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After Death: Christina Rossetti’s Timescales of Catastrophe

Nathan K. Hensley

Department of English, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA

In a brief, seemingly simple poem called “Time seems not short” from late in her career, Christina Rossetti requires only three stanzas to disorient our conventional experience of temporality. Like many of Rossetti’s plainspoken lyrics, this one uses flat diction to belie dramatic conceptual work. It whisks us on a scalar journey from micro to macro, moving from spans of time perceptible to human speakers and even “humankind” upwards, outwards—towards “eternity” and the interlocked movements of heavenly “sphere[s]”:

Time seems not short:
If I so call to mind
Its vast prerogative to loose or bind,
And bear and strike amort
All humankind.

Time seems not long:
If I peer out and see
Sphere within sphere, time in eternity,
And hear the alternate song
Cry endlessly. (Lines 1–10)

Characteristically for Rossetti, these first two stanzas advance by negation, and in their play of cancelled appearances—“Time seems not short,” “Time seems not long”—readers are made to stumble over whether “time” at any given moment is meant to be experienced as long or short, big or small. The point is that it is both, or rather that it can seem like either, depending on how one views it. The poem’s final stanza radicalizes this effect of temporal disorientation, as it collapses the first two stanzas’ opposed perspectives into disjunctive adverbial phrases that attempt to unite them:

Time greatly short,
O time so briefly long,
Yea, time sole battle ground of right and wrong;
Art thou a time for sport
And for a song? (Lines 11–15)

The poem ends by turning toward a personified time, now both infinite and human, to ask it a question the poem itself has already performatively answered, which is whether the problem of human and cosmically-scaled temporali“Time seems not short” achieves the “simple, chaste, and severe” effect Jerome McGann describes as Rossetti’s prevailing mode (236). This effect of radical condensation is highlighted by the preponderance of monosyllables here: only six words in the poem are more than a single beat. It also derives from Rossetti’s characteristically pitiless editorial practice, by which she

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CONTACT Nathan K. Hensley Nathan.Hensley@georgetown.edu
carved these seemingly colloquial lyrics from larger pieces, turning expansive meditations into tiny performances of thought, whose “cropped form” (in Constance Hassett’s words) “allows opposing feelings to remain in suspension” (504).1

“Time seems not short” enacts at the level of its construction the modulation of scale it describes. The poem’s three five-line stanzas are organized according to a perfectly symmetrical scalar pattern, a bell curve by which lines of two, three, five, three, and then two iambic feet move us up and then down a graded scale of regular increment. Yet the poem’s rhyme scheme injects into this perfectly symmetrical rising and falling action a slight wobble, three b rhymes to two a’s, such that the lines’ evenness of scalar distention—scaling up, then scaling down—is overlayed with a kind of imbalance or irresolution: abbab. Coded into structure, this hesitation becomes thematic when expressed in the poem’s final question, which asks how human verse might measure against the vaster music of divine perfection. The whole package finds Rossetti opening out from the seemingly modest location of the poem’s (implicitly human) “I” to the scale of universal, eschatological time, from the increments of lifespans and species-being to the inconceivable movements of planets in the cosmos—and, inevitably, to their ends.

This essay aims to show how Rossetti’s career-long efforts to think temporal scale, poetic form, and apocalypse together can take on new import in light of the damaged and very possibly extinguishing world we inhabit in the late Anthropocene. If that is true, as I will suggest below it is, then Rossetti’s short poems about finitude and temporal duration might help us recognize how nineteenth-century poems might be seen best not as instances of ideology or examples of discourse—still less as sites of “resistance” to those things—but as models for thinking, and, as such, resources for engaging the present. To understand the stakes for viewing Rossetti’s verse as thought in this sense requires briefly framing debates in the environmental humanities, as that field has consolidated and reshaped itself in light of the advancing climatological disaster we now inhabit. This critical discussion is spurred by a dispute about the dating and character of the Anthropocene and a gathering sense that the interlinked nonlinear processes that constitute our climate emergency have become irreversible.

In the shadow of these developments a strain of recent work has built its inquiries around what we could call the climatological future retrospect. Books like Jan Zalasiewicz’s The Earth After Us: What Legacy Will Humans Leave in the Rocks? (2009) or Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway’s The Collapse of Western Civilization (2014) seek to look back on (an extinct) human civilization from the vantage of an imagined future, a difficult exercise that in the case of Zalasiewicz’s text is also a technically impossible one, since it locates its speaking perspective in a deep future that is, he assures us, without human speakers at all. This problem of post-extinction point of view takes dramatic shape in Michael Madsen’s film Into Eternity (2010), where scientists tasked with storing radioactive material with a half life of 100,000 years must solve as a matter of practical engineering the question of what life will be like—and whether it will in any way resemble us—in an imagined moment ten times longer into the future than the earliest human settlements are in our past.

Such modulations of scale generate disorientations akin to the sublime. But the perplexities heighten still further when our view extends to time’s ultimate duration and we attempt, with Rossetti, to construe temporality with a view to its end. In an astonishing book called Maps of Time (2004), David Christian attempts to tell the history of the present in all of its nested timescales, locating the human storylines of modernization, industrialization, and even species evolution within the geological and cosmic timeframes that dwarf them (Figures 1, 2, and 3). Were the entire 13 billion year history of the universe represented as 13 years, Christian explains, complex organisms would have been alive for about 7 months, agricultural human societies for only 5 minutes, and industrial civilization a mere 6 seconds (503). After placing our present against a vastness structurally inconceivable to human minds, Christian draws out time’s storyline to its ultimate future: what astrophysicist Paul Davies calls the “final cosmic heat death” of the universe, trillions of years from now (13), and what Rossetti, as we will see, imagines as the “extreme boundary of time or space.” Beyond planetary timescales, after the death of the sun, the universe will follow the entropic laws first discerned
Figure 2. The scale of the earth, the biosphere, and "Gaia": 4.5 billion years. David Christian. Maps of Time: 58. ©University of California Press, Berkeley.
by Lord Kelvin in the 1850s: stars will dwindle to corpses, galaxies dissolve, matter cool, and space float apart in “an infinitely slow diminuendo” (Christian 488) culminating in an inconceivable universal vacuum, the universe now becoming “a dark, cold place, filled only with black holes and stray subatomic particles that wander light-years apart from each other” (Christian 489). This deep future is accessible to us only by scientific extrapolation and poetic imagination; we will never see it. Narrating this infinitely cold nothingness in other words requires a nonhuman point of view, a virtual or poetic posthumanism that might look on the present as if from its own aftermath, what Rossetti calls our “common ruin,” when the “impartial ploughshare of extinction / Annu[ls] them all without distinc-
What will the world look like, in other words, in the deep future of our climate catastrophe—and more to the point, who or what will be there to see it? These pragmatic questions open onto conceptual ones having to do with our fleeting time on this planet and the challenge of imagining scales of time in which all the monuments of our world will register as mere traces if at all. Zalasiewicz observes that, compressed into geological strata and viewed from a vantage millions of years into the future, the entire history of the human species would be no more than three inches of rock (2); the entire sweep of time covered by the Norton Anthology would likely take up about a millimeter or two. This shift from humanistic to geological and then cosmic timescales forces us to think, with Rossetti, of apocalypse and a near-infinite future. It conscripts us also to face down our impending species death and to see it as both the most important thing that has ever happened (it is) and as absolutely nothing at all, a matter of perfect indifference. (Rossetti’s word is “cold.”) As Roy Scranton puts it in “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene”: “The biggest problem we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead” (emphasis original, n.p.).

Even beyond enjoining us to engage in the pitiless adjustments in perspective that would produce such realizations, the shifts in scale occasioned by our climate disaster force us to think how the literature we read and care about—poetry, prose, the very words I am typing now—might figure, if they do at all, against the inhuman durations of an extended time.

In this context, Rossetti’s aesthetic meditations on the end of the world, and her poetic attempts to think the present “after death,” might shine out for us as methodological examples. Her efforts “to face the present as if it were irrevocably past” (Hassett 507) answer in advance at least some of the Dark Mountain Manifesto’s call for an ecopoetic writing that would refuse the consolations of the world as it is and instead “look over the edge, face the world that is coming with a steady eye” (“Manifesto” n.p.).

Emily Harrington has drawn on McGann and others to discuss what she calls Rossetti’s “death lyrics,” the poems of Rossetti’s—and there are a lot of them—that imagine human occasions like funerals retrospectively, from the point of view of a disembodied (because departed) speaker. Paired with Rossetti’s apocalypse poems and nursery rhymes about death, those exercises in what I will call necropoetic voice work out a way of imagining what life would look like under the aspect of death, even from within it: “The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse (1892), that work is monumental and strange, a kind of S/Z of biblical hermeneutics. As in Barthes’ fanatically close reading of Balzac’s Sarrasine, The Face of the Deep finds Rossetti proceeding sentence by sentence through St. John’s prophecy of the end of the world, offering a close reading of each verse conjoined to her own commentary and, occasionally, original poems.

The volume took her seven years to complete and was the only book she wrote after her mother, to whom she was emotionally and physically attached throughout her final decades, died. Rossetti’s
own health during this time was precarious in the extreme, her body a constant reminder of mortality and human finitude: she was spitting up blood as early as 1864 (Battiscombe 114) and by 1871 was “wretchedly ill,” in her brother William’s words (qtd. in Battiscombe 140), with a version of Graves disease. (Her brother Dante would spin into an anomic of addiction and illness that culminated in his 1882 death from a kidney disease at age 53.) Between 1871 and 1873, we are told, Christina suffered from a bewildering variety of ills, a swelling on her throat, heart-attacks, choking, frequent vomiting, sensations of intolerable heat, cough, neuralgia, fainting fits, and, not surprisingly, total exhaustion. (Battiscombe 141)

These wracking failures of her biotic system produced physical deformity, skin discoloration, and loss of hair. In Battiscombe’s misogynist account these details are adduced to suggest that Rossetti’s “worst trial” was “the ruin of her delicate beauty” (141). In conceptual terms, they mean that while her whole poetic career took shape in response to the evanescent character of worldly life, a concern as evident in the early “Passing away, saith the World, Passing away” as in her latest and indeed last work, on the end of the world. The entirety of Rossetti’s mature period unfolded in tactile and embodied anticipation of death. While the Collected Poems list no date for composition, Battiscombe suggests it was during the period of these intense illnesses that she wrote “Mirrors of Life and Death,” which begins this way:

The mystery of Life, the mystery
Of Death, I see
Darkly as in a glass;
Their shadows pass
And talk with me. (Lines 1–5)

The mystery of life is the mystery of death, and this interconnected or properly dialectical relation is only visible, as in Rossetti’s reworking of 1 Corinthians 13:12, “Darkly as in a glass.” The shadows of this mystery themselves take shape as a kind of character, with whom Rossetti’s speaker is strangely, colloquially intimate. They talk together.

Like much of Rossetti’s work in this period and earlier, The Face of the Deep gravitates toward the classical Christian pairing of death and rebirth but its orientation toward the time of ends means that its emphasis falls most pressingly on death. Here as in her more seemingly personal poetry, the apocalyptic arrival of God’s kingdom occasions meditations not just on glory and redemption but on the scale of time and the character of diminishing worlds. Filtered through Rossetti’s “temperamental austerity” (Curran 292), apocalyptic cast of mind, and attraction to “neutralized and evened emotion” (Hassett 501)—the frozen affect of detachment she shares with the “cold” women of her death poems—even the Good News of God’s eventual reclamation of the world registers as calamity:

I lift mine eyes to see: earth vanisheth.
I lift up wistful eyes and bend my knee:
Trembling, bowed down, and face to face with Death,
I lift mine eyes to see. (“I lift mine eyes to see,” Lines 1–4)

Rossetti’s tendency to refuse consolation in favor of impartial engagements with the bleakest outcomes of temporal life sits uneasily against what Battiscombe refers to as the “general impression” of “deep happiness” given off by The Face of the Deep (203). Seen together, the collection’s apparently contradictory impulses toward tragedy and rejuvenation—the mystery of life, the mystery of death—mean that the arrival of Judgment registers not just as happy advent but as fulfillment of the “trembling” that has preceded it. Eschatology is salvation, but disaster too. As Rossetti explains in her preface to The Face of the Deep, the book will offer not just descriptions of how the apocalypse will reveal God’s permanent glory, “but terrors likewise, doom, the Judgment, the opened Books, the lake of fire” (15).

Critics have noted Rossetti’s “developing apocalyptic vision” during this later period (Hu 186n) and cited her “fascination with the apocalypse” (Heady 150; cf Humphries). Rossetti’s always-
sharpening Tractarian fidelities meant that her interest was in apocalypse, not catastrophe, apocolypse being derived from *apokálpasis*, “revelation,” and naming a process of disclosure or uncovering rather than world ending. (Catastrophe, too, is by etymology neutral, meaning “sudden turn or overturning”; its negative associations arrived only in modernity.) Though her own beliefs were of course most directly shaped by the Tractarian high Anglicanism of John Keble and his Oxford Movement—as well as by its ideological successor, Ritualism—Rossetti refused the Oxford Movement’s drift toward Catholicism and maintained close ties to the lower-church traditions of Pre-Millenarianism and evangelical enthusiasm (McGann 240–241). Though Rossetti’s early religious education was “of a somewhat conventional nature” (Battiscombe 30), by 1843 the family had begun attending the Christ Church Albany Street, where the incumbent was William Dodsworth, a Catholic-leaning supporter of Keble, Pusey, and Newman. Rossetti and her mother embraced this stringent and doctrinal version of Tractarian Anglo-Catholicism “with all the fervour of converts” (Battiscombe 30); in her brother William Michael’s words, Rossetti was “An Anglo-Catholic, and, among Anglo-Catholics, a puritan” (lxvi).

McGann and Harrington both note how, more idiosyncratically, Rossetti also subscribed to the notion of “Soul Sleep,” whereby (in contrast to both Catholic and High Church theology, where the soul is judged individually at the moment of death, and then at the final Judgment), a dead soul waits, unredeemed but frozen into inertia or suspension, until the Second Coming. “According to Adventist doctrine of Soul Sleep,” McGann explains, “death initiates the period during which the soul is placed in a state of ‘sleeping’ or suspension. Only at the Millennium, on the Last Day, is that sleep broken and the soul confronted with its final reward” (243). The haunting force of an anthology piece like “Song [‘When I am dead, my dearest’]” comes from this uncanny stasis, a disembodied sentence that maintains a semi-consciousness that can perceive but is also severed from sense experience. The poem that begins by urging “When I am dead, my dearest, sing no sad songs for me,” continues by explaining that “I shall not see the shadows, / I shall not feel the rain; / I shall not hear the nightingale / Sing on, as if in pain” (Lines 9–12). Again proceeding by negation, Rossetti’s nonliving speaker here explains all that she will not see, not feel, and not hear, a cancelled apprehension that Kathy Psomiades glosses as a “state of dreamlike suspension between life and death … described from within” (62). Rossetti composed “[‘When I am dead’]” during the Advent season of 1848, when she would have heard sermons delivered by Dodsworth at Christ Church that focused “on the end of the world and the Second Coming” (cited D’Amico 34). Diane D’Amico speculates that “[s]uch sermons might easily have encouraged Rossetti to wonder about the time between death and resurrection” (34), but the detail confirms the traffic between Rossetti’s personal and eschatological scales of world-ending.

Rossetti’s ongoing meditation on lifelessness, disembodiment, and what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls poetry’s “closural effect[s]” (e.g. 212) takes shape in the early poems like “[‘When I am dead’]” as a concern with the deaths of individual speakers. But her verse is everywhere permeated with anticipations of much larger scales of finality. Stuart Curran observes that Rossetti “has only one real subject, mortality” (291), but we could more properly call her subject time, since mortality and the temporal processes appropriate to it inform the content of nearly all her poetic work and should be seen to provide templates, as well, for the sing-song measurements and allegedly simple structures of its form. As Hasset observes, Rossetti’s “preference for short measures and full stops” and instinct toward the “confinement” of regular stanza forms (509) relates intimately to her thematic obsession with boundaries and enclosure, while the time of verse itself—its status as temporally-unfolding speech marked into intervals—is implicated in the content of these poems about duration and time. The wobbling meter of “[‘When I am dead’],” for example, introduces irregular seven- and even eight-beat lines into the tick-tock trimeter of its regular form, generating a model at micro scale of temporal extension and compression.

The poetry’s concerns with duration are legible in yet another idiom in, for example, the interlocking calendric regimes that organize the “reading diary” of *Time Flies* (1885), published by SPCK seven years before *The Face of the Deep*. Dedicated to Rossetti’s mother a year before her
death, *Time Flies* is a kind of compendium for yearlong prayer and private study; it features an entry in prose or verse (or both) for each day of the calendar year, a series of entries followed by an appendix with entries for each holy day in the Anglican church calendar. Entries shift between modes and jump seemingly haphazardly among topics, all of them religious, and the volume’s concern with time seems restricted to its formal organization. At other moments it addresses its central concern more directly. The entry for June 3, for example, meditates on the image of a bottomless pit, familiar from the book of Revelation (D’Amico 53–54), and uses this now-familiar image to think through the nature of finitude. Its complexity justifies extended quotation. “Whatever other idea we may form of the bottomless pit,” Rossetti writes,

> Whatever other idea we may think to detect within its undefined horror, two points stand out unmistakably: as a *pit* it is a place into which to fall [sic]; as *bottomless*, it appears to be one within which to fall lower and lower for ever and ever.

Herein lies one distinct thought for ourselves: an awful thought. A deep fall, infinitely deep, so long as any bottom at any depth underlies the lapser, must at length be arrested and must stop. However mangled or shattered, and on whatever floor landed, the wretch cannot cease there to lie: self-destroyed, indeed, yet accessible to Mercy and Help if these deign to look so low, and lift with recovering hands, and carry home on shoulders rejoicing.

But in the *bottomless* pit I see a symbol of that eternal antagonism and recession by which created free will seems able to defy and baffle even the Almighty Will of the Creator. At a standstill anywhere, though on the extreme boundary of time or space, the sinner might be overtaken by the pursuing Love of God: but once passing beyond those limits, eternity sets in; the everlasting attitude appears taken up, the everlasting recoil commenced. (*Time Flies* 105–106)

The entry is noteworthy insofar as it undertakes a sustained thought experiment on the problem of closure; it imagines the brutal process by which even an almost infinitely long fall (“awful thought”) must eventually end. This would result in a “mangled or shattered” self, but this ending, brutal though it may be, nonetheless forms the bottom or terminus from which a process of redemption and reclamation can proceed. Against this apparent but not actual eternity stands a yet more awful thought, that of the nonterminal processes of genuinely infinite time, a real “eternity”: this non-teleological process of abandonment would push the sinner beyond what the text amazingly refers to as “the extreme boundary of time or space.” Rossetti’s binary configuration in the June 3 entry, pitting bounded time against unbounded eternity, becomes yet more striking when we see what comes next. These words directly follow the above entry, the “2” below the date confirming this entry’s relation to the previous day’s, which is marked “1”:

**June 4.**

2.

I have read how matter can be exploded, or at the least can be conceived of as exploded, from the sun, with such tremendous force as to carry it beyond the radius of solar attraction. That attraction which unifies and sways a whole harmony of dependent planets, recalls not one atom which has passed beyond the pale. (*Time Flies* 106)

Seen together, these two entries—one on Biblical narratives of loss and recovery, the other on particles pushed by explosion outside the pull of “solar attraction”—stage a paratactic relation between religious mysticism and scientific speculation; here, a salvation couched in specifically Biblical rhetoric sits against—and is explained by—an investigation into the problem of abandonment and reclamation on atomic and planetary scales.

The shattering and mangled bodies of the fallen man of the June 3 entry suggest Rossetti’s materialist concern for biological and embodied life; but seen against its pendant piece, they also suggest that these damages are legible best, or only, when viewed against their vaster, spiritual, and in fact cosmic opposites. Material harm and spiritual redemption must be thought in the same frame, folding present and past into an almost impossible temporal configuration. In *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti glosses a clause in the fourth verse of Revelation—“Him which is, which was, and
which is to come”—by explaining the conventional idea that God is beyond time, outside it, even somehow before it. But for Rossetti these mixed prepositions disclose that human language can only ever fail to capture the nature of Divine existence. God, she writes, is “[a]ntecedent to creatures, antecedent to time, [and] is revealed to our finite conception by ‘was’. … We creatures of time, who might instinctively have written ‘was—is—to come,’ are thus helped, not indeed to understand, but to adore the inconceivable, eternal, absolute Unchangeableness of God. We run a course, not he” (Face 14–15). What Rossetti explains is that human language, composed of verb tenses comprehending the past, present, and future, are mismatched fundamentally with the fact of a divine or universal temporality, which is, she paradoxically states, “antecedent to time.”

Rossetti’s speculation on the relation of God to temporality reanimates an ancient problem in Christian theology and evokes, too, a specific engagement with it in Saint Augustine, whose meditations on the impossibility of measuring time—“When then is the time, which we may call long?” (236)—and dividing the present from the past find echoes in Rossetti’s late-career investigations into the same topics. Book Eleven of Augustine’s Confessions is entitled “Time and Eternity,” and likely provided inspiration for the section of Verses in which she engages those questions most directly (“Divers Worlds. Time and Eternity”). In the 1853 translation Rossetti would have known—it was translated by Tractarian leader E.B. Pusey, and published as part of his “Library of the Fathers,” a key institution in the Oxford Movement—Augustine wonders aloud how God can speak, if all speech must transpire inside of time and God’s word “abideth above me for ever” (qtd. 230, emphasis original):

But how didst Thou speak? For that voice passed by and passed away, began and ended; the syllables sounded and passed away, the second after the first, the third after the second, and so forth in order, until the last after the rest, and silence after the last. (230)

No syntax can unfold except in time, and Augustine here anticipates Rossetti to comprehend a problem of theological ontology—is God inside or outside the category of temporality—as a linguistic and indeed poetic problem. (“My soul is on fire,” Augustine writes, “to know this most intricate enigma,” 240). More specifically it is a problem for versification too, one focused (as Augustine specifies here) on “syllables” and the rate by which they “pas[s] away.”

The point is that Augustine raises as philosophical meditation the problem that Rossetti would polish into the very crystal of a poetic project, whereby small exercises in measured language seek a grammar or provisional form able paradoxically to give linguistic shape to a time beyond time, “ever still-standing,” as Augustine says (233), that is properly beyond the capacities of language to figure. This condition of atemporality would necessarily escape the (temporal) logics of syllabic sequence, of grammar, and of predication itself. Yet in Rossetti’s hands, measured verse becomes the most flexible and appropriate medium for sharpening this irresolvable paradox to its crisis. Rossetti takes the theoretical challenge of time’s end, I mean, as the motive for her most striking and elegiac poems, eschatological visions tangled in sense and syntax, that imagine time outside of sequence, a moment of “perfect rest,” she puts it in “Dream-Land,” when “time shall cease” (Lines 17 and 28).

Passages like this show how fiercely Rossetti (following Augustine) remained committed to thinking time as a conceptual and therefore linguistic (and poetic) problem. Her late poems show her working out tentative solutions to it. In the manner I’ve traced out above with “Time Seems Not Short,” it would be possible to unpack yet further the fractal procedure by which Rossetti’s death poems coordinate macro- and micro-scaled temporal durations and therefore labor to imagine interlocked scales of disaster: love lost, death in nature, and ends of worlds all together. Poem sequences like Monna Innominata, the “sonnet of sonnets,” and “Later Life” (“a double sonnet of sonnets”) wear Rossetti’s fractal scalar procedure on their sleeves, since their forms, like crystals and certain forms of broccoli, are identical at both minor and major scales: the whole is composed of yet tinier versions of itself.
In “Time Lengthening,” another poem from *The Face of the Deep* that is also collected in *Verses*, catastrophe ends temporality itself:

Time lengthening, in the lengthening seemeth long;  
But ended Time will seem a little space,  
A little while from morn to evensong,  
A little while that ran a rapid race,  
A little while, when once Eternity  
Denies proportion to the other’s pace. (Lines 1–6)

In these cryptic and repetitive lines, Rossetti imagines an apocalypse in the language of magnitude: in the event of final Judgment human time will *seem* to be infinitely extended, but this apparent extension of temporality is collapsed into almost nothing, a tiny duration or “little while” that is “denied proportion” and transformed into another dimension entirely. “[E]n ded Time,” she says, “will seem a little space.” In Rossetti’s hands, the cosmic durations of eschatological renovation—the temporality of the end of the world—transform all other deaths into tiny dress rehearsals for the big one.

In the context of the specifically ecological appropriation of Rossetti’s eschatological poetry I am attempting here, it bears noting that across her writing, Rossetti evinces a fascination and intimacy with nonhuman nature. This concern with the created world is legible in, for example, her flower-catalogs, her poems about the passage of seasons, her descriptions of plants, her careful analyses of weather phenomena, even her “studies of animals from the zoo” (Battiscombe 88). All of these acts of natural witness unfold in Rossetti’s characteristic millennialist idiom (one of her poems is titled simply “The End of Time”), but manage to be both metaphysicalizing and concretely observational at once, such that the nonhuman world is both a symbol of something else and always only itself. This commitment to the material particularity of nonhuman life is also clear in her oddly numerous poems about pets.

Rossetti’s sustained concern with nonhuman nature and temporal duration also finds voice in the profusion of her quasi-pastoral lyrics named after seasons: we might think of “Winter Rain,” “Spring,” or “A Summer Wish.” I call them quasi-pastoral because each of these poems inverts the customary association of spring with life, winter with death; here the frozen rains of winter bring life, and spring incipient death: “There is no time like Spring that passes by, / Now newly born, and now / Hastening to die” (“Spring,” Lines 36–39). Rossetti’s 1872 collection of nursery rhymes, *Sing-Song*, is only apparently a book for children and turns Rossetti’s catastrophic poetics toward intimate scenes of physical damage. At least one reader has noted that this children’s book might have been more successful if it had featured less infanticide, and it is true that the collection is concerned significantly with death, perhaps preoccupied by it. Rossetti’s original illustrations, stark and awkward (Figures 5 and 7), are given melodramatic shape in Hughes’s published editions (Figures 4 and 6). Hughes would also illustrate Rossetti’s *Speaking Likenesses* (1874), a compendium of didactic animal tales that sought unsuccessfully to capitalize on the Christmas market—and the popularity of *Alice in Wonderland*.

In *Sing-Song*’s “Hear What the Mournful Linnets Say,” the melancholy birds of the poem’s title lament the destruction of their nest by “cruel boys” (Line 3). This is the poem in its entirety (Figure 4):

Hear what the mournful linnets say:  
“We built our nest compact and warm,  
But cruel boys came round our way  
And took our summerhouse by storm.

“They crushed our eggs so neatly laid;  
So now we sit with drooping wing,  
And watch the ruin they have made,  
Too late to build, too sad to sing.”
As we saw in the entries about “mangled” and “shattered” falling bodies from *Time Flies* above, the injury to the physical world is here unexplained (it derives from “cruelty”) and unconsolled. In the poem the audience, “we,” can only “watch the ruin they have made.” The loss itself is “[t]oo late” to be healed by “build[ing]”; it is even, Rossetti adds in a stunning performative contradiction, “too sad to sing.” But it has been sung. A sense of the world’s precarity and availability to injury organizes the “Linnets” poem and structures much of Rossetti’s dark nature poetry. Rossetti’s evident care for non-human life—wild animals, plants, pets, flowers, seasons, and weather—and her emphasis on the various modalities by which such things can vanish might serve by itself to recommend Rossetti as a poet of the Anthropocene.

One poem in *Sing-Song* is called “A Baby’s Cradle With No Baby In It,” and is just what it sounds like; for this chaste and resolutely nonreproductive writer, this and other of the infanticide poems of *Sing-Song* amount to a performed theory of nonreproductive nonfuturity, Lee Edelman’s “queer negativity” (6), albeit one redeemed with a vision of a future state beyond our embodied existence. But as was evident earlier, promises of future redemption do not cancel or even blunt the pain of disaster now. Another selection in *Sing-Song* memorializes a dead songbird and by extension writes an obituary for the poet herself (Figures 5 and 6):

Dead in the cold, a song-singing thrush,
Dead at the foot of a snowberry bush, —
Weave him a coffin of rush,
Dig him a grave where the soft mosses grow,
Raise him a tombstone of snow. ("Dead in the cold," Lines 1–5)

The poem addresses survivors, directing its living audience to “weave” and “dig” so as to memorialize this lost object. In so doing, it implicitly occupies the point of view of those who have lived beyond the death event. By contrast, haunted artifacts like “Introspective,” “Echo,” “[‘When I am dead’],” “After Death,” and “At Home” take the opposite tack, pivoting their inquiries on a scene of death, as disembodied or desubjectified speakers address living humans in a key of ambiguous, even “inhuman” indifference, “So lost from chime to everlasting chime / So cold and lost for ever-more” (“Dead Before Death,” Lines 13–14). What I am suggesting is that we can read in Rossetti’s experiments in world-ending the seeds of an analysis of what ecocritic Greg Gerrard calls disanthropy, the project of imagining futures without human kind at all. While Gerrard locates the efflorescence of disanthropic thinking in the 20th century, he sees its key ingredients as “millennial Christianity” and “geological and evolutionary ‘deep time’” (42), meaning that the nineteenth would make more sense. Rossetti of course has a strong sense of both, and works to imagine, albeit in an uncompromisingly religious key, “the inhumanly deep temporality towards which disanthropy gestures” (Gerrard 43).

If Rossetti’s animal poems, apocalyptic writings, and so-called “death lyrics”—all narrated, like “After Death,” by disembodied speakers from beyond the grave—provide evidence of a wide ranging concern with finality and ending, they also help us see how this formally inventive female poet, long
cast as a religious scold and anti-secular mystic, drew on the capacities of her medium to probe the paradoxes of temporal representation occasioned by ending worlds. She imagines the apocalyptic outcome, I am suggesting, at both human and nonhuman scales, in both material and spiritual registers, a doubleness that is clear in a haunting short poem like “Why did baby die,” also from *Sing-Song*. The poem meets a child’s imagined questions about mortality—why did the other baby die?—with mute indifference. The picture it paints cannot be consoling, since as with the “Linnets” poem above, this one tells of a natural world inclined pitilessly and without explanation towards disaster (Figure 7):

> Why did baby die
> Making father sigh,
> Mother cry?
>
> Flowers that bloom to die
> Make no reply
> Of “why”?
> But bow and die. (Lines 1–6)

As we’ve seen, Rossetti’s intermittently thanophilic poetics of catastrophe—pointed always toward death, and positing little in the way of consolation for the human survivors—gets expressed at scales beyond individual dead birds or even dead babies.

All this helps underscore that while Rossetti could correctly be seen as a poet for the age of Mass Extinction, she is more than a nature poet. By attending to the scalar procedure by which her poems move between individual biota and “Divers Worlds. Time and Eternity” we see how her work might speak to the predicament of humankind in our late carbon era, as we draw up our own prospective elegies for human life on this planet. Rossetti’s delicate management of humanist and “post-humanist” perspectives, I am suggesting, shows her scalar experiments and disanthropic visions to be an important resource now, as the literary humanities come to terms not just with the sublime temporal distention of the Anthropocene, but with the prospect of a future without humans at all. If we could remain poised in such “a liminal space between life and death,” and if we could hover temporarily, like so many of Rossetti’s speakers, in that “disembodied or attenuated” perspective after our own death (Harrington 40), our present might appear not only as the center of all we treasure but also
as an infinitely brief instant of lucky, glowing warmth in a universe of frigid indifference. We might then say of the world what Rossetti’s dead speaker says of her lover, with “sweet” ringing, as it does in the original, with a gutting irony:

He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is
To know he still is warm though I am cold. (“After Death,” Lines 12–14)

Notes

1. McGann observes: “Rossetti not infrequently established her final texts by cutting away the original openings and conclusions. The word-by-word changes are not especially remarkable, but these more severe prunings are unusual and very important. Whole stanzas and stanza sequences are lopped away from the poems’ original beginnings and endings, and equally large passages are sometimes also removed from other parts of the poems. The lean and often enigmatic beauty and power of her work is certainly related to such revisionary practices” (210).

2. The Manifesto frames its withdrawal from the world in terms that might have been pulled from “Goblin Market,” whose religious resistance to indulgence sees consumerist appetite as a (fundamentally fallen) path of temptation; both the dissident ecologists convened in Paul Kingsnorth’s Dark Mountain Collective and Rossetti critique what they style as a base materialism. Their affinities are most apparent when they shift into the register
of renunciatory apocalyptic: “And so we find ourselves, all of us together, poised trembling on the edge of a change so massive that we have no way of gauging it. None of us knows where to look, but all of us know not to look down. Secretly, we all think we are doomed: even the politicians think this; even the environmentalists. Some of us deal with it by going shopping. Some deal with it by hoping it is true. Some give up in despair. Some work frantically to try to fend off the coming storm. Our question is: what would happen if we looked down. Would it be as bad as we imagine? What might we see? Could it even be good for us?” (“Manifesto” n.p.). Compare “Song”: “When I am dead, my dearest, sing no sad songs for me” (1–2).

3. Psomiades counts eight of these death poems and notes that they date for the most part from the late 1840s (62), which is, we learn from Battiscombe, the period of Rossetti’s most sustained engagements with Dodsworth’s Tractarian preaching.

4. “All I am doing,” wrote Rossetti to Theodore Watts with characteristic self-effacement, “is reading and thinking over part of the New Testament, writing down what I can while I go along. I work at prose and help myself forward with little bits of verse. What I am doing is (I hope) for my own profit, nor do I in the least know that it will ever become an available ‘book’” (Letters 346). The desultory and multigenre compositional process Rossetti outlines find shape in the hybrid form of The Face of the Deep, a bricolage with antecedents in other devotional works but remarkable for containing in their original contexts verse passages later excerpted as stand alone works of “poetry.”

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Notes on contributor

Nathan K. Hensley is Assistant Professor of English at Georgetown University, where he co-directs the Modernities Working Group. His book, Forms of Empire: The Poetics of Victorian Sovereignty, is forthcoming from Oxford UP in Fall 2016. A second project, now in its early stages, tracks Victorian ideas of system, interconnection, and disaster to argue for the power of their thought in the present.

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