armstrong has argued, Ruskin’s gothic grotesque is a theory of representation “based on a social and not a psychological analysis, seeing psychological experience as determined by cultural conditions” (240). Pater’s important essay on Rossetti refers, as well, to the “grotesque” quality of his blend of naturalism and supernaturalism (see Stein 125). Rossetti’s sensual double art exposes the construction of myths and ideologies by which we live, shuttles the viewer/reader
among them, shows them as prey to history and culture, and shatters their traditional hold on vision and cognition. The loss entailed in this process of destruction produces the very desire and longing for meaning that Ruskin identifies as the most important experience of disturbed modern consciousness.

Rossetti’s magisterial and erotic painting *Astarte Syriaca* (1875–77), originally entitled *Venus Astarte*, ostensibly may be considered a subjectless late “stunner,” and yet it forces the reader to face the construction of myths, their modern secular blending, and how we experience mixed symbols. Rossetti chose Jane Morris as his model, the spiritual and sensual muse for him during these years. The fact that the word *art* is in the title of the painting, *Astarte*, seems not coincidental. The painting reworks Semitic, Christian, and secular iconography in a critique of religion and in a reinterpretation of the most widely worshipped goddess of all the deities in the Near and Middle East. The painting is not an expression of Venus as much as it is an analysis of the translation of human energies into ecstatic visions and symbols. It drapes the female body with symbolism and asks if we lose the embodiment of the body thereby.

Astarte, Canaanite goddess of fertility, war, and love, gazes at the viewer with a steady, all-powerful look: creating, destroying, and preserving. Like numerous counterparts in other eastern cultures, including Ishtar, Isis, and Aphrodite, she is associated with the planet Venus. Rossetti self-consciously includes traditional elements associated with her: her parents, the sun and moon; twining vines, like serpents, illustrating her demonism; angels’ hands hovering above her as if she were sprouting horns—illustrating fertility, vertical elements of torches, arms, the girdle tie, and her left leg—emphasizing a phallic power. He emphasizes that she is angelic and demonic, material and spiritual, biologically female, and yet culturally associated with both female and male attributes. The false binaries of sensuality/spirituality and male/female are both addressed by the painting.

A tremendous contrast with Rossetti’s earlier work, this painting and those of his later period heighten the interplay between representation and abstraction. In progressively freeing his style from the imitation of realistic detail, and in further materializing abstract ideas, Rossetti exploits further what we saw in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*. His painting is not about what we see, but about the process of how symbolic forms come to be, change, and invite new meanings. In this case, he blends religious and secular imagery to reimagine the goddess of love as the body of the flame of desire.

To get the full imaginative sense of Rossetti’s Venus, one has to look not only microscopically but also by half-closing one’s eyes. She flames
like a torch, incandescent at the top as fiery lights fill the nimbus, and she grows upward, like a dark flower blooming on a long stem even as she seems to look down at us. Rossetti garbs her in his favorite color, green, which he has glazed for luminosity, following Titian. Alice Craig Faxon reports that in the iconography books to which Rossetti referred, green represented art and hope (193). In another code, the Victorian language of flowers, Astarte’s girdle made of roses and pomegranates indicates passion and resurrected life—all meanings Rossetti ascribes to art as well as to his muse.

Commissioned by Clarence E. Fry, the three-quarter length, six-foot high Astarte is noteworthy for the pose of the right hand at breast and the left hand with fingers at the genitals, based on the sculpture in the Uffizi, the Medici Venus. One of the most celebrated examples of antique sculpture, the Medici Venus was mass produced in the nineteenth century as the epitome of beauty. Astarte Syriaca may also be a reworking, even this late in Rossetti’s career, of the soft and relatively muted, but similarly posed, Raphael St. Catherine—the most literally accessible Raphael to all the pre-Raphaelites. For in their student days, the National Gallery, where it hung, shared space with the Royal Academy, as Tim Barringer notes (33). If my conjecture is correct, then Astarte Syriaca could also be an homage to Jane as creative artist as well as muse. For in 1860 Jane embroidered St. Catherine in a three-foot tall panel which featured twining flowers, a phallic sword, long, unbound hair, and a face very much like her own.

With regard not to pose, but to location, Rossetti is very likely revisiting Giorgione’s Dresden Venus and Titian’s Venus of Urbino—Giorgione places his Venus as a courtesan figure outside; Titian, in an opposite move, places his as a wife figure in a domestic scene. Rossetti alters space realms, perspective, and status by placing his Venus in a natural-supernatural sacralized reality, with ministering angels hovering over her. In his preference for primitive, flattened perspective, which he fills with active forms (here torch-bearing, illuminating angels), Rossetti suggests that space is a projection of the consciousness perceiving it and of the forms within it as they meet at the surface of the painting. For a painting without depth, it lures the viewer well beyond the surface into unseeable realms.

Most significantly, Rossetti turns Venus to face the viewer with her deep, dark eyes, forcing us to look and leaving no doubt about the alluring depths of her spirituality. He crooks her left hand so that she actively fingers her girdle, leaving no doubt, either, about the intensity or depths of her eroticism. Rossetti revises earlier representations of Venus and Catherine, as he sexualizes the spiritual and elevates beauty and desire to religious heights.
To spiritualize her, Rossetti draws upon the only accepted iconic image in the Old Testament—the cover of the Ark of the Ten Commandments, created, as Exodus relates, out of two angels, hammered in gold and face to face. Ancient commentators speak of the two cherubim on the ark cover as the base of the footstool of God’s throne on earth, an allusion reworked in the sonnet. Further, the Bible tells us that God’s voice emanates from in between the angels’ faces to Moses.

Iconographically the angels here work differently. They do not frame a space from which the deity communicates down to a prophet. In Rossetti’s handling they look up, creating an aureole and serving as reminders of the fiery skies from which this earthly goddess emerged. In addition, their hands and bodies frame Astarte—they are immensely physical presences, adding to the erotic, fiery intensity of the image as a whole.

Unlike the Old Testament God’s hiddenness, Astarte’s face is not turned away, nor is she invisible; as a deity she does not speak through an imperceivable space. Rather, her face speaks directly. Rossetti not only exploits his knowledge of the Old Testament—in one Canaanite tradition Astarte is the consort of the Hebrew God—but, following Blake, as the Rossetti Archive points out, he also draws on the book of Revelation, in which Astarte is both the woman of the sun and the great mother of harlots. Rossetti blends divine and demonic traditions in a re-vision of earthly revelation. His pairing of poem with painting works to this same end of mixing what is normally kept apart.

In writing a sonnet for this picture, Rossetti affixed the sestet to the frame, but dispensed with the octave which was published first as part of F. G. Stephens’s 1877 notice of the painting in The Athenaeum (“Mr. Rossetti’s New Pictures,” 14 April 1877) and later rejoined to the sestet for publication in Ballads and Sonnets 1881. It is interesting to speculate on why Rossetti used only the sestet with the painting.

ASTARTE SYRIACA

(FOR A PICTURE)

Mystery: lo! betwixt the Sun and Moon
Astarte of the Syrians: Venus Queen
Ere Aphrodite was. In silver sheen
Her twofold girdle clasps the infinite boon
Of bliss whereof Heaven and Earth commune:
And from her neck’s inclining flower-stem lean
Love-freighted lips and absolute eyes that wean
The pulse of hearts to the spheres’ dominant tune.
Torch-bearing, her sweet ministers compel
   All thrones of light beyond the sky and sea
The witnesses of Beauty’s face to be:
That face, of Love’s all-penetrative spell
   Amulet, talisman, and oracle,—
   Betwixt the Sun and Moon a mystery.

The sonnet opens and closes with one word *Mystery:* / *mystery,* as if Rossetti aims to fashion a Coleridgean circle poem with its tail in its mouth. *Mystery* colon seems a concept to be defined—the very confusion of images from different traditions before us. *Lo* indicates something wondrous we shall come to know: but when the same word *Mystery* closes the sonnet with a full stop, it suggests both a transformation of meaning during the course of the poem and limits to our visual knowledge of the painting—as mystery remains despite the aspects of definition offered by the poem.

On the level of content, this use of *mystery* at start and finish suggests that all knowing is only ever partial in the face of meanings unfathomable. But at the level of graphics, *mystery* does bridging work in the poem. The word *mystery,* with its reach upward of a *t* and its searching downward *y’s* calls attention both to movement upward into the spiritual realm and downward into the material realm. In its enclosure positioning, *Mystery/mystery* further replicates the torch-bearing angels, as if the repetition of the word serves as the parenthetical markings or the dual ministers of a Beauty positioned between and born of sun and moon.

If the octave, which establishes a genealogy for Astarte, holds descriptive clues for interpreting the painting, Rossetti turns in the sestet to the topic of interpretation itself and to those who worship her. I disagree with the Rossetti Archive that this sonnet “pales” next to the painting, because I view it as equally complex. Ruskin recognized that there was an element of picture in every letter of the alphabet and an element of writing in every picture (Miller 1992, 77). In extending visual theory to language, Rossetti also extends linguistic theory to the image. Notice that the sestet opens with the hyphenated word *Torch-bearing* describing the angels and what they hold. But I would extend that connotation. Astarte is herself a torch. The painting bears and bares her, exposing the viewer to flame. To this end, it seems to me that the *T* is very significant in this sonnet, graphically speaking. A much-used alphabet letter to be sure, *still* it opens three of the last lines and appears thirty-eight times, fifteen times in the sestet. The painting can also be viewed as a set of graphic variations on T. Astarte’s girdle, in the shape of a T, following the T of her breasts and genitals, is reproduced in the shape that the
Angels make when forming the top of a T—emanating from her head, a T where her figure becomes the T stem.

The sestet not only draws attention to aspects of the painting we may not have noticed, but it compels us by drawing us in to the presence of Astarte’s face. Drawing on a phrase McGann would use (2000), the painting spells out, but by trying to cast a spell on us. McGann has drawn attention to the importance of the pictorial words draw and frame in Rossetti’s sonnets (2000, 71–72). But notice here how the last words of lines in the sestet compel, see, be, spell, oracle, mystery both connect and plumb in meaning and in sound the concepts of seeing, being, a spell, and mystery.

If the octave focuses on the goddess, the sestet turns to the viewer—speaking of her worshippers—those who minister to her, those who interpret her meaning, and those who are receptive witnesses to her beauty. These witnesses include not only religious functionaries, in Rossetti’s reworking of worship, but painter, poet, the spectator, and the reader. If we let the painting work on us, the sonnet says, we leave penetrated and singed by Astarte’s power, imprinted with her face, a living witness to her continuing beauty.

But we also leave with an object. Our experience of the painting becomes an amulet—the portal to a female womb as it ushers us into a different reality than the everyday. It becomes a talisman, something to ward off evil and bring good fortune. And it is an oracle—a shrine in which deity communicates. Rossetti’s hyperconscious double art not only compels questions about what we see and know, exposing while exploiting the myths and histories of our knowing, but also demands that the viewer/reader ask what it is to see, to read, to know.

In the second example of late double art, The Day-Dream, begun in 1878, Rossetti revises Wordsworthian nature poetry as well as realistic portrait painting of women. Painted again monumentally and again in green, Jane Morris sits this time passively in a natural scene with eyes staring off abstractly and solipsistically, sending the viewer back into her or himself too. She sits slightly sideways, entwined in boughs, as a tree-maiden. Iconographically, she represents regenerate love. The painting’s history is especially telling. Originally Jane Morris held snowdrops, but the painting took so long that Rossetti changed the flower to honey-suckle, coinciding with the season in which he completed it. Moreover, first called Mona Primavera, emphasizing her as goddess, the painting title became The Day-Dream.

Note that in the painting the human and vegetative blend and seem to sprout and leaf together. This fusion is even more apparent in a
sketch. Rossetti is not actually creating an icon of springtime or picturing a goddess—hence his title change. Rather, he is representing a woman’s dream where the seasons, as in Keats’s “To Autumn,” can be extended, blended, and even erased through imaginative reverie. This example performs a passionate and erotic blending of the female with nature, as if it would ask where does one begin and the other end? At first glance, it seems a typical, patriarchal construction of woman. Yet, at the same time, it skeptically questions the shaping, even deforming, of the human by the natural and by connection with the natural, asserting the primacy of the human mind over nature.

While the Astarte sonnet was dismembered to put aside the octet’s description in favor of emphasizing the sestet’s focus on interpretation, this poem’s sestet works differently from its octet too.

THE DAY-DREAM
(For a Picture)

The thronged boughs of the shadowy sycamore
Still bear young leaflets half the summer through;
From when the robin ’gainst the unhidden blue
Perched dark, till now, deep in the leafy core,
The embowered throstle’s urgent wood-notes soar
Through summer silence. Still the leaves come new;
Yet never rosy-sheathed as those which drew
Their spiritual tongues from spring-buds heretofore.

Within the branching shade of Reverie
Dreams even may spring till autumn; yet none be
Like woman’s budding day-dream spirit-fann’d.
Lo! tow’rd deep skies, not deeper than her look,
She dreams; till now on her forgotten book
Drops the forgotten blossom from her hand.

Commissioned by Constantine Ionides from an earlier drawing (1878) where Jane Morris embodies nature in terms of the return of spring, The Day-Dream concerns the representation of woman in terms of nature and its relationship to sexuality, both that of the woman and that of the viewer/reader whom her body and eyes desire and who, presumably, desires her. The painting responds directly to a long Idyll by Alfred Lord Tennyson published in his 1842 poetry volume (and illustrated later by
Millais) called “The Day-Dream,” which opens:

O LADY FLORA, let me speak:  
A pleasant hour has passed away  
While, dreaming on your damask cheek,  
The dewy sister-eyelids lay.  
As by the lattice you reclined,  
I went thro’ many wayward moods  
To see you dreaming—and, behind,  
A summer crisp with shining woods.

Reminiscent of the situation between speaker and sleeping woman in Rossetti’s multiply reworked interior dramatic monologue “Jenny,” the painting shows itself to be, like the Idyll, as much about the desires of the reader-viewer as about the object represented. Perhaps we can see most clearly what this example of double art enacts if we reflect on differences between it and another female-in-nature poem, however, Wordsworth’s 1798 lyric “To My Sister.” There, in a first verse that connects the season, the time, nature, and the human, Wordsworth addresses sister Dorothy—inviting her to put aside her book, her chores, her reason and intellect, to enter a “living calendar” that annuls time, returns to Eden, and rebirths feeling. Unlike Flora, who is asleep, Dorothy is awake, as is the green-gowned lady in the painting The Day-Dream.

Leaving humans out of the octave of his sonnet, Rossetti focuses first on time and the seasons, as if consoling himself that though time marches on, rebirth is possible. In line 6, with a marked caesura, “Through summer silence. Still the leaves come new,” he exploits the notion of stillness in terms of quietude/sound, and in terms of duration/time. His juxtaposition of leaves/come reinforces seasonal and life changes—filled with cycles of leave takings and comings, births and losses. As with Holman Hunt’s representations of the microscopics of nature, which must be read symbolically, the leaves and buds in “The Day-Dream” are echoed in the folds of the green dress and in the red nails and lips of the sitter. We have to read leaves, though, not only in terms of kinds of greenery and journeys or departures, but as leaves of poetry and of a sketchbook. Despite regular, expected cycles of birth and death, new leaves sprout even in summer.

However, with the sonnet volta, Rossetti puts aside differences between the seasons and types of inspiration. In the sestet, disavowing a nature poetry of the shadowy sycamore, Rossetti extracts multiple meanings from the word shade by which he refers both to leaf cover
and to the effect of imaginative reverie. Shade means darkness, a shelter, a screen, an unreal appearance, the netherworld, a ghost, a subdued color in painting, a tone in music, a nuance of meaning. Within this kind of deeper than deep, unreal space, Rossetti indicates, spring can be a verb and a noun, dreams can spring till autumn. Transcending books, time, and nature, the woman of the sestet immerses herself, but, unlike Wordsworth’s Dorothy, she does so not to revel in nature and not to lose herself in it. Not nature, says “A Day-Dream,” but the human mind in a receptive state enables us to fuse spaces, annul the passage of time, and draw (in both meanings) a spiritual, sexual tongue.

Richard Stein has suggested that “At times, literature is regarded by Rossetti as a form of magic, especially in the rituals of interpretation, where the primary object seems to be the total immersion of the spectator into the mysterious rhythms of art” (203). In The Day-Dream, Rossetti plays with surface—making the woman so like the honeysuckle that one expects a transformation like that of a Daphne into a tree at any moment. As the honeysuckle curves and twines and buds, so does she. Yet the two are not equated. More aptly, the relationship is one of simile: as the bird song soars through the leafy core, so the woman may soon voice her pleasure from deep within, unless her dream is also too deep for words. The fact that there is nothing else in this painting but sky pulls us back, though, to the sonnet where the vocabulary of sheathing, budding, core, and tongue intensifies the eroticism but, in turn, again takes us back to the pulsing rhythms of the painting.

Neither organic expressions, nor commentaries on each other, nor distortions of each other, Rossetti’s late career double art shows an extreme self-consciousness about form, symbol, mixed media, graphics, viewing methods, interpretive histories, and the conventions of kinds of representation. Locating exteriorly to the double artwork the very process he also wishes his works to perform internally, the negotiation of a gap, he attacks binaries that keep word and image conventionally apart. Representing Mary becomes the conduit for collapsing time in the Christian narrative. The Day-Dream offers a dream work, associated by Rossetti with the female, that abolishes the nature/culture divide, and Astarte Syriaca blends aspects of the earthly and heavenly realm, while partaking iconically of various antithetical religious and mythic traditions. His examples of double art highlight the circulation of traditional tropes, even as they raise questions about them, modify, and reconceive them in a dialectical manner. Inviting us into realms of secular revelation, they work to critique our reading, viewing, and knowledge as always partial and limited.