**Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Déjà Vu**

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> "Memory believes before knowing remembers."
>
> William Faulkner, *Light in August* (119)

In his review of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Poems* (1870), Thomas Gordon Hake reflected that, "surely poetry must be a progressive art in which discoveries may be made as in other branches of knowledge; yet one ever seems to have experienced its fresh revelations beforehand" (699). Hake's idea is a resonant one, common to Samuel Johnson, John Keats, and Ralph Waldo Emerson before him; that it was prompted by reading Rossetti, however, invites further consideration.[1] Rossetti might well have objected to Hake's characterization of poetry as a province of knowledge; in "The Cloud Confines," the faith in knowing professed by the refrain—"Whatever there is to know, / That shall we know one day"—comes to sound hopelessly complacent and insufficient as a response to the experience of love, death, and war (l. 11–12). Yet Rossetti's poems are often interested in what it feels like to know, especially when the temporal dynamics of knowing are bent out of shape. What is more, they are creatively self-reflexive about the poetic consequences of these cognitive kinks. Rossetti has always been closely identified with what he called the "summoning art" of memory ("The Stream's Secret" l. 97), but his poems often tilt away from the sense of control implicit in recollection, compelled instead towards the shock and perplexity of involuntary recognition.[2] "[M]eshed with half-remembrance", Rossetti's lyrics record and bequeath experiences of knowing in which knowledge arrives uncertainly or unexpectedly, and in which cognition and recognition become hard to distinguish ("Willowwood, II" l. 2).

Puzzled arbitrations between familiarity and unfamiliarity recur throughout Rossetti's verse. In "The Soul's Sphere," the speaker considers whether the images that haunt his sleepless nights are "Visions of golden futures: or that last / Wild pageant of the accumulated past" (l. 12–13). In "A Dark Day," Rossetti compares thoughts with drops of water that strike the brow of the traveler, who "knows not, darkling, if they bring him now / Fresh storm, or be old rain the covert bears" (l. 3–4). The brilliance of these lines is concentrated in Rossetti's placement of the inconspicuous word "or". Had he chosen in each case to place it at the end of the line, he would have lent it an expectancy that would have made the thought sound premeditated; had he placed it at the beginning, he would have retained the surprise of the turn, but lost the crucial unexpectedness of the pause that precedes it, making it sound more like a sudden swerve than a doubted drift. As it is, the placement of "or" in the middle of the line introduces an unanticipated medial pause, a silence that is the darkling sound of knowing not, of hesitating without deciding. "Or" thus comes to sound less like an instrument of binary logic than a delicate act of mental balancing, holding in tension past and future, the known and the unknown.

Similarly, in "Jenny," the heroine's erstwhile lover becomes self-conscious and curiously precise about the familiar unfamiliarity of her old lodgings, calling them "Something I do not know again" (l. 42). Not "Something I had forgotten," or "Something I *have* forgotten," or even "Something I do not know *anymore*." The very carefully articulated sense is of a reversion to (or a recovery of) a prior state of not knowing, rather than a loss of knowledge. Even so, that loss lingers in the possibility of taking "know again" as a compound verb—something I do not *know again*, that is, something I do not remember. A paradox of this sort can often be found lurking whenever Rossetti turns his attention to forms of remembering, which often turn out to be forms of discovery, and vice versa. "And here the lost hours the lost hours renew," as "Autumn Idleness" has it, compacting into a phrase the poems' divided

attachment to recursion and revelation (l. 12). Inverted syntax jams up the line with stresses, conjuring away the metre's iambic forward motion with the incantatory force of the repetition. Throughout Rossetti's poetry, the lost hours are absences that continually reassert their presence; losses are not redeemed so that lostness might be.

This essay attends to those moments in Rossetti's oeuvre when known and unknown seem superimposed upon one another, blurring the boundaries between representation and reality, and exposing a gap between knowledge and the feeling of knowing. It is an inquiry into Rossetti's phenomenology of knowing, or what Steven Connor has recently termed "epistemopathy," "the spectrum of feeling exacted by the idea, the ambition and even . . . the fantasy of knowledge" (10). The phantasmal moments I am concerned with can be situated within the wider history of memory, specifically with respect to Rossetti's interest in the disorienting cognitive phenomenon of déjà vu, first treated as an object of sustained research in the late nineteenth century. In this way, mapping what is most idiosyncratic—what is often so radiantly odd and beautiful—about how Rossetti imagines knowing may also reveal his participation in the kind of scientific and psychological discourses from which his writing has frequently been dissociated.[3]

For W. B. Yeats, who did much to shape the poet's reception, Rossetti was distinguished from Victorian contemporaries like Robert Browning because he abjured the latter's "psychological curiosity" in pursuit of "pure beauty" (242). Bringing the poems into dialogue with the discourse of déjà vu exposes the limits of this distinction, providing an opportunity to revise our conception of Rossetti's poetic and intellectual ambitions. In his illuminating recent study, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Science* (2018), John Holmes offers the more nuanced view that Rossetti "took little interest in science after the 1850s" (183), tracing a movement away from the "psychological challenge" of his early painting and poetry towards events "transposed out of history into a mystical, dreamlike landscape" (175). As Henri

Bergson would later note, however, the sense of "a reality transposed into dream" (145) is exactly how one might describe the experience of déjà vu, a condition which, during Rossetti's own lifetime, went by the name of "dreamy state" in the neurological literature (qtd. in Lardreau 38).[4]

In truth, the gap between Rossetti's artistic concerns and the scientific and psychological discourses of his period is not so wide as it has often seemed to be; far from leaping free of history, the dreamlike commingling of presence and retrospect in his poems echoes the symptoms analysed by his peers in medicine and psychology, whose very conceptualization of memory disorders his poetry went on to influence in turn. In pursuing these connections, my study of Rossetti's poetry of déjà vu complements and complicates Veronica Alfano's recent exploration of the "simultaneity of remembering and forgetting" in Victorian lyric (47). By showing how déjà vu becomes not only a favoured subject of Rossetti's poetry but a model of the kind of effects Rossetti desired from his poems, I hope to shed new light on Rossetti's poetic technique and to suggest revisions to prevailing conceptions of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics.

## I. Wonder and Familiarity

Hake's suggestion that Rossetti's poems produce the feeling of having experienced their "fresh revelations beforehand" neatly catches the dissonance that characterizes the experience of déjà vu: a paradoxical overlay of familiarity (something that is known beforehand) and unfamiliarity (something that appears like a fresh revelation). This doubleness is signalled immediately by the opening lines of Rossetti's "Sudden Light," one of the songs from the 1870 *House of Life* sequence: "I have been here before, / But when or how I cannot tell" (l. 1–2). Cognitive psychologists would distinguish this speaker's experience from false

memory or confabulation by pointing to his self-consciousness about what he knows. As Chris Moulin, one of the leading modern authorities on déjà vu, succinctly puts it, "one couldn't have an experience of déjà vu without knowing it": it is a "metacognitive experience" (165). "I knew it all of yore," declares the speaker of "Sudden Light" (l. 10), not in jaded weariness of the all too familiar but in astonished surprise at what he didn't know he knew. His experience of déjà vu harnesses the epistemological extremities of "unknown things" and "things overknown", whose competing claims Rossetti weighs up elsewhere in *The House of Life* ("From Dawn to Noon" l. 14). The 1881 publication of the revised and expanded sequence in Rossetti's *Ballads and Sonnets* coincided with the appearance of Théodule-Armand Ribot's ground-breaking book on memory disorders, *Les Maladies de la Mémoire*, which divided such conditions into forms of amnesia and hypermnesia. As Richard Terdiman has argued at length, disquiet about memory in the nineteenth century "crystallized around the perception of two principal disorders: *too little memory*, and *too much*" (14). Experiences like the one depicted in "Sudden Light" weave such anxieties together, bringing to a pitch the "memory crisis" Terdiman identifies (*passim*).

The now familiar term déjà vu dates from 1876, but did not acquire popular currency until the early twentieth century; until then it competed with others such as intellectual aura, dreamy state, and paramnesia in the neurological and psychological literature which flourished in the nineteenth century's latter decades.[5] Though Rossetti is unlikely to have been conversant with a great deal of this writing, not least because much of it postdates his death in 1882, he was able to draw on a handful of previous portrayals in nineteenth-century literature by the time he came to write "Sudden Light," dated to 1854 by his brother. Déjà vu had been represented in fiction by Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, and had been evoked by Rossetti's favourite poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, as that "Which makes the present, while the flash doth last, / Seem a mere semblance of some unknown past" (l. 2–3).[6] Indeed, when the eminent

Victorian psychiatrist Sir James Crichton-Browne presented the Cavendish Lecture on "dreamy mental states" at the West London Medico-Chirurgical Society in 1895, he devoted a sizeable proportion of his address to the appearance of déjà vu in fiction and poetry, including "Sudden Light" (3). Rossetti's poem was even being cited as a case study in the *British Journal of Medical Psychology* as late as 1942.[7] "Sudden Light," then, did not so much respond to contemporary research into anomalous memory phenomena as it helped to inform the development of such research.

This contribution is less startling than it sounds when one observes that Crichton-Browne's literary references did not merely signal his gentlemanly urbanity but also granted express weight to the close association he drew between déjà vu and "flights of genius" (7). For Crichton-Browne, déjà vu was a distinctly literary malaise, and he pointed out (albeit inaccurately) that Scott, Dickens, and Rossetti all died of "brain disease" (15). The experiences these writers described, he maintained, were "comparatively rare amongst the unlettered, the prosaic, and the stolid masses of our people," and the "new cerebral combinations" generated in a déjà vu were "akin to those which take place during the activity of the imagination" (6–7). His was not an eccentric view. Crichton-Browne's German contemporary Emil Kraepelin associated déjà vu with the gift of lively imagination ("*lebhafter Phantasie*" [410]), while the French psychologist Ludovic Dugas commented on the remarkable intellect of many of those who reported it ("*d'une intelligence . . . remarquablement douées*" [41]). Writing in 1911, Havelock Ellis noted that déjà vu tended to disproportionately affect "educated people . . . who use their brains much," especially in artistic work, a finding still supported to an extent by the latest research (240).[8] Coleridge's word "semblance," then, is to the point, since—as Athena Vrettos has written—déjà vu involves "locating present feelings in the past or future, distancing the present moment from itself by making it representational" (206). And if déjà vu is a condition in which perception takes on the characteristics of representation, and which stresses

the temporality of knowing, then poetry may be an especially apt medium for exploring it. As the American scientist Henry Fairfield Osborn put it in 1884, "There is a vague and mysterious mental form in these impressions equally attractive to the poet and the psychologist" (478).

"Sudden Light" explores this mysterious form with a simplicity as precise as it is disarming:

I have been here before,
But when or how I cannot tell:
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell,
The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

You have been mine before,—
How long ago I may not know:
But just when at that swallow's soar
Your neck turned so,
Some veil did fall,—I knew it all of yore.

Then, now,—perchance again! . . .
O round mine eyes your tresses shake!
Shall we not lie as we have lain
Thus for Love's sake,
And sleep, and wake, yet never break the chain? (Rossetti 174)

On the one hand, this speaker records a powerful feeling of knowing—powerful in both its certitude ("I knew it all of yore") and its extent (his déjà vu stretches to the *déjà senti* (already smelled) and the *déjà entendu* (already heard)). On the other hand, however, there is a confession of ignorance, a feeling of uncertainty underscored by the stress-pattern, with its weight on the conditional: not "how long ago I do not know," but "how long ago I *may* not know." Rossetti's "may" hedges its bets between the sense that he will *never* be able to know and the sense that he *may*, or may *not*, know. It enacts in miniature the metacognitive ambiguity dramatized by these first two stanzas.

Déjà vu's alloy of knowing and unknowing receives especially careful attention from Henri Bergson in his 1908 essay "Memory of the Present and False Recognition," a paper which handsomely acknowledges its debts to the innovative research of the previous century, citing around thirty studies reaching back to 1868. "If I recognize the present instant," writes Bergson,

> am I not quite as surely going to recognize the coming one? So I am unceasingly, towards what is on the point of happening, in the attitude of a person who will recognize and who consequently knows. But this is only the *attitude* of knowledge, the form of it without the matter. As I cannot predict what is going to happen, I quite realize that I do not know it; but I foresee that I am going to have known it . . . placing me in the strange position of a person who feels he knows what he knows he does not know. (134)

Bergson's account is recognizable in the third and final stanza of "Sudden Light," in which the speaker reveals that the falling of the veil is not, as the metaphor seems to imply, a single event, but something that happens repeatedly *within* the experience of déjà vu and helps constitute it.

Like Bergson's subject, the poem's speaker is (in this slightly more faithful than elegant translation) "towards what is on the point of happening, in the attitude of a person who will recognize and who consequently knows," but is unable to say what it is that will prompt this recognition. There is a difference, in other words, between knowing and what neurologists call the feeling of knowing. As the pioneering Victorian neurologist John Hughlings Jackson noted in 1876: "Some healthy people occasionally have the *feeling* that they had seen something exactly like what they were then seeing, although *at the same time* they *believe* that they could not possibly have seen it before" ("Notes" 702). Rossetti himself observed a similar distinction in one of his notebooks from the same decade: "there are certain passionate phases of the soul," he wrote, "when to know a thing true & to believe it are found 2 separate things" ("Small Notebook 3" $8^{v}$). Rossetti had perhaps been introduced, if only at second hand, to John Henry Newman's conception of "certitude" (as distinguished from certainty) in the matter of religious belief, as elucidated in his 1870 *Grammar of Assent* (139). The former quality, which Stephen Maitzen crisply defines as "subjective epistemic certainty," is a state of mind rather than an attribute of propositions (65). Déjà vu, one might say, offers the feeling of knowing without the content of knowledge.

Like Bergson's, Rossetti's remark configures knowing as dynamic rather than static, an experience of "phases." Contrary to the common critical assumption that Rossetti sought from poetry "an immortal artefact describing an eternal moment," as David Riede suggests, what "Sudden Light" pursues is not the transcendence of time, but an endless reduplication of experience in time: the wish to "sleep, and wake, yet never break the chain"—a cycle of repetitions embodied in the surfeit of rhymes in this last stanza, where the last syllable of every line is united by the same vowel sound. Assonance in the final line highlights the metrical chains by which the poem itself is bound. This is writing that enjoys its temporality rather than dreaming of how to escape it. The view that Rossetti invests memory with the power to

"mitigate" the effects of time, as John R. Conners has suggested (20), is qualified by these moments in which remembering involves being set in motion, so that "Time itself / Is consciously beside us, and perceived" ("Antwerp to Ghent" l. 11–12). "Sudden Light", then, encourages us to hear Rossetti's famous avowal that "A sonnet is a moment's monument" slightly differently ("[Sonnet on the Sonnet]" l. 1). What matters most to him, perhaps, is not what a monument is but what it does, which is to remind (from the Latin *monere*).[9]

Rossetti clearly distinguishes this unwilled access of memory from the voluntary activity of recollection with which his poetry has more often been associated. This latter mode of remembrance is mirrored in the logic of Victorian spiritualism and its efforts to summon the dead: as Rossetti's friend Thomas Woolner lamented to Lady Trevelyan in 1858, "you will be sorry to hear that Gabriel Rossetti has taken up with that foolish but growing abomination, Spiritual Rapping, and declares he can make ghosts and spirits talk to him and do all he pleases" (qtd. in Trevelyan 10). Déjà vu, by contrast, deals in a more volatile and uncontrollable form of recall ("Then, now,—perchance again! . . ."), one that nineteenth-century psychologists tended to find troubling. Henry Holland, for example, stressed the difference between the "recollective faculty of the will" and those dangerous and unmanageable memories that came "unbidden and vaguely into the mind" (155).[10]

It is on this dangerous edge of things that Rossetti's poetry is so often drawn to tread. The image of sleeping and waking in "Sudden Light" figures a cycle of forgetting and remembering that lies beyond the will's control and generates a knowledge that is fresh yet uncannily familiar. Hughlings Jackson recounted how one of his own patients described the experience of déjà vu by saying that "it was as if waking from sleep" ("Intellectual Aura" 186). The approach of the dreamy state, on this account, is like waking from dream into dream. Rossetti's "Nuptial Sleep" presses a similar suggestion: "Sleep sank them lower than the tide of dreams . . . / Till from some wonder of new woods and streams / He woke, and wondered

more: for there she lay" (l. 9–14). Greater than the wonderland of slumber is the wonder which greets the lover's waking eyes, a compound of spontaneous revelation and remembrance: "for there she lay" is fittingly ambiguous about its temporal reference, allowing both possible senses (there she lay *then*, and there she lay *now*) to converge, as they do in an experience of déjà vu. Indeed, it is precisely this collapsing of temporalities that distinguishes déjà vu from other instances of involuntary memory and which produces the magical quality Rossetti covets. It offers a means of realizing that "constant unison of wonder and familiarity" which, in his commentary for Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* (1863), Rossetti hailed as one of the "inestimable prizes" of painting ("Supplementary" 371).

Rossetti's attraction to the sonnet-sequence (a term he himself coined) might be seen as a means of pursuing this elusive effect through poetic form, with its series of repetitions that are repeated opportunities for starting anew, and whose cyclicality implicates the future in every flicker of feedback. Within the 1881 *House of Life* Rossetti celebrates such a conspiracy of tenses as a crucial "test for love": "in every kiss sealed fast / To feel the first kiss and forbode the last" ("True Woman. III: Her Heaven" l. 13–14). The title of his great watershed painting of 1859, *Bocca Baciata*, enshrines this conception as an artistic as well as erotic ideal: inscribed on the back of the canvas is the full quotation from Boccaccio, "*Bocca baciata non perde ventura, anzi rinnova come fa la luna*" (The kissed mouth loses not its freshness; still it renews itself even as doth the moon) (Surtees 114). It is tempting, then, to read *The House of Life*'s treasured imagery of sleeping and waking as a figure for the sequence's own iterative form ("Sudden Light" itself appears at the end of the 1870 sequence, as though offering itself as a kind of commentary).

The promise of déjà vu to which Rossetti's verse form aspires is the one descried in "Heart's Hope": a feeling "intense / As instantaneous penetrating sense, / In Spring's birth-hour, of other Springs gone by" (l. 12–14). Unlike memory's summoning art, which ambushes

all determined attempts to forget ("Didst ever say, 'Lo, I forget'? / Such thought was to remember yet," as "Soothsay" laments [l. 92–93]), the experience of knowing generated by déjà vu arrives unbidden, and so, as Walter Benjamin suggests, promises a mode of remembering that coincides with forgetting, rather than cancelling it:

> Is not the involuntary recollection, Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and ornaments of forgetting. (204)

Benjamin's suggestive characterization has a silent dependence on Bergson, for whom every moment of experience simultaneously "presents two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and memory on the other" (132). Bergson himself drew on work dating back to the 1860s in support of this notion that perception has two aspects.[11] Writing in 1873, for example, the distinguished English physician Edward Liveing speculated about "that singular reduplicating action of the brain which many people momentarily experience, when they seem to have been at some indefinitely remote period under circumstances precisely similar to those at the moment in question" (109). Bergson reasons that, ordinarily, only the "forward-springing" (127) track of perception attracts our attention, since "we have no need of the memory of things whilst we hold the things themselves" (128). In déjà vu, by contrast, the will

is relaxed to such an extent that we turn our attention to that side of experience which is not immediately useful: to the backward-looking, memory-making aspect, which we mistakenly believe to be posterior to perception. Déjà vu thus brings to light the double structure of *all* our experience of the present, ordinarily concealed from us by what Benjamin dubs "purposeful activity." As Havelock Ellis paraphrased Bergson for an English audience, the experience of déjà vu "would take place at every moment if it were not that will, ceaselessly directed towards action, prevents the present from folding in on itself by pushing it indefinitely into the future" (257).

For Bergson, therefore, "Each moment of life is split up as and when it is posited," or rather, "it consists in this very splitting" (132). Bergson's insight resonates with Walter Pater's observation that, to Rossetti, "life is a crisis at every moment" (211). This is especially true when we remember the etymological sense of crisis as a division (from κρίνω, "separate, put asunder" ["κρίνω" 996]). Déjà vu brings this division into focus, estranging the present moment from itself, but also, paradoxically, offering a way of dwelling in and enjoying a present which Rossetti often imagines to be hopelessly evanescent. As Bergson proposes, the "fleeting limit between the immediate past . . . and the immediate future . . . would be a mere abstraction were it not the moving mirror which continually reflects perception as a memory" (132). In "Proserpina (For a Picture)," Rossetti's speaker can think only of "The nights that shall be" and "the days that were", anticipation crossing seamlessly into retrospect, as if the unknown were always passing into the overknown, and knowing were always knowing too much (l. 8). Déjà vu, by contrast, models a way of holding together these temporal dispositions, one which Mark Currie has argued is homologous with the experience of reading a narrative: "we might regard narrative as part of our memory of the present," he writes, "in the sense that it is one of the cognitive resources that we have at our disposal to anticipate what is to come, not only because we anticipate when we read, but perhaps more significantly because we

anticipate in the mode of retrospect, as if we already know how to look back upon the present" (66). Rossetti's dramatically foreshortened, lyric version of this doubled perspective keeps in play a fateful sense of the extraordinary that tacks closer to the felt experience of déjà vu. More often than not, his "vanished hours and hours eventual" are embroiled in ways that frustrate any prospect of composure ("Life-in-Love" l. 8).

**II. A Dream of Knowing**

If Bergson's highly developed account of déjà vu builds on a synthesis of late nineteenth-century psychology, a more immediate context for Rossetti's interest in the wider phenomenon of involuntary memory can be found in the work of John Ruskin, his early patron and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's greatest advocate. In his 1851 pamphlet on "Pre-Raphaelitism," Ruskin described how J. M. W. Turner's truth to nature was not simply a matter of transcribing his immediate surroundings but also a process of combining what he saw in the present with memories of what he had seen in the past; Turner's mind, he wrote, was a treasure-house of images, "each mingling in new associations with those now visibly passing before him" (360). Ruskin returned to this idea in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*, emphasizing that the process was unwilled and common to all the "great inventors" he had studied, from Dante to Tintoretto, "their imagination consisting, not in a voluntary production of new images, but an *involuntary remembrance*, exactly at the right moment, of something they had actually seen" ("Of Turnerian Topography" 42, emphasis mine). Déjà vu takes this spontaneous fusion of past and present to the limit, threatening what Crichton-Browne described as "an absolute identification of the present with the past" (1). One moment, experience takes on the hue of reminiscence—the next, it is as though memory itself were trembling into flesh. Both Ruskin's "involuntary remembrance" and the more extreme version evoked in "Sudden Light" stress the

helplessness of the subject which so worried Victorian psychologists and which framed the view of both Hughlings Jackson and Crichton-Browne that déjà vu was essentially pathological. This passivity, however, was key to both Ruskin and Rossetti's understanding of the creative process: while Ruskin hailed the "passive obedience" of Turner's imagination ("Of Turnerian Topography" 41), Rossetti was to tell William Sharp that "I do not wrap myself up in my imaginings, it is they that envelop me from the outer world whether I will or no" (qtd. in Sharp 414). These notions harmonized with the longstanding association between poetry and mania, given renewed impetus in Romantic poetics by the central role attributed to the unconscious.[12] In the Victorian period, this role had been extensively theorized by Rossetti's friend, the literary critic E. S. Dallas, and by the century's end it was granted new authority by Ribot in the field of psychology.[13]

Rossetti's unfinished tale "Saint Agnes of Intercession" (begun in 1850) plays with the supposed links between creativity, mental disorder, and déjà vu. In this story, Rossetti narrates a present-day artist's disturbing discovery that his lover's portrait is identical to one painted four hundred years previously. It is eventually revealed that the artist had seen (and subsequently forgotten) a print of this picture during his childhood, but this cannot explain the similarities in appearance he perceives between the picture and his own fiancée, still less his succeeding conviction, upon finding the Florentine painter's self-portrait, that he looked just like himself. These vivid impressions of the already seen induce a period of "prolonged illness" that confines the narrator to his bed ("Saint Agnes of Interecession" 333). The narrator's alarmed parents prefigure the pathologizing approach taken by Hughlings Jackson and Crichton-Browne when they label his illness "brain sickness" (334). As these figures would later suggest, déjà vu should not be taken entirely lightly because, as the painter's father puts it, such experiences "might end . . . by endangering [his] reason" (334). For Crichton-Browne, they represented the potential "first step in a series of changes which, extending through many

degrees of mental dissolution, ends in . . . obliteration of mind" (7). Rossetti's story reads like one of the "extreme" cases of paramnesia documented by the American psychologist William H. Burnham in the 1880s, such as the man convinced that the opinions, jokes, and even obituaries he read in the newspapers had all previously been articulated verbatim by himself (450). The tone of Rossetti's tale, however, is uncertain, prefaced by a jaunty Shandean pastiche about tall tales but later seeming to solicit the reader's sympathy with the artist against the unbelieving world. Whether one is inclined to credit the narrator's view of events as proof of a kind of metempsychosis, or the parents' view that he is suffering from a neurological condition, the story brings into startling conjunction the ideas of creativity, uncanny recognition, and brain malfunction which would cluster around the medical and psychological discourses of déjà vu decades later.

Close affinities between uncanny recognition and the creative process are also suggested by Rossetti's "The Portrait," in which the painting comes to commemorate less the original rendezvous in the forest than the poignant feeling of having been there before which the painter experiences after the beloved's death, an experience the poem shrouds with enchantment:

> For unawares I came upon
> Those glades where once she walked with me:
> And as I stood there suddenly,
> All wan with traversing the night,
> Upon the desolate verge of light
> Yearned loud the iron-bosomed sea. (l. 85–90)

The sea's Tennysonian moan is anticipated by Rossetti's "suddenly," which the intervening lines endow with tension like a suspended chord, their awkward rhythms and Latinate diction priming the aural appeal of the delayed resolution, which would risk sounding trite and too easily achieved without them. These metrical and lexical strayings also help to create the impression that this speaker is less leading than led, so that the reader participates in the sense of being taken "unawares"; inverting Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy," it is the sea's mighty yearning that prompts the speaker's own ("Of the Pathetic Fallacy" 205). By the time this emotional denouement arrives, the poem has traveled a long way from the woman who is ostensibly its subject. What matters to this portraitist is not his sitter's physiognomy, her expression or posture, least of all her psychology (all of which are left undescribed), but rather that the setting should evoke an atmosphere of déjà vu, the kind of place you might find "your own footsteps meeting you" (l. 26). Almost all Rossetti's pictures are figurative, but as in the most celebrated paintings of his idol Giorgione, the settings are as responsible for the creation of mood as the figures. On a second reading, the Browningesque boast "and there she stands / As in that wood that day" (l. 28–29) brings to mind the latter day of remembrance as much as the original event; this speaker is not so much haunted by the past as by hauntedness itself, the "rapt and awed" state into which his involuntary remembrance has delivered him (l. 95).

It is by evoking such a state that Rossetti's highly wrought sonnet "Memorial Thresholds" brings into focus many of the complexities of metacognitive experience. In common with Bergson and Benjamin's imagined subjects, the speaker's detachment from the purposeful activity of the hurrying crowds which surround him licences his entrancement by an involuntary sensation of simultaneous strangeness and recognition:

> What place so strange,—though unrevealèd snow
> With unimaginable fires arise

At the earth's end,—what passion of surprise
Like frost-bound fire-girt scenes of long ago?
Lo! this is none but I this hour; and lo!
This is the very place which to mine eyes
Those mortal hours in vain immortalize,
'Mid hurrying crowds, with what alone I know.

City, of thine a single simple door,
By some new Power reduplicate, must be
Even yet my life-porch in eternity,
Even with one presence filled, as once of yore:
Or mocking winds whirl round a chaff-strown floor
Thee and thy years and these my words and me. (Rossetti 163)

The opening image of the frost-bound fire-girt scenes of long ago (which Rossetti's brother suggested refers to the *aurora borealis*) provides a rhetorical measure for the strangeness and passion of surprise he feels upon revisiting this simple urban setting.[14] Yet "why such strangeness and surprise," Joseph F. Vogel very pertinently asks, "at seeing a place he has never forgotten (it has been immortalized to his eyes) that he must reassure himself of the reality of the experience ('this is none but I . . . This is the very place')?" (57). One answer might be that this is exactly what happens in an experience of *jamais vu*: the sense of strangeness and surprise in the face of something which one knows ought to be familiar. Like déjà vu, this alternative form of paramnesia cannot be willed into being and relies on a sense of dissonance, of being struck by the unexpected unfamiliarity ("Lo! . . . and lo!"), rather than merely experiencing an absence of familiarity. It is this nexus of feelings that is articulated by

the quotation from "Jenny" referred to at the beginning of this essay: "Something I do not know again." Or as one of Hughlings Jackson's patients put it, it is like suddenly finding oneself "in a strange country" ("Notes" 702), a suggestion embraced by Rossetti's simile about the northern lights at "the earth's end."

In the sestet, "Memroial Thresholds" moves from recording an experience of *jamais vu* to imagining a future experience of déjà vu (hence the almost unmanageable proliferation of temporal planes: "long ago," "once of yore," "this hour," "eternity," future "years"). Here as in "Sudden Light," the duplication of experience registered is deemed insufficient, and the speaker imagines a prospect in which it will be *re*duplicated; he imagines continually finding himself at a physical threshold that, as the title suggests, is a symbol for the threshold of remembrance. Rossetti's tangled grammar supports this aspiration, for as James Richardson has astutely observed, the extensions of his syntax "seem to be dictated moment-by-moment, each phrase surging out of the last rather than drawn forward by a visible goal" (108). What unites this speaker's experiences of *jamais vu* and déjà vu is the same thing that unites him with the speaker of "Sudden Light": the coveted prospect of veils falling and knowledge dawning—even if it is only the knowledge of one's ignorance.

Another point of contact between these speakers is their awareness of their astonishing experiences being limited to themselves, one of the defining aspects of a déjà vu. The feeling of recognition in "Sudden Light" is not mutual, for the speaker has to tell his beloved "You have been mine before," while the speaker of "Memorial Thresholds" cuts a lonely figure among the crowd "with what alone I know." These speakers resemble many of the subjects of Rossetti's pictures, who, as Ford Madox Ford (then Ford Madox Hueffer) observed, bear a "rapt expression peculiar to the listener to sounds inaudible to others" (34). Rossetti's poem "Dante at Verona" sets the pattern for this motif, foregrounding sight rather than sound as the poet is blessed with a vision of Beatrice to which no-one else is party:

All this, being there, we had not seen.
Seen only was the shadow wrought
On the strong features bound in thought;
The vagueness gaining gait and mien; (l. 463–66)

The most obvious way in which such vagueness gains gait and mien is by converting the vision into poetry, as Rossetti imagines Dante doing with the *Purgatorio*.

Rossetti's poems are likewise marked by a desire to make the private experience they describe shareable by turning it into art—a desire with which both the linguistic and conceptual materials of Rossetti's poetry co-operate. The highly restricted imagery of *The House of Life* cultivates a sense of familiarity which is at the same time undercut by the shifting ways in which this imagery is combined; while one might suppose that the recurrence of images like night, waves, fire, and angels would make them cosily familiar, like bits and pieces of old furniture perhaps, one never quite feels at home in this house. Pater called *The House of Life* a "haunted house", and there is something persistently *unheimlich* about the experience of inhabiting it as a reader (214). The string of complex variations the sequence plays on a relatively limited range of themes and imagery elicits a fraught sense of simultaneous continuity and discontinuity which mirrors the basic structure of a déjà vu experience. These formal biases are not in themselves, of course, sufficient to trigger an experience so specific (and so infrequent) as *déjà lu*, but they begin to account for Hake's eerie sense of discovery as recognition. Cognitive psychologists, for example, have been able to replicate the effect of "recognition without identification" (of which déjà vu is a special type) by presenting participants at intervals with lists of semantically similar words (Urquhart and O'Connor 2). At a broader conceptual level, too, Rossetti's poetic present is typically projected either through

a medieval past (as in what he called his "modern-antique" ballads, reclaiming Thomas Love Peacock's slur on the Lake Poets ["Letter to Allingham" 15 Oct. 389]) or into an idealized time "which might have been yet might not be", an elsewhere and elsewhen that blends fear, longing, and belonging ("Stillborn Love" l. 1).[15]

Sigmund Freud's definition of the *unheimlich* strikes at these ambivalences: "the German word *unheimlich* is obviously the opposite of *heimlich* [homely], *heimisch* [native]—the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is uncanny is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar" (220). Yet "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (226). The speaker of "Memorial Thresholds" is frightened by what is "unrevealèd" and "unimaginable," but he also figures his inauguration into such hiddenness as a kind of homecoming ("my life-porch in eternity"). Pursuing Freud's definition of the *unheimlich*, what is unfamiliar emerges as a form of *nostos* or return, the Greek concept from which seventeenth-century Swiss doctors developed their diagnosis of "nostalgia."[16] Joseph Koerner has written lucidly of how the experience of déjà vu is intertwined with this feeling of homesickness in the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich: "déjà vu excites us with an anticipated return"—as though we know for sure what will happen next—yet it "leaves us in a state of exile; anticipation becomes finally nostalgia for a place I have never visited" (270). Rossetti's speakers, too, hark back to a "home" they have never yet set foot in (l. 17), a place where they might see their "exile exchanged for sanctuary", as one of Rossetti's last poems, "Spheral Change," aspires (l. 18).

Yet Rossetti was experimenting with this idea as early as "The Staff and the Scrip," first published in the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856. At the quiet centre of this tragic ballad, between the knight's pledge to fight for Queen Blanchelys and his foredoomed death on the battlefield, stands a visual encounter akin to those Koerner identifies in Friedrich's landscapes:

And there the sunset skies unseal'd,
  Like lands he never knew,
Beyond to-morrow's battle-field,
  Lay open out of view
    To ride into. ("The Staff and the Scrip" [1881] l. 96–100)[17]

The aerial revelation that lies unsealed to the knight's view is saturated with a sense of destiny as the sky becomes the locus for his anticipation of life after death. Both time and space are rendered ambiguous by the curiously self-divided way in which Rossetti evokes them. The vision is "unseal'd" and "open," yet at the same time "out of view". In temporal terms, the knight's fate lies in the future, yet he frames it in terms of his past ("Like lands he never knew"). In the original 1856 printing Rossetti had "Long" for "Like" ("The Staff and the Scrip" [1856] 773); the revision, made for the 1870 edition, exchanges a metaphor for a simile, replacing an assertion (he never knew the skies) with something more equivocal (it's *like* he never knew them). The revision allows the knight's knowing to echo the ambivalence of his seeing, as well as suggesting a difference in kind rather than degree between land and skies that supports the wider sense that this will be his final sally: these skies are *like* lands, but they are not lands. Seen and unseen, known and unknown, they represent something strange and other, and yet also a home "To ride into". As in a Friedrich painting, or an experience of déjà vu, anticipation in this poem becomes nostalgia for something its subject never knew.

In "The Birth-Bond," composed in 1854, the same year as "Sudden Light", the desire for homecoming is fulfilled in a striking experience of déjà vu:

Even so, when first I saw you, seemed it, love,

That among souls allied to mine was yet
One nearer kindred than life hinted of.
O born with me somewhere that men forget,
And though in years of sight and sound unmet,
Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough! (l. 9–14)

The speaker's first sight of his beloved triggers a flash of recognition and nostalgia for a person he has never seen; locating the origin of his feeling of familiarity somewhere that men forget, he posits a place from which all mankind is exiled until the moment of recall supplies the knowledge they did not know they had. This poem enlists internal rhyme in Rossetti's formal repertoire of uncanny recognition effects. The whole sonnet moves towards the crowning verb in the last line, whose clinching resonance has been prepared by the long "O" sounds throughout the sestet ("so," "souls," "O," "though") with their insinuating sense of the *déjà entendu*, which is to say that they are registered as already heard in a way that differs from the repetitions of end-rhyme in being difficult to place. The knowledge which eventually arrives does so unsought and perhaps also with an air of ambiguity; "Known for my soul's birth-partner well enough!" could be litotes, but it could also hint at a disavowal of the idea that absolute knowledge is desirable, for such knowledge risks rendering its object obsolete. In its place, Rossetti conjectures a good *enough* knowing that forestalls the threat of the "overknown" expressed in "From Dawn to Noon" (l. 14).

A similarly tempered fantasy of knowing wins the tribute of that sonnet's most arresting lines, when the speaker turns to pause upon "the sun-smit paths, all grey / And marvellous once" (l. 10–11). Grey might typically be conceived as dim, drab, or gloomy, and associated with age, but here it is unexpectedly paired with the marvellous and connected with youth—surprises whose impact is heightened by being withheld over the line break. Rossetti's esteem

for this twilight tone contrasts notably with his sister Christina's account of the soul's eagerness to ascend "Up, up into the day, / Where twilight no more turneth grey" ("The Three Nuns" l. 136–37). Holman Hunt recalled him exulting over Lizzie Siddal's "grey eyes" (198), and Rossetti himself described his painting "Proserpine" as a "graduation of greys" in which there was "nothing dismal or gloomy," but which vibrated with a "mystic luminous warmth" ("Letter to Howell" 285). Pitched, like his painting, between the blank shadows and the "unblenching day," Rossetti's poems pursue and invite a more grey and marvellous mode of knowing, seeking to dodge the opposing pitfalls of novelty and overfamiliarity ("From Dawn to Noon" l. 12). In déjà vu Rossetti found a model of how these delicately balanced desires might be realized.

Rossetti's own famously revisionary practice put this model to work as a compositional method, for as he wrote to William Allingham, "my sonnets are not generally finished till I see them again after forgetting them" ("Letter to Allingham" 23 Jul. 362). By this logic, poems that become too readily familiar are found wanting; the ideal poem, then, might be one which, in Robert Frost's words, offers "the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew" (132). Such a poetics offers an intensified version of the "lyric knowledge" recently proposed by James Longenbach: "people who love poems," Longenbach writes, "reread them not to acquire new knowledge but to reinhabit the enactment of what they already know" (116). Rossetti's poems invite this sense of reinhabitation from the outset, such that we are encouraged—in Havelock Ellis's memorable description of memory in dreams—to "remember things we never knew" (221). Rossetti made this very point in his advocacy of Blake:

> while any who can here find anything to love will be the poet-painter's welcome guests, still such a feast is spread first of all for those who can know at a glance that it is theirs and was meant for them; who can meet their host's eye with

> sympathy and recognition, even when he offers them the new strange fruits grown for himself in far-off gardens where he has dwelt alone, or pours for them the wines which he has learned to love in lands where they never travelled. ("Supplementary" 384)

The startling recognition of something entirely new, the nostalgia for lands one never traveled, the fantasy of knowing, at a glance, something strange for one's own: here is the very machinery of déjà vu turned, in Rossetti's own words, towards the issue of poetic reception. More than an abiding poetic subject, déjà vu became for Rossetti a kind of prototype of the poetic experience itself.

Excavating this poetics offers to recast the characteristic Pre-Raphaelite gesture of a present that circles back to the past: from an anxiety about belatedness into a fantasy of poetic knowing. To establish the contours of this fantasy is to sketch a more complex picture of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics than that of a "withdrawal from the actuality of the present to a nostalgic no man's land," in Lothar Hönnighausen's representative construction (182). William Morris offered a more sensitive gloss on Pre-Raphaelite aims when he defined romance as "the power of making the past part of the present" (148). While critics have been alert to the ways in which Rossetti's poetic present is impinged upon by the past, salvaging the late nineteenth-century connections between thinking about déjà vu and artistic creativity brings into focus a very different means of realizing Morris's end: neither by questing after the past, nor by submitting to its ghosts, but by kindling an uncanny aura of pastness that blurs the lines between known and unknown, past and present, recovery and discovery.

Four years after his death, among the "Sentences and Notes" (510) assembled for the first collected edition of his works, we find the most explicit evidence of Rossetti's investment in the poetics of déjà vu: "poetry should seem to the hearer to have been always present to his

thought, but never before heard" ("Sentences and Notes" 511). If this posthumous tenet recalls Hake's 1870 review, it also anticipates the 1888 testimony of one of Hughlings Jackson's most articulate patients, "Dr Z," who recorded experiencing the dreamy state when "reading poetry aloud—the line I am reading or just going to read seems somehow familiar . . . though I may never have seen or heard it before" ("Intellectual Aura" 203).[17] Perhaps Dr Z had been reading Rossetti.

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**NOTES**

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1. Johnson: "The *Church-yard* abounds with images which find a mirrour in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo. The four stanzas beginning 'Yet even these bones,' are to me original: I have never seen the notions in any other place; yet he that reads them here, persuades himself that he has always felt them" (1471). Keats: "I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity—it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance" (238). Emerson: "In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty" (27).

2. In a series of fine readings, Elizabeth Helsinger has drawn attention to Rossetti's interest in "the vicissitudes of involuntary memory" (219). This essay seeks to expand Helsinger's exploration of memory's "estrangements or deformations" of "time and space", and to provide a new conceptual and historical framework for approaching them (219).

3. Rossetti's brother, William Michael Rossetti, pronounced him "anti-scientific to the marrow" ("Preface" xxi). William Holman Hunt, convinced that science was "of the greatest poetic and pictorial importance for modern art" (104), cast himself in explicit opposition to Rossetti, who, in Hunt's words, "despised such inquiries" (105).

4. The term "dreamy state" was coined in 1876 by John Hughlings Jackson, who associated it with incipient epilepsy.

5. See Boirac. For the early history of research into déjà vu, see Brown; Vrettos.

6. See Scott, 244; Dickens, 483; Coleridge, 273. In the Preface to his edition of his brother's works, William Michael Rossetti confided that "in the long run he perhaps enjoyed and revered Coleridge beyond any poet whatsoever" ("Preface" xxvi).

7. See Pickford.

8. Modern research points to a strong positive correlation with education, and one of the most substantial studies, by V. M. Neppe (1983), identified reading as one of the three main triggers for déjà vu, narrowly behind place and encounter; see Brown, 47.

9. See the OED's entry for "monument".

10. For a discussion of how control features in nineteenth-century accounts of memory, see Shuttleworth.

11. Bergson cites Henri Piéron, Carl Anjel, André Lalande, François-Léon Arnaud, Ludovic Dugas, Auguste Micaël Lemaître, Théodule-Armand Ribot, and Frederic W. H. Myers (114–15). The German physician Julius Jensen suggested in 1868 that déjà vu could be due to the

failure of co-operation between the brain's two hemispheres in perception; for more on Jensen, see Harrington, 121.

12. See Rand.

13. As Dallas put it in *The Gay Science* (1866), imagination was "but another name for . . . the unknown and automatic life of the mind" (251). In 1870, Rossetti referred to Dallas as "an old intimate acquaintance of mine" ("Letter to Joseph Knight," 462).

14. See *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer*, 244.

15. See Peacock, 153.

16. See Cassin, 5–6.

17. These lines are from the final, 1881 text as reprinted in McGann's edition.

18. "Dr Z" has been identified as the physician Alfred Thomas Meyers; see Critchley and Critchley, 69.

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