

# Introduction

OH FOOLISHEST FOND folly of a heart  
Divided, neither here nor there at rest!  
That hankers after Heaven, but clings to earth;  
That neither here nor there knows thorough mirth,  
Half-choosing, wholly missing, the good part[.]  
(Christina Rossetti, *Later Life*, 24.9–13)

A sonnet is a coin: its face reveals  
The soul,—its converse, to what Power 'tis due.  
(Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The House of Life*, 1.9–10)<sup>1</sup>

The common factor structuring both Christina Rossetti's and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's presentation of human experience and the psychoanalytic presentation of the subject is that of an integral duality. In the above excerpts from their most comprehensive poetic statements—the virtually contemporaneous sonnet sequences *Later Life* (1881) and *The House of Life* (1881)<sup>2</sup>—the two poets consider the divisions that structure their oeuvres and plague their biographies. Christina Rossetti's speaker describes the conflict within herself in traditional Christian terms, depicting the conflicting appeals of heaven, where as a “wise” and scrupulous woman she aims to “send [her] heart[.]” and of earth, where her heart contrarily clings.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *House of Life* sonneteer presents a somewhat different split, giving an account in the introductory sonnet of the fissured nature of an ideal poetic expression, which must not only attend to the needs of one's individual loving soul but also supplicate power, paying "tribute to the august appeals / [o]f life" in order to attain social goods such as money and fame (11–12). Thus, in contrast with the Christian framework in which Christina's speaker describes duality as a conflict of world against heaven, Dante Gabriel's speaker represents the fundamental conflict as one of self against world, expressing what Loy Martin has described as the typical Victorian split between a "desire for autonomy" and a "desire for coherence in the system of social . . . ties."<sup>3</sup> Not merely isolated expressions, the speakers' testimonies in these sonnets portray the divisions that underlie Christina Rossetti's and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's oeuvres as wholes. Christina's writings divide starkly between her lyrics, in which speakers disavow earthy sensuality and cultivate an austere ideal in pure language, and her Romantically tinged fantasy and gothic poems that make use of sensually appealing imagery to dramatize scenes of demonic temptation; this radical division makes it difficult to decide whether, as an author, she ultimately celebrates austerity and obedience or pleasure and subversion. Dante Gabriel's works, in contrast, split between works that glamorize private amorous ecstasies and works that indulge in dispassionate fantasies that display how symbolic iconographies and hierarchies mediate desire. These two alternating thrusts, toward autonomous intimacy and toward social ratification, also produce duality within Dante Gabriel's individual works such as "Jenny" (1848–59/1870), in which tones of tenderness interweave with tones of exploitation.

But while Christina's and Dante Gabriel's modes of representing the duality of subjectivity are sharply distinct from each other, both are circumscribed within psychoanalytic theories of divided subjectivity, particularly within the theories of Jacques Lacan, who observes that "essential dualism [is] constitutive of the subject."<sup>4</sup> Lacan's theories, which he describes as a "return to the origin of the Freudian experience," revise Sigmund Freud's economic split between death instincts and life instincts to imagine the subject (as well as his speech) as split between the effects of the symbolic order and the imaginary order.<sup>5</sup> The symbolic order of the subject is that of culture, through which the subject becomes linked through the sharing of discourse into a community that offers "recognition and transcendence" while demanding submission to "the order of a law" (SI, 177). The imaginary order comprises the vestiges of the subject that were created before he came to understand himself in

these symbolic terms, that is, while he subsisted within a “specular state” of mirrored relations with others (SI, 177). As Lacan insists, “The line of cleavage [in the subject] doesn’t pass between the unconscious and the conscious but between . . . something which is repressed and tends simply to repeat itself, that is to say speech which insists . . . and something which is an obstacle to it, and which is organised in another manner, namely the ego . . . the imaginary” (SII, 321). Thus, in the mature subject, an insistent symbolic order impels the subject toward social belonging and a share of immortal meaning through a relationship with what Lacan calls “the Other”—the abstract position often held by a God who supervenes these values. Meanwhile, the subject’s imaginary attachments continue to underlie pressing and potentially obstructive libidinal attractions toward “others,” or other particular subjects.

Julia Kristeva, a semiotician and student of Lacan, further relates how a split in the subject is constitutive of the dynamics of art and literature. The networks of signification in works of art from the late Victorian period onward are, she finds, bifurcated between the effects of the symbolic order and the effects of desire.<sup>6</sup> Kristeva’s account of art as a network of symbolic regulations and the libidinal impulses that oppose them helps to map the conflict in Christina’s writing in psychoanalytic terms, as between a dominant symbolic order of Christian devotion and the imaginary desires that persist despite all of the subject’s attempts to sublimate them. Kristeva’s model of the opposition of desire and symbolic law also sets out a way to read the struggle in Dante Gabriel’s work. According to this model, we may see his work as divided between the cultivation of a state of libidinal fusion characterized in Freudian theory as narcissistic and associated by Lacan with the imaginary order, and the compulsion to sacrifice the imaginary connection to an other in order to be inserted into what Juliet Flower MacCannell calls a “function within the symbolic order” in the pursuit of fame, social acceptance, and aesthetic or spiritual redemption.<sup>7</sup>

In this book, I argue that the psychoanalytical account of a subject divided against himself that was formalized by Freud and further developed by Lacan and Kristeva is more capable than most other interpretive models of characterizing the Victorian formations of the Rossettis. I further propose that a congruence between nineteenth-century art and twentieth-century theory in this case is neither ahistorical nor coincidental, given the range of formative contexts shared between the Rossettis and psychoanalytic theory. Most obviously, psychoanalytic criticism can be understood to account for dynamics in the Rossettis’ works because these

works were created amid the same nineteenth-century conflicts and frustrations that Freudian theory was originally devised to explain. James Eli Adams has pointed out that Freud's skepticism about the possibility of reconciling one's sexuality with the demands of one's culture expresses the Victorian sense of an insoluble division within the self.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the works of Christina and Dante Gabriel foreground an opposition between individualistic and regulated desires that Wendell Stacy Johnson has described as the Victorian question as to why the sexuality exhibited by subjects frequently obstructs them from social harmonization.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in several of her gothic poems, Christina depicts brides who are torn between taking a place within ordinary society and surrendering to deeper, more-occult sexual pressures, while Dante Gabriel typically portrays, and inhabits, the position of the romantic rogue whose desire leads him beyond the bounds of social acceptability.

Furthermore, the experience of inner disharmony that underlies both the works of the Rossettis and the theories of psychoanalysis can be analyzed in relation to the legacies within Christian metaphysics and Romantic literature. Both the Rossettis' art and Freudian theory display vestiges of the Christian model of the subject occupied by forces of evil and goodness, as well as vestiges of the Romantic model of the subject imagined by writers such as William Blake and George Gordon Byron, who inverted Christian values to reclaim the individual desire that Christianity labeled demonic. Indeed, psychoanalytic theory and the Victorian art of the Rossettis can each be said to share the burden of preserving dualist conceptions of the subject from the monistic rationalizations of post-Enlightenment humanism. As Joan Copjec explains, psychoanalytic theory arose in resistance to nineteenth-century utilitarians who conceived of the subject as a pure ego singularly in pursuit of desire, and it has persisted in resistance to twentieth-century cultural materialists such as Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault who have envisioned the subject in reverse, as totally susceptible to the symbolic order of ideology.<sup>10</sup> In contrast with these monistic treatments of the subject, psychoanalytic theory identifies the subject neither with his desire nor with a higher symbolic will but as relentlessly split between these thrusts (Copjec, 23). According to psychoanalytic theory, as Copjec elaborates, the psychoanalytic subject does not "purely and simply follow his inclination," in Lacan's words (SII, 326), because he also expresses ethical potential: the ability to participate in a symbolic order that has evolved to regulate human relationships (Copjec, 92). Lacan thus equally preserves the Christian intuition that a subject's libidinal desire is not necessarily well motivated or even

authentic; if “desire is not self-originating” but “is first grasped in the other and in the most confused form,” it consequently retains a fatal thrust (SI, 147, 225). This fatal thrust of desire is registered throughout the Rossettis’ oeuvres, especially in the Christian terms in which their subjects—who frequently resemble the Rossettis<sup>11</sup>—are accused of indulgence and distraction from higher aims.

But while insisting that the subject must be wary of his desire, Lacan also displays how psychoanalytic theory has preserved the Romantic intuition that a life that excludes one’s deepest impulses is barren,<sup>12</sup> insisting that “the only thing one can be guilty of is [of] giving ground relative to one’s desire.”<sup>13</sup> The writings of both Christina and Dante Gabriel, notwithstanding the former’s severe Christian commitments, are each likewise inhabited by a Romantic compulsion to excavate and release hidden psychic elements and thereby give full scope to emotional life. Both, of course, read widely in the Romantic literature that preceded them and—as with many Victorian writers—continued to explore issues raised during the Romantic period, such as the claims of one’s passion when it is at odds with one’s morality. Dante Gabriel identifies himself as an explorer of hidden desire in the sonnet “Dantis Tenebrae” (1861 / 1870), in which he describes how he is drawn to the “magical dark mysteries” of the infernal valley (6). Christina experimented with the Romantic gothic genre particularly during the mid-1850s, when she imagined many scenarios in which demon lovers promise, at least initially, to save women from sterile lives. In the same way that in Freud’s writing desire that becomes unrepessed can emerge as a “thing of terror,”<sup>14</sup> Victorian poets such as the Rossettis articulated their deepest desire as a demonic reflection of the self, as Ekbert Faas observes.<sup>15</sup> The Rossetti family context was especially suited to engendering in these artist siblings the sense of the duality of the human subject that psychoanalytic theory would later excavate in clinical terms. Whereas their mother, Frances Rossetti, was a member of a fervently antisensual brand of Anglo-Catholicism, their Italian father was a culturally free skeptic, and the Rossetti children enjoyed free rein in a library full of gothic writings by such authors as their maternal uncle, John Polidori.<sup>16</sup> This clash between religion and romanticism shows up throughout Christina’s and Dante Gabriel’s works, in which the glamorization of desire contests with the condemnation of it. In the most famous example, Christina’s narrator of *Goblin Market* seems undeniably to relish the landscape of desire that she structurally determines as demonic. And while Dante Gabriel’s writing is famous for its inveterate “flesh[iness],”<sup>17</sup> it is also laden with signs of sexual guilt, as in “Jenny,”

in which the scholarly young speaker expresses the abjectness of the male physiological response in the face of an alluring female body (366–69).

In this regard, Faas has discussed how Victorian poetry is distinctive insofar as it began to reflect the psyche in a highly analytical manner, echoing contemporaneous developments in the fields of scientific psychiatry and philosophical psychology, in which an intuition that the rational life was overshadowed by unconscious elements was burgeoning, preparing the ground for Freud's discoveries.<sup>18</sup> We can see this kind of analytical rigor in the Rossettis' sketches of the architecture of anxious and depressive states and the archaeology of childhood delights and traumas, to a degree that the Rossettis can be said to have "often anticipated the new science," according to their general characterization by Faas (31). Christina's *Goblin Market* thus itemizes with disturbing precision a traumatized response to a precocious sexual encounter in its account of how Laura came to "dwindle[], as the fair full moon doth turn / [t]o swift decay and burn / [h]er fire away" after her submission to the goblins' invitation (278–80). Dante Gabriel displays striking insight into the displacement of sexual guilt in "Jenny" where the speaker admits to regarding Jenny in a dismissive and mocking manner because he is "ashamed of [his] own shame" (380–83). Given the convergence of the reference points of psychoanalytic theory and Victorian literature, one should not be surprised by the parallel courses taken by each to illuminate the depths of human experience.

Another reason for the intersection of art and theory in the case of the Rossettis can be drawn from the conditions of the production of Freudian theory. In an interview conducted late in his life, Freud attributed his discovery of the unconscious not primarily to his research in earlier forms of mental science but to the products of the poets and philosophers who had preceded him, claiming that what he added to this heritage was the "discover[y of] . . . the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied."<sup>19</sup> While Freud was presumably in large part referring to the backdrop of Romantic culture upon which he extensively draws in his formulations, Victorian literature is even more broadly a site in which complex psychic formations suggested by the artistic and mythical structures of the past were opened up. In the terms of Jerome McGann, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's works map out "forms of desire" by elaborating in a self-conscious and aesthetic manner on a legacy of highly suggestive medieval, renaissance, and Romantic imagery.<sup>20</sup> Christina Rossetti, for her part, interweaves rich biblical and Byronic backdrops to dramatize the kind of "intimate . . . apocalypses" that Kristeva observes in horror novels

and nightmares, in which subjects are torn wrenchingly between libido and law.<sup>21</sup> The same kinds of classical, biblical, literary, and visual backdrops are frequently referenced by Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, who admit through their eclectic means to owing a great debt to this heritage, through which Western subjectivity was broadly formulated. The Rossettis might therefore be included among the great number of Victorian writers and artists who foraged in the clearinghouse of past arts and, by doing so, lent interpretative depth to the same literary formulations that would stimulate Freud and his followers.



Despite the historical convergence between the Rossettis' art and pro-psychoanalytic thought, very little of their work has been subject to the kind of detailed psychoanalytical treatment it would seem to merit. A few articles have offered subtle post-Freudian interpretations of the Rossettis.<sup>22</sup> Often, however, psychoanalytical criticisms of the Rossettis' works have been analytically reductive and prone to pathologizing generalizations, portraying Dante Gabriel as an out-and-out narcissist or fetishist, for instance, or taking Christina's religious dedication as a sign of masochism.<sup>23</sup> Out of frustration with damaging treatments of Christina Rossetti in particular, critics such as Antony H. Harrison have come to assert that her poetry is "hardly best served by . . . neo-Freudian interpretations."<sup>24</sup> In this book, I have added a new dimension to psychoanalytic criticism of Victorian poetry by emphasizing Christina's and Dante Gabriel's analyses and discoveries about the psyche, showing how their works exhibit ingenious analyses that augment, as well as qualify, existing theory. I have meanwhile followed Ellen Handler Spitz's guidelines for treating artistic works as cultural objects, interpreting the Rossettis' artistic preoccupations and habits not only in relation to biographical events and trends but also in relation to matters of genre, technique, historical context, reception, and requirements of commercialization.<sup>25</sup>

In *The Demon and the Damozel*, I have also tried to surmount another limiting aspect of more-recent psychoanalytical readings of both Christina's and Dante Gabriel's works: the way in which such readings tend to polarize the gender politics of these writers' works in predictable ways. Typically, recent psychoanalytic criticism of Christina Rossetti draws on theories of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler to find that she subverts patriarchy,<sup>26</sup> while recent psychoanalytical criticism of Dante Gabriel Rossetti tends to draw on the writings of film theorist Laura Mulvey to find that Dante Gabriel traps women in destructive masculinist

fantasies.<sup>27</sup> A careful reading of the Rossettis' works, such as I have done, suggests that these post-Freudian frameworks are, in themselves, too single-faceted to encompass these artists' sexualities, of which "no [singular] drive presents [a] totality," in the words of Lacan (*Four*, 184). Apart from those works in which Dante Gabriel portrays a norm-determined idea of masculine desire, there are also works in which he is willfully unmanly. Likewise, whereas Christina sometimes exposes the particular perils of women's lives, as in her critical sonnet "A Triad" (1856/1862), she also frequently eludes such concerns through the pursuit of a Christian redemption that promises to lead her into a realm beyond gender. I have therefore attempted to present a more nuanced treatment of how these artists' works embody and depict gender, dealing especially with struggles inherent in their sexualities as well as contradictions in their gender politics.

Meanwhile, the collection of interpretations of the Rossettis' works into a single volume perhaps goes some way toward overcoming the gender segregation that has kept the Rossettis from being read in relation to each other, with Christina Rossetti tending most often in recent decades to be critically grouped with women writers and Dante Gabriel Rossetti with other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. *The Demon and the Damozel* continues in the line of more recent efforts to treat in tandem<sup>28</sup> two artists whom the record shows were mutually influential, companionate, and collaborative (if not in the writing process, then in the process of editing and illustrating each others' works).<sup>29</sup> In this book, I augment this growing effort to understand the Rossettis as a distinctive Victorian phenomenon, using a methodology that investigates how their intricate visions of the paradoxes of selfhood were born out of a singular, highly charged context and consequently intersect as well as collide in fascinating ways.

The critical methodology of this volume emphasizes recent psychoanalytical theory that is faithful to the original Freudian concept of the economically divided subject, which is largely found in Lacan's writings, as well as in interpretations of these writings by critics such as Julia Kristeva, Joan Copjec, and Slavoj Žižek. Kristeva's writings likewise open up the literary and artistic implications of Freudian and Lacanian concepts, while contributing additional useful concepts such as "the abject."<sup>30</sup> In addition, culturally and historically situated uses of Lacanian ideas by Copjec and readings of courtly love, horror, medieval art, and mystical devotion by Kristeva in this book elicit psychoanalytic readings of the Rossettis that are responsive not only to the logic of their works

but also to the cultural traditions in which they lived and the influences on which they drew.

The book's content generally reflects the aim of distinguishing discursive and formal divisions in Christina's and Dante Gabriel's texts that anticipate Lacan's opposition between the symbolic and imaginary orders. In keeping with Lacan's description of the symbolic order as a system of regulation (SII, 254), the dominance of the symbolic order can be observed in those instances of Christina's and Dante Gabriel's art that are dominated by teleologies and other overriding structures of meaning. In contrast, the imaginary order is found in the pleasure—what Lacan calls the *jouissance*<sup>31</sup>—of a scopic dynamic in which the self is discovered through reflection in mirrors constituted by others.<sup>32</sup> Thus, imaginary effects are observed in works that feature passionate glances, for instance, Dante Gabriel's paintings of Dante meeting Beatrice and Christina's sonnet sequence *Later Life*, in which her speaker longs to set "the eyes of [her] desire" upon Jesus (11.9). Furthermore, because the imaginary order is the compulsion in the subject that disrupts symbolic meaning—"sowing discord in the discourse," as Lacan puts it (SII, 306)—its pressures are indicated in jumbled and surreal poetic and visual imagery. As a complement to these confusing imaginary suggestions are hints, meanwhile, of the elusive expression of "the real," Lacan's formulation for the terrifying and sublime experiences that "resists all symbolization absolutely" (SI, 66). At the same time, no perfect division between the the three orders can ever be found in the texts, since, as Lacan claims, these "two different dimensions . . . never cease getting caught up with one another" and "crisscross" in multitudinous ways (SII, 105). Indeed, the places where Christina's and Dante Gabriel's evocations of the symbolic, imaginary, and real orders crisscross—where Christina's quest for Christian transcendence is permeated by an imaginary desire for companionship and where Dante Gabriel's expressions of narcissism in *The House of Life* are elevated through invocations of the sacred—are where we find the most striking effects.