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# ‘All green things’: Christina Rossetti’s Franciscan ecology

di *Emma Mason*

As the case stands our study of ‘all green things’ may fitly become a study of beauty and pleasure, an exercise of thankfulness.<sup>1</sup>

Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs<sup>2</sup>

Christina Rossetti’s praise of ‘all green things’ in her 1879 exploration of the Benedicite, *Seek and Find* (1879), constitutes a radically ecological vision of creation. Not only is this vision ‘Franciscan’, indebted to a nineteenth-century reimagining of Francis of Assisi and the writings it was assumed he authored; it also implies a continuum between both religion and ecology, and grace and nature. For Rossetti, grace constitutes a mode of perception that takes believers beyond the physical – ‘things of sense’ – and ‘openeth to us a more excellent way’ in which they feel themselves to be one with Christ<sup>3</sup>. Her prevenient reading of grace assumes that it is freely given by God and that creation originates in it, but also infers that it only continues to function through the participation of things with it. Grace thus gathers the universe into a ‘divinely effected corporate life’ in which distinctions are dissolved and all

<sup>1</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies on the Benedicite* (London & Brighton: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1879), pp. 96-97.

<sup>2</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Creatures*, in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, 4 vols (New York: New City Press, 1999), I, pp. 113-114.

<sup>3</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Called to Be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied* (London & Brighton: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1881), p. 28.

things are called to come into themselves by belonging together<sup>4</sup>. Rossetti finds a model for this integrative and relational engagement with grace in 'all green things', the same plants, flowers, fruits and herbs Francis celebrated in his 'Canticle of the Creatures'. Rossetti's praise of attention to 'the whole vegetable creation' is key to her ecological vision, one that offers a Christian politics of interconnected life as a possible answer to the condition of modernity<sup>5</sup>. Like Pope Francis' recent encyclical letter, 'Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home' (2015), which also begins with a quotation from Francis' 'Canticle', Rossetti's writing promotes a religious ecology of harmony and interdependence that is directly contradicted by the inequality and uneven development that structured nineteenth-century Britain. The slow and patient growth of plants incarnates a restorative movement that offers an alternative to modernity by enabling habits of mind that move the believer closer to the divine. Plant life moves like grace, embodying a gradual and careful thinking that is 'grafted upon, not substituted for' nature. This 'green grace', I suggest, brings the visible and invisible, material and immaterial together in a participatory kinship cognate with Christianity<sup>6</sup>.

Rossetti's green grace is unusual because it works with both a Catholic sense of co-operation with supernatural grace, and an Anglican sense of the passive reception of grace. She is able to think grace in this way because of her affiliation to the Oxford Movement or Tractarianism, one that brings the Catholic and Anglican together to enact an Anglo-Catholic position on grace. In her reading, grace removes distinctions between elements in creation and brings into being a relational love that reconciles the usually differentiated notions of an immanent God and a transcendent God into a 'horizontal' or lateral transcendence. In this framework, the believer's relationship to God is a movement of spiritual cultivation and evolution in which things bend towards God like a plant towards light. Things come to image God when they are reworked into the divine image through their participa-

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith in Outline*, trans. D. M. Baillie (Edinburgh: W. F. Henderson, 1821), p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> For Rossetti's relationship to animals, see Emma Mason, *Whales and all that move in the waters: Christina Rossetti's ecology of grace*, in Wendy Parkins, ed., *Victorian Sustainability in Literature and Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (London & Brighton: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1883), p. 42; and see Adam Miller, *Badiou, Marion and St. Paul: Immanent Grace* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 3, 21.

tion with it, or as Rossetti argues, the divine is not creation, but rather creation images the divine: 'For if (as I have seen pointed out) God is not to be called like His creature, whose grace is simply typical, but that creature is like Him because expressive of His archetypal Attribute, it suggests itself that for every aspect of creation there must exist the corresponding Divine Archetype'<sup>7</sup>. All aspects of the created order are connected through this correspondent participation in God, and so are already graced. Like Samuel Taylor Coleridge's focus on 'all of animated nature' framed by a God whose energies materialize as 'Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze', Rossetti works with the adaptability and plasticity of all things under spiritual and material influence.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, she questions both the Augustinian perspective on grace as that which 'perfects' a fallen nature; and also the Pelagian revision in which all beings are created with grace and must continually reconnect to it through 'good' actions. While the former view dichotomizes human and divine, nature and supernature, by envisioning grace as an extrinsic healing power that comes from an unknown 'outside', the latter rests on the alarming and oppressive expectation that human life must conform to an impossible perfectibility. Her challenge to this is at once political in that it questions an Enlightenment, now neoliberal, belief in constant improvement; and also theological in its celebration of the inclusivity of grace.

Part one of this essay establishes Francis as a significant influence on Rossetti's reading of plant life as model of interconnected, patient and communal existence. In aligning her plant thinking with Francis, I challenge critics who dissociate the eighteenth and nineteenth-century renewal of interest in the physical world from innovative religious thinking and establish Rossetti's green grace alongside Coleridge's one life and Erasmus Darwin's vegetative energies.<sup>9</sup> Like Coleridge and Darwin, Rossetti works with a Christian language of kinship that refuses to break the religious from the ecological. Part two locates her interest in Francis within the broader context of nineteenth-century nat-

<sup>7</sup> Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> S.T. Coleridge, *The Eolian Harp* (1796; 1817), in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ll. 45-49.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ashton Nichol's statement that in his imagining of the 'one life', Coleridge offers 'a naturalized version of a divine force, but he is clearly not describing any version of the Judeo-Christian God', in *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbanatural Roosting* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 21.

ural theology, especially as it relates to a concurrent interest in botany prompted by Carl Linnaeus. Far from being enclosed in a distinct discipline of 'science', botany is widely explored by Christian writers and finds a wide audience as a result of the Anglo-Catholic revival of decorating church spaces with flowers and foliage. I introduce these themes through Michael Marder's 'plant thinking', a modern philosophical position based on the premise that plants 'think' in a non-cognitive and non-individualistic way, and so offer a model of green consciousness oriented towards communal and collective growth. I suggest that Rossetti's poetry enacts a Christianized plant thinking through Francis to imagine grace as re-associative and dynamic in a society marked by discontinuity and schism. As I discuss in part three, she does so by imagining the narrators of her poetry as individuals disconnected from grace in order to map their search for reintegration with it.

### *Franciscan Ecology*

Franciscan monasticism celebrates a fellowship model of being with nature, encouraging compassion for all created things, animal, vegetable and mineral. It neither favours a stewardship model of caring for the land that necessitates its provision of food and shelter for human beings; nor fetishizes the uniqueness of the human. Francis conceived of every creature as a reflection of God and so an expression of the spiritual in the world. Instead of a hierarchical and linear chain of being headed by the human, he conceives of a relational cosmology where the divine is received by all as renewing and sustainable. Rather than abstractly contemplate the possible structures or rationale of creation, which might consist exclusively of human beings pondering why God made them, Francis embraces a sense of religious awe that is felt by all beings, not just humans. Rivers and birds are asked to venerate God in his 'The Exhortation to the Praise of God', for example, and to do so through 'praise, glory, honour, and blessing'<sup>10</sup>. Francis was popular in the nineteenth century, a period eager to reconcile physical creation with religious belief. His tomb and relics, lost since the fifteenth century, were rediscovered during an archaeological dig in the basilica of Assisi in 1818, and Clare of Assisi's were found a few years later in

<sup>10</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Let Every Creature*, in *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 71.

1850. Visits to Assisi were integrated into the framework of The Grand Tour, and several new books on Francis fashioned him as a Romantic hero: as one 1852 study claimed, Francis ‘had only lived for the poor, who preached in their language’ and ‘was truly the father of painting, as well as of all eloquence, and all Italian poetry’<sup>11</sup>.

In Britain, Francis featured in many stained glass tributes to monastic history, and he was regarded as an advocate of kinship and solidarity with all of creation, especially the sick and poor. John Hart calls his reading of an interconnected creation a ‘sacramental commons’, where all elements of creation are visible sacraments of invisible grace<sup>12</sup>. Like many critics writing on Francis, Hart aligns the saint’s vision with that of William Blake. But Rossetti’s vision of creation is much nearer to Francis’ in its embrace of creation as a gathering of disparate beings in harmony, from birds, flowers, trees, shells, and snow to the sun, moon, wombats, crocodiles, ladybirds, and whales<sup>13</sup>. In his ‘The Canticle of Brother Sun’, for example, ‘Brother Sun, / who brings the day’, ‘Sister Moon and the stars’, ‘Brother Wind’, air and clouds, ‘Sister Water’, ‘Brother Fire’, and ‘Sister Mother Earth’ are all blessed components of one lived kingdom of God. For Francis, this kingdom then exists ‘in us by grace’, a dynamic Rossetti inherits by intimating the presence of grace through our participatory relationship with the rest of creation<sup>14</sup>. That he did so in poetic form increased his appeal for Tractarians like Rossetti, for whom poetry was a privileged means of communication with and about God<sup>15</sup>.

Rossetti’s reception of Francis is particularly distinctive both because of her relationship with Anglo-Catholicism and her proficiency in Italian language and culture. Her father, Gabriele Pasquale Gi-

<sup>11</sup> André Vauchez, *Francis of Assisi: The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval Saint*, trans. Michael F. Cusato (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Blake perceives creation as human-shaped. Looking across the sea at Felpham, for example, the narrator of Blake’s ‘To Thomas Butts’ (1800) sees ‘The light of the morning / Heaven’s mountains adorning: / In particles bright, / The jewels of light / Distinct shone and clear. / Amaz’d and in fear / I each particle gazèd, / Astonished, amazèd; / For each was a Man / Human-form’d’, ll. 13-22, in William Blake, *Selected Poems*, ed. G. E. Bentley (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Prayers of St Francis*, in *The Writings of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Paschal Robinson (1905), at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/wosf/wosf18.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Jame Schaefer describes Francis’ writings as ‘poetic calls’, in *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), p. 105.

useppe Rossetti, a professor of Italian at King's College, London, was a recognized Dante scholar, and all three of her siblings, Dante Gabriel, William Michael, and Maria, wrote in and about Italian literature. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with its brief life of Francis as a 'sun born to light the world' was regular reading for the whole family, and was translated into English by Dante Gabriel and explicated for students by Maria in her essay on the text for beginners<sup>16</sup>. Dante Gabriel also included some of Francis' work in his collection of Italian poetry, *The Early Italian Poets* (1861); and Rossetti read of and about him in the Franciscan Bianco Noe's 1566 chronicles of his pilgrimage from the Holy Land to Assisi<sup>17</sup>. Later in the period, a reviewer for *The Liberal Review* even compared one of the most popular nineteenth-century primers of Francis' work, A. G. Ferrers Howell's *Franciscan Days*, to Rossetti's book of prayers, *Annus Domini*<sup>18</sup>.

Francis' name and those writings associated with him appeared in many Tractarian pamphlets and sermons too: an 1864 article on John Henry Newman in *The Saturday Review* compares Newman's reforming mind to Francis'; and Rossetti's confidant, Richard Frederick Littledale, commends the saint's 'reforming zeal' in an article on the lacklustre English clergy<sup>19</sup>. According to William Holman Hunt, Francis also 'kindled the spiritual life' of art within the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Edward Burne-Jones, friend to all the Rossetti siblings, publicly associated himself with Francis by claiming 'Birmingham is my city . . . but in reality Assisi is my birthplace'<sup>20</sup>. Burne-Jones' panel of four saints in the East Window of Holy Trinity Church, Chelsea, not only figures Francis as patience, but also anticipates his 'Memorial Panels to Christina Rossetti' (1897-99) designed with Thomas Rooke following

<sup>16</sup> See Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994); Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradiso*, trans. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin, 2007), canto XI, 49.

<sup>17</sup> Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Early Italian Poets From Ciullo D'Alcamo to Dante Alighieri (1100-1200-1300)* (Smith, Elder, and Co., 1861), pp. 18-19, <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/1-1861.fitz.rad.html>; and see W. E. Fredeman, *Books from the Libraries of Christina, Dante Gabriel, and William Michael Rossetti* (London: Bertram Rota, 1973).

<sup>18</sup> GNIPE, *Splendid Aliens, The Speaker: The Liberal Review*, 15.372 (November 17, 1906), 211.

<sup>19</sup> Anon., 'Dr. Newman's Religious Autobiography', *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, Jun 25 (1864), pp. 785-787 (p. 786); R.F. Littledale, *The Professional Studies of the English Clergy*, in *The Contemporary Review*, April (1879), pp. 1-36 (p. 31).

<sup>20</sup> William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* [1904-5] (Boston: E. P. Dutton, 1914), p. 376; Fiona MacCarthy, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 24, 233.

her death in 1894<sup>21</sup>. Significantly, both Burne-Jones' Francis and his panel for Rossetti are framed by foliage, the latter portraying the four evangelists all drawing or painting next to the central figure of Christ, whose arms are folded over a Eucharistic chalice. The identification between Francis, Rossetti and vegetation in Burne-Jones' work is not only suggestive of a shared ecology, but is also a reminder of the influence of John Ruskin, who famously commanded artists to 'go to Nature' and came to call himself a 'brother' of the saint's order while studying his life in Italy<sup>22</sup>.

Direct references to Francis in Rossetti's writing, however, are difficult to establish, most likely because she hides or 'reserves' them due to the saint's strong association with Roman Catholicism. While Rossetti was not anti-Catholic, as her sonnet to the converted John Henry Newman attests, her father was profoundly hostile towards all things papist following his exile from Italy because of his criticism of the faith. She would also have been aware of the cultural anxiety that Tractarianism was a form of back-door Romanising, having already been suspected of Catholicism because of her friendships with James Collinson (whose depiction of Christ in his poem 'The Child Jesus' appears to be modelled on Francis) and W. J. E. Bennett (who was removed from his cure at St Barnabus in Pimlico following anti-ritualist riots because of his assumed Romanism). Even if she had been willing to confront the critical storm surrounding the assumed Romanism of Pre-Raphaelite sacred symbolism, her faith commanded her to hold back her religious beliefs and reflection from those not yet ready for their message while simultaneously leaving them accessible to those wishing to meditate on them. Many prominent Oxford Movement writers, including Newman, John Keble and Isaac Williams, advocated the 'doctrine of reserve' while endorsing poetry as an appropriately oblique formal expression of religious ideas and beliefs. As Keble argued: 'Poetry is the indirect expression in words, most appropriately in metrical words, of some overpowering emotion, or ruling taste, or feeling, the direct indulgence whereof is somehow repressed'<sup>23</sup>. The statement parallels Williams'

<sup>21</sup> The panels remain on display in All Saints Church, Margaret Street, London, which once housed the Anglican convent to which Rossetti's sister, Maria, belonged.

<sup>22</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters: Volume I*, in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903), III, p. 415; E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 'Introduction', to *The Works of John Ruskin*, XXIII, xlvi-xlvii; John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*, in Cook and Wedderburn, ed., *Works*, XXVII-XXIX, p. 86.

<sup>23</sup> John Keble, *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott by J. H. Lockhart*, in *British Critic*

description of poetry as protective 'of all sacred and virtuous principle' like 'the bloom which indicates life and freshness'<sup>24</sup>. Keble's 'somehow' and Williams' 'indicates' are both plant-like, neither revealing or completely hiding their complexity and being. Reserve is to poetry what vitality is to the plant, apparently invisible but wholly present through the 'bloom' it shows to the world. Like reserve, the bloom hides the bud it emerges from to obscure its origins even as it attracts attention.

It is possible, then, that Rossetti reserved her reading of Francis and his dynamic model of grace, presenting both as 'absent', but in so doing alerting the faithful reader to their presence<sup>25</sup>. An example of this method is apparent in her poem 'Good Friday', its Franciscan allusions hidden to some, but noted by the Anglo-Catholic, later Roman Catholic editor, Orby Shipley, who included it in his anthology of ancient and medieval hymns, *Lyra Messianica* (1864). Shipley positions Rossetti's poem in a section devoted to The Passion that opens with a Franciscan hymn<sup>26</sup>. As Elizabeth Ludlow argues, the positioning of the two Good Friday poems puts Rossetti 'into dialogue with ancient and medieval meditations', such as Francis' synergizing grace<sup>27</sup>. The movement of grace is tracked in the poem by the narrator's transition from despair in its absence to a hope in its presence. No longer a stone outside of Christ's fold, the narrator is now part of the Shepherd's sheepfold, a transition from isolation to solace registered in a formal shift from the indented middle lines of verse one to the ballad form of verse four:

«Am I a stone and not a sheep  
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy Cross,  
To number drop by drop Thy Blood's slow loss,  
And yet not weep? ...

Yet give not o'er,

(1838), in John Keble, *Occasional Papers and Reviews* (Oxford and London: James Parker and Co, 1877), p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Isaac Williams, *Tract 80: On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge*, in Emma Mason and Jonathan Herapath, ed., *Nineteenth-Century Poetry: Criticism and Debates* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 314.

<sup>25</sup> W. David Shaw argues the same about her treatment of empathy, 1981. There is a possibility that 'A Song for the Least of All Saints' at the end of the 'Feasts and Fasts' section of Rossetti's *Verses* is about Francis, coming just after poems on St Bartholomew and St Michael, whose feast days come before Francis (October 4).

<sup>26</sup> The section opens with the hymn writer Archer Gurney's own 'Good Friday' poem, composed by Jacopone da Todi, but often mistakenly thought to have been written by Francis.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Ludlow, *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 109.

But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;  
 Greater than Moses, turn and look once more  
 And smite a rock».

The presence of grace is finally disclosed in a moment of interconnect-  
 edness between those who grieve at Christ's death: the Sun and Moon  
 weep beside the executed thief (ll. 8-9), as well as Mary, Mary's sister,  
 Mary Magdalene and Peter (ll. 5-7). The reference to the Sun and Moon  
 is also connective, setting Francis' Cantic of Brother Sun alongside  
 Old Testament references to Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my Shepherd', and  
 Exodus 17. 6, where Moses draws water out of Mount Horeb for his  
 people to drink. Mount Horeb, sometimes thought to be the same site  
 as Mount Sinai, is itself a reference to the sun, Horeb meaning glowing  
 or heat, where Sinai is linked to the word moon. While Rossetti's narra-  
 tor, like her assumed reader, is outside of the inclusive creation invoked  
 in the poem, by its close she is folded back into it by way of a resur-  
 rected Christ that gathers his sheep by providing for them – smiting a  
 rock so that they might drink. Her petition to endless grace – 'Yet give  
 not o'er' (l. 16) – a 'give' or gift that is never over or done – prefaces  
 Christ's re-appearance, no longer a bloody body but a 'true Shepherd  
 of the flock'.

Like Francis, Rossetti's belief that grace is one with creation is simul-  
 taneously a directive that ostensible distinctions between things are  
 fictions<sup>28</sup>. Those things that constitute the order of nature might be  
 different in certain ways, but they are not independent from the di-  
 vine economy to which they are all called. Rossetti draws on Paul to  
 perceive the orientation of things towards God as living 'under grace'  
 (Romans 6. 15): grace might well be already present, but it is only felt as  
 such through faith. For Paul, the transition from sin to faith is distinctly  
 human, a mental transformation that renews the mind and in doing so,  
 discloses our connectedness in creation, our 'being many' together:

«And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the  
 renewing of your mind . . . For as we have many members in one  
 body, and all members have not the same office: So we, *being* many,  
 are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another» (Ro-  
 mans 12. 2-5).

<sup>28</sup> See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1976), p. 101.

Paul's 'one body' enables Rossetti to envision interconnectedness in creation as well as to stress the impact of grace on thinking. Grace ushers in a renewing model of mind that awakens the believer to the unified, divine body. In *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies on the Benedicite* (1879), for example, Rossetti draws on Romans 8 to argue for a mode of holy thinking in which 'all things work together for good to them that love God'.<sup>29</sup> In her poem 'Leaf from leaf'<sup>30</sup> too, she unites the figure of Christ intrinsically with all of creation, even as she acknowledges the component parts that make up his body:

«Leaf from leaf Christ knows;  
Himself the Lily and the Rose:

Sheep from sheep Christ tells;  
Himself the Shepherd, no one else:

Star and star He names,  
Himself outblazing all their flames»

Christ 'knows' the uniqueness of every element of creation, able to recognize the disparate aspects of a single leaf, sheep or star, even as he identifies himself as the unifying foundation of their formation. For he 'knows' himself to be a lily or rose even while he discerns the individual leaves that make up their being, just as he accepts his role as shepherd to the sheep and outshines the stars as an overseer of their multiplicity. Through his beingness in the many, Christ heightens the relevance of all elements as part of a world held buoyant in grace, a message Rossetti echoes in the form of her poem. Even as her short, two-line stanzas appear disparate and fragmented, her punctuation constantly gestures towards connection with the following line, enacting the Christ-like dialectic between parts and the whole.

### *Theological Botanizing*

If grace initiates all things and so triggers a cosmic expansion 'without end', to echo the Gloria Patri, then plants embody such infinity,

<sup>29</sup> Rossetti, *Seek and Find*, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> Christina Rossetti, *Leaf from leaf*, first published in *A Pageant and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1881), in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti: A Variorum Edition*, ed. R. W. Crump, 3 vol. (Baton Rouge and London: 1979, 1986, 1990), II, p. 193.

a life-form that open-ently extends outwards without closure. Plant life makes up over 99% of organic material on earth, but presents a challenge to human understanding because of its apparent lack of subjectivity or transcendental meaning. As Aquinas noted, ‘life in plants is hidden’, their variety, modes of communication and forms of action as challenging to phenomenology as to human being<sup>31</sup>. Slime mould, for example, remembers previously taken pathways despite the absence of identifiable memory cells; while trees use fungi like ‘an organic internet’ to warn other trees of aphid attacks<sup>32</sup>. Locked in western metaphysics, however, plant life is understood to be incapable of ‘succeeding’ in anything, and as such, essentially inferior to animal life. For Hegel, the ability of plants to adapt to environment undermined his bigger picture of progress towards absolute spirit, one in which all phenomena are reintegrated. Despite networks of semi-independent tissues, cellulose and structures like roots, stems and leaves, Hegel considered plant-life insentient, immobile and without self<sup>33</sup>. The supposed passivity and incomplete being of the plant not only negated it in relation to animal vitality, but also associated plants with women and specific populations he argued received too much sunligh<sup>34</sup>. As Michael Marder argues, Hegel’s dialectics is inherently problematic for thinking about plants because of the way it understands difference as opposition and then ‘devalorizes’ formations – such as the vegetal – that ‘escape’ the ‘sweeping theoretical move’ of ‘spirit’. This association of withdrawal and failure might also account for Hegel’s reading of Jesus as ‘a sensitive plant, he withdraws into himself when touched’<sup>35</sup>. Hegel reads Jesus this way because his purity and virtue seem to separate him and the community he represents from reality<sup>36</sup>. But Jesus might also be ‘like’ a plant be-

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, in Anton C. Pegis, ed., *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas: Volume One* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1997), p. 652; Michael Marder, *Of Plants and Other Secrets*, in *Societies*, 3 (2013), 16-23 (18).

<sup>32</sup> Dominic Pettman, *The Noble Cabbage: Michael Marder’s “Plant-Thinking”*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 28, 2013, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/the-noble-cabbage-michael-marders-plant-thinking>

<sup>33</sup> See G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Nature: Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences (1830)*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>34</sup> Michael Marder, *The Philosopher’s Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 164; and see Michael Marder, *The Life of Plants and the Limits of Empathy*, in *Dialogue*, 51. 2 (2012), 259-273 (p. 270).

<sup>35</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate (1799-1800)*, quoted in James Yerkes, *The Christology of Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 37.

<sup>36</sup> Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 215; Yerkes, *Christology of Hegel*, p. 36.

cause of his association with those without apparent subjectivity, such as the vulnerable and dehumanized. Occupying a position of forgiveness and acceptance in the Gospels, Jesus relates to others 'without' thought, just like the plant, both able to respond to others through relationship rather than self.

Marder draws attention to plant thinking 'without thinking' by stating that the plant unceasingly reproduces for its species rather than for itself and so replaces the ego-bound 'I think' with a holistic and participatory immanence<sup>37</sup>. He writes that the 'vegetal *it thinks* does not answer the question, "Who or what does the thinking?" but, "When and where does thinking happen?"', so keeping close to the ground, to existence, to the immanence of what is "here below"<sup>38</sup>. The plant is both embedded and on the move, rooted in its spatial and physical environment but also full of memories of physical stimuli such as touch, darkness, and light<sup>39</sup>. Like the plant, Jesus also responds to his immediate environment, taking care to attend to particular people and places through his tactile relationship with those he blesses and heals. Where Hegel suggests that he tragically falls away from reality like a sensitive plant, his incarnated embodiment of the divine and human makes the transcendent God accessible for a material world. In uniting the divine and human, Jesus is anchored, not in the limited metaphysics of the anthropic, but in a biosystem made up of multiple readings of time, being and thinking. He is, then, like the plant, but not in the negative way Hegel posits. Jesus is like a plant because he embodies a 'spiritual cultivation' and connects across species to all things in a rhizomatic or horizontal movement that refuses to hierarchize existence<sup>40</sup>. Like the plant too, he embodies a beingness that is incomplete without others (the plant is a composite of its matter as well as light, water, soil) and so questions human-drawn boundaries between things. As a connective, horizontal force, Jesus is also akin to grace, a movement without end that approaches existence in a way that is actual in its moment. While Christianity might be eschatologically geared towards last things, Jesus' immortal promise negates the reach towards an objective or goal and is

<sup>37</sup> See Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 491.

<sup>38</sup> Marder, *What is Plant-Thinking?*, *Kl sis: Revue Philosophique*, 25, 2013, pp. 124-143 (p. 138).

<sup>39</sup> Marder, *What is Plant-Thinking?*, p. 130

<sup>40</sup> See Michael C. Kalton, *Green Spirituality: Horizontal Transcendence*, in Melvin E. Miller and P. Young-Eisendrath, eds., *Paths of Integrity, Wisdom and Transcendence: Spiritual Development in the Mature Self* (London: Routledge, 2000).

instead vital, evolving and propagative.

This notion of ‘ceaseless change’ is inherent to Erasmus Darwin’s reading of ‘nature’, where ‘restless atoms’ move ‘From life to life’ and ‘man’ encouraged to ‘eye with tenderness all living forms, / His brother-emmetts and his sister worms’<sup>41</sup>. In celebrating the proto-evolutionary message of the poem, commentators have overlooked the Franciscan echo in the extract’s last two lines. Darwin’s ‘brother-emmetts’ and ‘sister-worms’ recall both the ‘brother sun’ and ‘sister moon’ of Francis’ ‘Canticle of the Creatures’, as well as his alleged reference to addressing ‘all creatures by the name of brother . . . Even toward little worms he glowed with exceeding love’<sup>42</sup>. This disregard for Francis’ poetics is concurrent with a tendency in modern criticism to portray the nineteenth century as the pinnacle of science’s departure from theology, often epitomized in the figure of Charles Darwin. But for many eighteenth and nineteenth-century scientists, the objective of studying the natural world was to glorify God by learning about creation, variously referred to as the second ‘Book of Scripture’ or ‘Book of Nature’<sup>43</sup>. Many naturalists responded to Carl Linnæus’ famous sexual reading of plants in his *Systema naturæ* (1735) and *Dissertation on the sexes of plants* (1759) by asking how God was involved, rather than assuming his absence. Supporters of Linnæus like the Bishop of Carlisle, Samuel Goodenough, typically modified the sexual language of the classification system to shelter readers from offence, and not because it implied any particular challenge to God. Where such a challenge was made, it was on the basis that Linnæus’ classification system hierarchized creation in a manner inconsistent with a benevolent God. The Unitarian physician Thomas Percival, for example, saw in creation ‘the greatest possible sum of happiness’ driven by a ‘life force’ by which plants can feel sensation and move towards light and push down into the earth (phenomena later known as heliotropism and geotropism)<sup>44</sup>. This vi-

<sup>41</sup> Erasmus Darwin, *The Temple of Nature; or, The origin of society. A poem, with Philosophical Notes* (London: J. Johnson, 1803), IV, 419-28, [http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/darwin\\_temple/canto4/canto4.html](http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/darwin_temple/canto4/canto4.html)

<sup>42</sup> Francis of Assisi, *Canticle of the Creatures*, in *Early Documents I*, pp. 113-114; Francis of Assisi, *La letteratura francescana*, vol. 2: *Le vite antiche di san Francesco*, ed. C. Leonardi (Milan: Fondazione Valla-Mondadori, 2005), in Giorgio Agamben, *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 111.

<sup>43</sup> Susannah Gibson, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: How Eighteenth-Century Science Disrupted the Natural Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Percival, *Speculations on the perceptive power of vegetables* (1785), in Gibson,

talist account of plants, wherein they shared the 'spirit' or spark that distinguished living things from other matter, underpinned the idea of the 'vegetable soul', a life principle that allows for growth, regeneration and nutrition and serves as a 'point of axis' around which plant life revolves<sup>45</sup>.

The vegetable or plant soul was initially considered the lowest kind of soul, relegated under the sensitive soul of animals and the rational soul of human beings. By the late eighteenth century, however, this hierarchy was interrogated by vitalist readings of plant sensation, which in turn triggered generic questions about the 'natural' order of the world and God's overseeing of it<sup>46</sup>. Many scientists agreed with William Paley's watchmaker analogy, which implied a benevolent designer who had created objects perfectly adapted for purpose within a balanced and harmonious order<sup>47</sup>. Humphrey Davy, for example, claimed that the objective of chemical philosophy is the application of 'natural substances to new uses, for increasing the comforts and enjoyments of man, and the demonstration of the order, harmony, and intelligent design of the system of the earth'<sup>48</sup>. Design arguments were also compatible with natural theology to the extent that both promoted a sociability based on affective bonds between things, an 'organic assurance of connection' that made sense as rhetoric, if not always as reason<sup>49</sup>. The validity of such arguments was tested as much by Darwinian theories of biological creation, mutation and natural selection as by discoveries like oxidation, thermodynamics, light waves and electrons. Evolution itself had long been established by Erasmus Darwin in *The Loves of the Plants* (1789), republished as *The Botanic Garden*, and also *The Temple of Nature* (1803), the initial title of which – *The Origin of Society* – foreshadows his grandson's later *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Like Linnæus, Darwin was denounced for ascribing emotion, intention, pleasure and sexuality to plants, claims that implied a connection between humans and vegetal life that embraced all of creation. Darwin's vision of the world as a connected biotic realm was also held

*Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, p. 161.

<sup>45</sup> Franz Julius Ferdinand Meyen, *A Report on the Progress of Vegetable Physiology during the year 1837*, trans. William Francis (London: R. & J. E. Taylor, 1839), p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Gibson, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, p. 178.

<sup>47</sup> William Paley, *Natural Theology* [1802] (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008).

<sup>48</sup> Humphrey Davy, *Elements of the Chemical Philosophy* (London: Johnson and Co., 1812).

<sup>49</sup> Colin Jager, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 59, 81.

together by a 'sum' happiness guaranteed by the relationships between things: life composes, decomposes and recomposes<sup>50</sup>. As the basic materials of life move through this shared process, they are joined in what Darwin called a 'system of morality and benevolence, as all creatures thus became related to each other'<sup>51</sup>. This connectedness served to collapse distinctions, not only between plants and animals, but also life and non-life, forming the basis of a post-Copernican 'peaceable kingdom' in which organic unity replaced the Great Chain of Being<sup>52</sup>.

The idea of an organic unity connecting all things was as essential to Romanticism as it was botany; Coleridge's 'one Life' and Wordsworth's 'motion and a spirit' both invoke a poetics of ecology that would later influence Rossetti. The notion of a constantly transforming ecosystem culminated in the concept of mutable species, a concept many clergy found compatible with their own thoughts about butterflies, animal souls, astronomy, botany, snow, marine life, forestry, conchology and even extra-terrestrial life<sup>53</sup>. Clergy-naturalists such as Francis Orpen Morris, Charles Alexander Johns, Thomas W. Webb, Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, Charles Kingsley, William Houghton and George Henslow published widely on evolution, and while their reactions to Darwin differed, they shared a belief in nature as the loving work of God. As Johns argued in *The Forest Trees of Britain* (1869), the 'trained' eye can find 'being' in the smallest details of 'hedges and by-ways', details denoted by scientific terminology but cared for by God<sup>54</sup>. In *The Theory of Evolution of Living Things* (1873), for example, George Henslow suggested that the theory of evolution strengthened Paley's design argument and that God had 'adopted Evolution as the method by which He chose to bring about the existence of successive orders of beings until Man appeared upon the scene of Life'<sup>55</sup>. 'Variations' in 'successive generations' could thus be folded into a 'doctrine' of evolution and natural selection, an approach exemplified by

<sup>50</sup> See Ashton Nichols, *The Love of Plants and Animals: Romantic Science and the Pleasures of Nature*, in *Romanticism and Ecology, Romantic Circles* (2001), <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/ecology/index.html>

<sup>51</sup> Darwin, *The Temple of Nature*, p. 192, in Nichols, *The Love of Plants*.

<sup>52</sup> *The Peaceable Kingdom* is an 1826 painting by the Quaker artist, Edward Hicks.

<sup>53</sup> See Bernard Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers of Science: Designing Nature for New Audiences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>54</sup> C.A. Johns, *The Forest Trees of Britain*, 2 vol. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1869), I, p. ix; and see Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers*, p. 56.

<sup>55</sup> George Henslow, *The Theory of Evolution of Living Things and the Application of the Principles of Evolution to Religion Considered as Illustrative of the "Wisdom and Beneficence of the Almighty"* (London: Macmillan, 1873), x-xi.

Henslow in his identification of 120 plants in Palestine, *Plants of the Bible* (1896)<sup>56</sup>. Many writers shared Henslow's focus on plant-life as a way of communicating what Charles Kingsley called 'Divine thought': titles like Richard Phillips' *The Young Botanists* (1810), Peter Parley's *Tales About Plants* (1839), Johns' *Botanical Rambles* (1846), John Hutton Balfour's *Phyto-Theology* (1851), Kingsley's *Earth Lore for Children* (1870) and Henslow's other works on plants, *Botany for Children* (1880), *The Origin of Floral Structures* (1888) and *How to Study Wild Flowers* (1896) are only examples of the magnitude of religiously-motivated texts on botany in the period<sup>57</sup>.

Modern critics sometimes overplay the extent to which these ideas impacted on religious belief. John Holmes, for example, writes in his otherwise excellent study, *Darwin's Bards*, that Rossetti 'saw Darwinism as a threat to be faced down through an affirmation of the incarnation of Christ and the truth of the revealed word' in a 'strategy' of 'denial' rather than 'engagement'<sup>58</sup>. Yet evolution arguably affirmed Rossetti's green reading of religion, and she joined the clergy in addressing scientific discourse through natural history. Her own contribution to the field, *Young Plants and Polished Corners* (1876), is at once a theological and botanical text, and is evidently influenced by texts like Phillips' *The Young Botanist* and Parley's *Tales About Plants* and *Illustrations of the Vegetable Kingdom*, both of which she owned; as well as Elizabeth Steele Perkins' *Elements of Drawing and Flower Painting* (1834), which she shared with Maria<sup>59</sup>. Later titled *Called to Be Saints*, Rossetti's 'de-

<sup>56</sup> Lightman, *Victorian Popularizers*, pp. 91-92; George Henslow, *Plants of Bible* (London: Religious Tract Society, n.d.).

<sup>57</sup> Charles Kingsley, *The Water Babies and Glaucus* (London: Dent, 1863), pp. 238-242; Richard Phillips, *The Young Botanists; in Thirteen Dialogues, with Twelve Coloured Engravings* (London: Richard Phillips, 1810); Peter Parley, *Tales About Plants, with numerous engravings* (London: Thomas Tegg, 1839); C.A. Johns, *Botanical Rambles* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1846); John Hutton Balfour, *Phyto-theology; or, Botanical Sketches intended to illustrate the works of God in the structure, functions, and general distribution of plants* (London and Edinburgh:

Johnstone and Hunter, 1851); Charles Kingsley, *Madam How and Lady Why; or, First Lessons in Earth Lore for Children* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1870); George Henslow, *Botany for Children: An Illustrated Elementary Text-Book for Junior Classes and Young Children* (London: Edward Stanford, 1880); George Henslow, *The Origin of Floral Structures through Insect and Other Agencies* (New York: D. Appleton, 1888); George Henslow, *How to Study Wild Flowers* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1896).

<sup>58</sup> John Holmes, *Darwin's Bards: British and American Poetry in the Age of Evolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 23.

<sup>59</sup> Many thanks to Diane D'Amico for generously sharing with me an entry from an 1896 catalogue of the Rossettis' books, auctioned by J. and L. M. Tregaskis, listing *The Young Botanist*, with inscriptions indicating that it first belonged to John Polidori, then Frances, then

votional reading-book for the red-letter Saints' Days' works through the minor festivals of the Church Calendar by bringing together sacred text, prayer, hagiography and a flower chosen from those in bloom on the relevant feast day, but retains enough detail to pass as botany on first glance<sup>60</sup>. As Gisela Hönnighausen and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra note, her references to flowers and plants work within a system of correspondences and emblems, in which, as Rossetti states, 'every aspect of creation' corresponds to an existing 'Divine Archetype'<sup>61</sup>. The interdependence of image and text in *Called to Be Saints* locates it with a seventeenth-century emblem book tradition that the Oxford Movement looked back to as an ideal way of communicating theological principle to their laity<sup>62</sup>. But it is also part of a green reading of grace in which all things correspond, an idea central to Tractarian aesthetics as well as ritual.

Tractarianism enthusiastically endorsed church decoration including the use of foliage and flowers in windows and on the communion table. Rossetti's own place of worship, Christ Church, Albany Street, which she attended from 1843, had been commissioned and built specifically for Tractarian worship, and its first incumbent, William Dodsworth, regularly placed flowers and candles on the altar<sup>63</sup>. Critics concerned that Tractarianism was a disguised Romanism worried about the pagan associations of flowers, while also emphasising their gendered meaning. As a result, priests practising vegetal decoration were branded either effeminate or sexual oppressors intent on using flowers to seduce and coerce female parishioners away from their families and into sisterhoods. As Dominic Janes argues, plant and flower decoration was profoundly political in the period, reflecting those doctrinal changes implemented by the Catholic revival in Anglicanism. Those who deco-

Charlotte Polidori, then Christina Rossetti; and see Mary Arseneau and D. M. R. Bentley, 'Peter Parley and the Rossettis', *English Language Notes*, 31. 1 (1993), 56-60; and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti and Illustration: A Publishing History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), p. 155.

<sup>60</sup> Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti*, pp. 143-144.

<sup>61</sup> Gisela Hönnighausen, *Emblematic Tendencies in the Works of Christina Rossetti, Victorian Poetry*, 10. 1 (1972), 1-15 (2); and Kooistra, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 148; Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit*, p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> Rossetti looks back to a text like Francis Quarles' *Emblems, Divine and Moral* (1624), as well as sideways to generic anthologies like *Sacred Emblems, with Miscellaneous Pieces, Moral, Religious and Devotional in Verse* (London, 1828) and specifically Tractarian texts like Isaac Williams' *The Baptistery* (Oxford, 1842) and *The Altar; or Meditations in Verse on the Great Christian Sacrifice* (London, 1847).

<sup>63</sup> See H.W. Burrows, *The Half-Century of Christ Church, Albany Street, St. Pancras* (London: Skeffington and Son, 1887).

rated their churches were thus open to critique by their presiding bishops. Charles James Blomfield, Bishop of London and overseer of the Catholic revival in London, which included Rossetti's church, warned priests not to overdo floral ornamentation for fear of 'Catholicising'<sup>64</sup>. His anxiety was particularly addressed to the Tractarian Frederick Oakley, incumbent of Margaret Chapel, London, whose parishioners opposed his introduction of plants, flowers and chapel furnishings. Oakley ultimately converted to Roman Catholicism, writing a guide to church flowers called *The Catholic Florist* (1851)<sup>65</sup>. His conversion put many Anglicans on guard against floral decoration, for which several priests were prosecuted. In 1847, for example, the Bishop of Exeter, Henry Phillpotts, ruled against William Parks Smith for 'illegally' placing vases of flowers and a cross covered with flowers on the altar at St John's Chapel, Torquay, on Easter Sunday<sup>66</sup>. Six years later, the churchwarden of St Paul's Knightsbridge, Charles Westerton, accused the incumbent Robert Liddell of using evergreens to 'veil' the church; and in 1869, the Ecclesiastical Court brought a case against John Purchas of St James, Brighton, author of a handbook of Anglo-Catholic ritual and decoration, for using flowers in worship<sup>67</sup>. As Janes argues, Liddell's victory over Westerton established a precedent that led to Purchas' exoneration and the legality of decoration in churches<sup>68</sup>.

<sup>64</sup> Nigel Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain, 1830-1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 180.

<sup>65</sup> Frederick Oakeley, *The Catholic Florist: A Guide to the Cultivation of Flowers for the Altar* (London: Richardson, 1851).

<sup>66</sup> Dominic Janes, *The Catholic Florist: Flowers and Deviance in the Mid-Nineteenth Century Church of England*, in *Visual Culture in Britain*, 12. 1 (2011), 77-96 (81); and see Anon., *The Western Luminary*, June 2, in *Christian Remembrancer*, 14 (1847), 113-23 (121) [reprinted from *The Western Luminary*, June 2 1847]; and George Oliphant, *The Law of Church Ornaments and Utensils, including Communion Tables, Vestures, Organs, Candles and Crosses* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851), pp. 91-4.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Westerton, *A Letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London, on the Popish Manner in which, Contrary to the Rubrics, Divine Service is Performed on Sunday Mornings at the Parish Church of St. Paul's, Wilton Place, Knightsbridge* (London: Charles Westerton, 1853), 9; Robert Liddell, *The Services and Furniture of St. Paul's, Knightsbridge: A Letter to the ... Bishop of London ... in reply to a Protest from one of the Churchwardens* [C. Westerton] (London, 1854), p. 10; Beverley Seaton, *The Language of Flowers: A History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), pp. 12-13; John Purchas, 'Directorium Anglicanum'; *Being a Manual of Directions for the Right Celebration of the Holy Communion, for the Saying of Matins and Evensong, and for the Performance of other Rights and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Ancient Uses of the Church of England* (London: Joseph Masters, 1858), pp. 204-205.

<sup>68</sup> Janes, *Catholic Florist*, p. 84; and see James Murray Dale, *Legal Ritual: The Judgments Delivered by the Privy Council and Dean of Arches, Sir Robert Phillimore, in the Recent Cases of Martin v. Mackonochie and Elphinstone v. Purchas, and Hebbert v. Purchas* (London: Effingham

Handbooks like Purchas' *Directorium Anglicanum* (1858) and W. A. Barrett's *Flowers and Festivals; or Directions for the Floral Decorations of Churches* (1868) were not only widely circulated among Tractarian clergy, but they also resulted in an increased demand for flowers. In an article on ceremonial flowers from 1880, Agnes Lambert comments on clergy and conventual sisters queuing as 'early as 4AM' at the entrance to the Covent Garden flower market to bid for flowers, since growers knew their profit would increase if they refused to 'book orders in advance'<sup>69</sup> Flowers and vegetal life became essential aspects of church life. Children's flowers services were instituted to teach correspondence to the young; foliage was wrapped around pews on Palm Sunday; and the nineteenth-century habit of sending flowers to the sick and poor was implemented on a large scale in the form of Flower Missions, in which boxes of flowers were sent by train to city centres for redistribution to the poor<sup>70</sup>.

The fashion for vegetal decoration was also encouraged by the gothic revival, or, as William Pettit Griffith ~~called~~ named it in 1852, the 'architectural botany' developed by A. W. N. Pugin<sup>71</sup>. In *Floriated Ornament* (1849), for example, Pugin discusses gathering leaves and thistles from which to copy, endorsing a 'medieval' style of decoration in which plants appeared to have been arranged on the space rather than illusorily fashioned for effect<sup>72</sup>. Barrett, however, argued beyond a flower aesthetic to declare that the first Christian Churches were 'built out of boughs' and floral decoration endorsed by the Church Fathers<sup>73</sup>. For him, plant life, especially his preferred evergreens, 'wreath' and 'adorn' the church with grace, 'pouring out in mute adoration' and serving as a 'counter spirit' to the discomfort of winter<sup>74</sup>. Barrett's 'counter spirit' is borrowed from Wordsworth's *Ecclesiastical Sketches*

Wilson, 1871).

<sup>69</sup> Agnes Lambert, *The Ceremonial Use of Flowers: A Sequel, The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 7. 39 (1880), pp. 808-27 (p. 815).

<sup>70</sup> Seaton, *Language of Flowers* p. 14; Janes, 'Catholic Florist', p. 78. On flower missions see, *Flower Services in Churches*, in *The Garden* 2 (June 1877), pp. 463-464; Constance O'Brien, *History of a Flower Mission*, in *The Garden*, 10 (March 1877), pp. 199-203; F.S. Stowell, *Flower Missions and Their Work*, in *Demorest's Magazine*, 18 (August 1892), pp. 381-389.

<sup>71</sup> Janes, *Catholic Florist*, p. 83; William Pettit Griffith, *Architectural Botany; Setting Forth the Geometrical Distribution of Foliage, Flowers, Fruit, etc* (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1852).

<sup>72</sup> See A.W.N. Pugin, *Floriated Ornament: A Series of Thirty-One Designs* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1849).

<sup>73</sup> W.A. Barrett, *Flowers and Festivals; or Directions for Floral Decoration of Churches* (London, Oxford and Cambridge: Rivingtons, 1868), pp. 5, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Barrett, *Flowers and Festivals*, p. 12.

where it signifies both greenery and the bird-life attracted to it: 'The counter spirit found in some gay church / Green with fresh holly, every pew a perch / In which the linnet or the thrush might sing'<sup>75</sup>. But Barrett also borrows Wordsworth's blurring of plant and bird life in his reference to Paul's 'every creature of God is good' to describe plants<sup>76</sup>. His evergreens, then, are creaturely and so defy simple taxonomic systems relied on to 'explain' the order of life.

Barrett's plant thinking posed a double threat. First, Barrett openly addressed his book to 'the wives and daughters of our parochial clergy', encouraging women to take responsibility for the sacred space of the church as well as the home. Women were already associated with botany, flowers and plant life, even though the sexual indecorum implied by Linnæus's promiscuous flora, and in many cases, the barrier of Latin, warned them away from vegetal studies<sup>77</sup>. Paley's seminal text, however, refuses the 'gendering of eighteenth-century botanical nomenclature', and so confirmed women's engagement with 'all areas of botanical production' from dissection and 'microscopic analysis' to 'botanical drawings and engravings'<sup>78</sup>. Like the clergy-naturalists discussed above, many religious women wrote about botany and plants, and Rossetti's mother, Frances, included *Natural Theology* in her *Common-place Book*, a text from which the Rossetti women read aloud together on a daily basis<sup>79</sup>. But as the domain of women and Tractarian priests alike, botany threatened to be reclassified as a lesser science.<sup>80</sup> Fears concerning the feminization of botany were deepened by the failure of taxonomic systems to explain and shepherd knowledge of plants, especially species readings like that offered by Barrett. His counter spirit evergreens defied a Linnæan system already under assault from ferns, fungi, mosses, algae that fell outside of the latter's classification system. As Theresa Kelley argues, Linnæus was forced to

<sup>75</sup> William Wordsworth, *Would that our scrupulous sires had dared to leave*, in *Ecclesiastical Sketches* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1822), ll. 10-12.

<sup>76</sup> Barrett, *Flowers and Festivals*, p. 23.

<sup>77</sup> See Theresa M. Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage: Botany and Romantic Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); C. M. Jackson-Houlston, "Queen Lilies"? *The Interpretation of Scientific, Religious and Gender Discourses in Victorian Representations of Plants*, in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11. 1 (2006), pp. 84-110; Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women, Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England 1760-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>78</sup> Jackson-Houlston, "Queen Lilies"?, p. 85; Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage*, p. 93.

<sup>79</sup> Frances Rossetti, *Common-place Book*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS.Facs.d.286.

<sup>80</sup> Jackson-Houlston states that between 1801-1900 women wrote 8% of published books on plants, but only 2% of those on birds, in "Queen Lilies"?, p. 87.

group these species as ‘cryptogamia’, or ‘clandestine marriage’, betraying the capacity of plants to defy ‘epistemic mastery’ while revealing the variety of a world beyond empirical organization<sup>81</sup>. The ‘invisible’ world of plants sustained the view that parts of the cosmos were present if unproven. As Goethe noted in *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790): ‘Nature has no system; she has – she is – life and development from an unknown centre towards an unknowable periphery’<sup>82</sup>.

### *Leafy Voices*

The mysterious movement of plants in both temporal terms (from stem to leaf to bud), and efflorescent ones (the appearance of flowers and fruit) suggests a form that flows, changes and moves. While plants might not migrate from one place to another, they do develop and grow through a process of metamorphosis and can even create new beings through replanted offcuts. Their ability to self-transfigure renders them ideal divine archetypes as Rossetti recognized in *Young Plants*, wherein each saint of the liturgical year is assigned a biographical note, prayer, passage from scripture, stone and flower. The format is not unlike the ‘Flowers and Plants Dedicated to Saints’ section of Barrett’s *Flowers and Festivals*, which confesses that while the connection between plants and saints may be derived from an association between ‘natural objects’ and ‘spiritual matters’ promoted by the Early Church, it is also underscored by ‘simple’ minded observers of which flowers are ‘in bloom at the times of the various festivals’<sup>83</sup>. While Barrett’s abbreviated entries note the correspondence between a flower and a saint accompanied by one or two literary quotations, Rossetti’s scholarly approach offers a considerable essay on the saint accompanied by a series of botanical drawings of plants and illuminated letters covered with foliage. Despite her focus on biography and the saints’ animal and stone connections, only the plant is accompanied by an image and her discussion of it becomes the apex of every chapter.

A comparison between Barrett and Rossetti elucidates the distinction of the latter’s work. Barrett’s entry for ‘S. John, Apostle and Evange-

<sup>81</sup> Kelley, *Clandestine Marriage*, pp. 1, 5, 23.

<sup>82</sup> J.W. von Goethe, *Goethe: Scientific Studies*, trans. Douglas Miller (New York: Suhrkamp, 1988), p. 43; and see *Metamorphosis of Plants* (1790), trans. Agnes Arber, *Chronica Botanica*, 10 (1946), 67-115.

<sup>83</sup> Barrett, *Flowers and Festivals*, p. 56.

list', for example, comprises only the lines 'Dec. 27.' and 'Flame Heath. *Erica Flamma*' next to a quotation from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'Lessons from the Gorse'. By contrast, Rossetti's twenty-eight-page excursus on John establishes his scriptural appearances, supplies an account of his life, gives a 'Prayer for Union with Christ', and finally a detailed 'harmony' of short excerpts from the Old and New Testament alongside the Book of Common Prayer translation of Psalms 120-131. John's unique place as one of the four evangelists warrants him an additional association with the eagle, a description of his stone, the chalcidony, and his plant, mistletoe. Rossetti grants mistletoe a 'being' in order to relate it to John, suggesting that the plant roots itself, not in the earth, but in 'some plant nobler than itself': it takes nourishment from a 'higher life', refuses artificial growth beyond its host and drains of strength the plant on which it is parasitic. This accords with the picture of John Rossetti presents earlier in the chapter, a figure who recognizes the urgency of complete dependence on Jesus and 'dies' into the spirit with him. Adapting and spreading in all environments, mistletoe extends everywhere, providing an analogy for John's description of the apostles' testimony, which cannot be contained by books and unfurls beyond even the limits of this world (John 21. 25).

This archetypal description of mistletoe does not obscure attention to its physical being as a speckled, yellowed-blossomed and white-berried evergreen that is at once medicinal and communal. For it thrives on trees and its leaves 'grow in pairs', claims that echo John Ruskin's observation in *Modern Painters* (1843-60) that leaves 'do not grow each to his own liking, till they run against one another, and then turn back sulkily, but by a *watchful* instinct, far apart, they anticipate their companions' courses, as ships at sea, and in every new unfolding of their edged tissue, guide themselves by the sense of each other's remote presence'<sup>84</sup>. His reading of leaves as familiar and mutually protective prefaces his memory in *St Mark's Rest* (1877-84) of drawing the carved leaves of St Mark's in Venice, itself introduced by a description of the apostles who appear on the tomb of the Doge Andrea Dandolo<sup>85</sup>. There is an appeal for Ruskin in assessing the leaf or saint carved from stone, both of which stay still under the reflective gaze and are relatively free from the torments of humans. Visiting the public gardens in Venice, he is dismayed by a 'cluster of boys' who chase the

<sup>84</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters: Volume V*, in Cook and Wedderburn, ed., *Works III-VII*, p. 48.

<sup>85</sup> John Ruskin, *St Mark's Rest*, in Cook and Wedderburn, ed., *Works XXIV*, p. 282.

‘first twittering birds of the spring from bush to bush’ and throw ‘sand at them’ to ‘clog the poor little creatures’ wings enough to bring one down’<sup>86</sup>. His disgust at the boys’ violent contempt for the gardens and its inhabitants is accentuated by his proximity to the comparable beauty of ‘silvery gleams’ on the horizon ‘beyond Mazorbo [sic]’, where, he states, ‘St. Francis preached to the Birds’. Ruskin reports that the birds ‘came and fluttered around the Saint’ with reference to the inscription on the island-church of San Francesco del Deserto – the island ‘beyond the horizon’ – as well as Paul Sabatier’s 1893 *Life of St Francis of Assisi*. Ruskin connects Italian art to architectural beauty to the natural world to the spiritual ideas behind them, which in turn reveal Francis to him. He was near obsessed with the saint, and in 1874, lived in St Francis’ home, worked in his conventual cell, sketched his life and writings and daydreamed with the relic of his sackcloth. Ruskin called himself a ‘brother’ of the saint’s order and attributed the ‘more distinctly Christian’ tone of his writing to St Francis<sup>87</sup>.

Rossetti does not align herself with Francis or attempt to imitate his life, just as she refuses to objectify him as a model of care-giving or stewardship. Instead she sees in Francis the basis of a model of grace that works through kinship between all things from which many humans fall away<sup>88</sup>. To illustrate her sense of the particular isolation humans experience in relation to creation, she draws her narrators as initially outside of the intimacy grace brings. Poetry is key here, her participatory relationship with creation ‘under’ grace analogous to poetry’s enabling of diverse connections and meanings deepened in relationship with religion. As Keble claimed, poetry grants religion language, and religion ‘restores’ this language to poetry newly radiant, now able to reveal the mysterious and sacramental, such as grace itself<sup>89</sup>. Her lost narrators thus speak to those who seek connection with God, as well as those who feel isolated from or disenfranchised by him in a form that invokes grace as connective and restorative. Plants and leaves allow Rossetti to depict the whole and the fragment and so explore the relationship between component things in the world (human and nonhuman) and the fabric of which they are intrinsically part.

<sup>86</sup> Ruskin, *St Mark’s Rest*, pp. 266-267.

<sup>87</sup> See Cook and Wedderburn, ‘Introduction’, to *Works XXIII*, pp. xlv-xlviii; and Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, p. 86.

<sup>88</sup> See Daniel P. Horan, *A Franciscan Theological Grammar of Creation, The Cord*, 61.1 (2011), 5-20.

<sup>89</sup> John Keble, *Lectures on Poetry 1832-41*, trans. Edward Kershaw Francis, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), II, p. 481.

In 'A Better Resurrection' (1857)<sup>90</sup>, for example, the narrator feels that her life resides 'in the falling leaf' (l. 7) and is comparable to 'the faded leaf' (l. 9): she might be 'like' a crumbling leaf, but her faith brings a 'sap of Spring' that restores her back 'in' to the dynamic experience of falling. As a way of registering existence alongside countless other elements of creation, faith may well feel like vertigo. But reconciliation with the entanglement of all things through faith is ultimately that which holds grace and nature together. Rossetti also explores this experience of feeling dissociated and split in 'The Trees' Counseling' (1847)<sup>91</sup>, wherein the narrator considers herself to be 'outside' of creation before grace restores her connectedness with all things:

I« walked among the shadows;  
While the ancient forest trees  
Talked together in the breeze;  
In the breeze that waved and blew them,  
With a strange weird rustle thro' them» (ll. 4-8).

In the 'weird' rustle of the wind in the trees is embedded an earlier meaning of the word as *wyrd* or *wurþ*, meaning 'to become' through a kind of power or principle by which events are predetermined. Both unfamiliar and strange, while at the same time captivating and animated, this 'weird' rustle acoustically traces the movement of grace as a mediating agency that brings together the trees, the narrator and the divine:

«Said the oak unto the others  
In a leafy voice and pleasant:  
'Here we all are equal brothers,  
'Here we have nor lord nor peasant.  
'Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring,  
'Pass in happy following.  
'Little winds may whistle by us,  
'Little birds may overfly us;

'But the sun still waits in heaven  
'To look down on us in splendour;  
'When he goes the moon is given,

<sup>90</sup> Christina Rossetti, *A Better Resurrection* (1857), Crump, ed., *Complete Poems*, I, p. 68.

<sup>91</sup> Christina Rossetti, *The Trees Counselling* (1847), in Crump, ed., *Complete Poems*, III, p. 26.

‘Full of rays that he doth lend her:  
 ‘And tho’ sometimes in the night  
 ‘Mists may hide her from our sight,  
 ‘She comes out in the calm weather,  
 ‘With the glorious stars together.’» (ll. 9-24).

Only a ‘leafy voice’ can register interconnection between all things, the oaks’ conversation an echo of Francis’ ‘Canticle’ in its references to the seasons, weather, birds, sun and moon. Like Francis, Rossetti’s vision of grace is not one that is found in a natural world that teaches us how to be good: humans are as constitutive of this world as the trees and the poem refuses to distinguish love of nature from love of humankind. For while the narrator is told to “learn contentment from this wood” (l. 29), the oaks do not distinguish themselves from humans as distant tutors, but rather “proclaimeth all states good” (l. 30). The trees are at once arboreal and rhizomatic here, reaching vertically towards God, even as they are horizontally networked to all things through their microsystems of branches, roots and leaves<sup>92</sup>. This lateral transcendence embraces the narrator, who is suddenly no longer outside of the fold of the community on which she looks, and instead held by a spirit in which she is encouraged to ‘turn’ and see creation differently. As she does, she observes that it comprises a presence that is neither united as one, nor atomized into parts:

«And I turned: behold the shading  
 But showed forth the light more clearly;  
 The wild bees were honey-lading;  
 The stream sounded hushing merely,  
 And the wind not murmuring  
 Seemed, but gently whispering:  
 “Get thee patience; and thy spirit  
 “Shall discern in all things merit”» (ll. 33-40).

If grace begins as the ‘weird’ becoming of the rustling trees, its presence is felt as that which moves things into relation with each other in a silent and cyclical connectivity.

The narrator is thus literally moved into a collective correspondence with ‘all things’, one sustained by the virtue Burne-Jones asso-

<sup>92</sup> See Alfred Kentigern Siewers, *Trees*, in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Inhuman Nature* (Washington, D. C.: Oliphant Books, 2014), pp. 101-113.

ciated with Francis: patience. As the wind whispers to the narrator, it is in this climate of patience that one's spirit is shaped by a discernment revelatory of the 'merit' of all things, a word that gestures towards a model of grace earned through 'good works' primordially given through the existence of things in relation to each other. Bound by grace, things take on meaning as part of a whole, assuming a way of being Marder associates with the vegetal. His understanding of vegetal being as a non-identity in which the plant is both inseparable 'from the environment wherein it germinates and grows' and lives 'devoid of a clearly delineated autonomous self' identifies an ontological existence free of 'the prescriptions of formal logic'. Liberated to 'see' otherwise, the plant is released from that dialectical thinking that blocks revelation and offers the potential for a mode of thought wherein connections between things 'prevail over what is delimited within them'<sup>93</sup>. Rossetti reads grace as Christianized plant thinking of connection rather than dissociation, but she also locates the movement of grace as an activity that bridges the heavenly and the earthly.

The failure to acknowledge beings of any order always disrupts grace, as Rossetti illustrates in her poem 'To What Purpose is This Waste?' (1853)<sup>94</sup>. The title is borrowed from Matthew 26 and is part of the disciples' criticism of a woman for anointing Jesus with a 'very precious ointment' that 'might have been sold for much, and given to the poor' (26. 6-9). Jesus replies by claiming that imperial rule will always create the conditions for poverty until it is overthrown by God's empire, one he seeks to establish in his death for which the woman's ointment prepares him (26. 11). The mutual recognition between Jesus and the woman enacts grace, just as Rossetti grants the poem's array of plants, insects, birds, animals, saints, sun and waters a sense of kinship with each other. Only 'men' stand outside of this connection: like the disciples, humans that stand outside of creation are unable to comprehend the 'good' of shells, lilies, roses, squirrels and skylarks outside of their use-value (ll. 30-31). Once again, Rossetti depicts various non-human beings inviting humans back into the fold as her narrator is lulled into sleep by the warm air and embrace of a tree. On waking, she finds herself within a heightened sensual experience of the 'force of utter Love', one that binds 'all things' together (ll. 48-49). As 'all hidden things' and 'all secret whisperings' are revealed, her earlier presump-

<sup>93</sup> Marder, *Plant Thinking*, pp. 162, 165, 169.

<sup>94</sup> Christina Rossetti, *To What Purpose is This Waste?* (1853), in Crump, ed., *Complete Poems*, III, p. 208.

tion that the world is a resource for humanity is abruptly ‘silenced’ (ll. 45, 48):

«All voices of all things inanimate  
Join with the song of Angels and the song  
Of blessed Spirits . . .  
Till all their voices swell  
Above the clouds in one loud hymn» (ll. 49-51, 59-60).

To those living things the narrator has already listed are added the ‘inanimate’ here, angels and spirits, but also plant life as the narrator invokes incense (l. 62), lilies (l. 65), blossoms (l. 70) and green stems (l. 71) as ‘types’ of the cleansed souls of saints. Significantly, the ecology of plant life and its dependents is sustainable here because it offers sustenance in a measured and evenly distributed manner: the bee takes only what it needs and then stores the rest to make honey for others to consume.

This storage system is described as a ‘perpetual law’ later in the poem, one that only faith enables: without faith humans are doomed to look upon creation as a picture from which they are excised; with faith, they are brought into being in relationship with it. In the former position, humans inevitably objectify the earth, ‘Exposed and valued at thy worth’ (l. 130), and fail to see the importance of reciprocal engagement: ‘And other eyes than our’s / Were made to look on flowers’ (ll. 78-79). These ‘other eyes’ are hidden to us, not only because of our refusal to ‘see’ and ‘behold’ creation, but because human perspective is yoked to the principle of gain:

«Why should we grudge a hidden water stream  
To birds and squirrels while we have enough?  
As if a nightingale should cease to sing  
Lest we should hear, or finch leafed out of sight  
Warbling its fill in summer light» (ll. 90-94)

Rossetti’s concern that there is ‘enough’ is a direct challenge to a stock-piling economics of which the disciples in Matthew 26 might also be accused: their desire to ‘sell’ the ointment and therefore trade goods that would otherwise be used in good faith is, Jesus states, in contradiction with the dissemination of the ‘good news’ (26. 13). The plants too protect what is around them from human exploitation, sheltering the finch, who is ‘leafed out of sight’ to preserve its song. Only ‘God’,

announced by the narrator at line 103 in a reference to Job 28 ('Who hath weighed the waters'), comprehends the close relations between things while keeping them 'back from human hands' (l. 107). For while 'we have heard / And known,' the narrator states, we 'have not understood' (ll. 123-124), and until we truly feel our disconnection from other things and their various ways of thinking, we remain external to creation. Grace fails to move the narrator into relationship at the beginning of the poem because her perception atomizes the world into things 'alone / With no companion' (ll. 3-4). By the end, however, the 'force' of 'Love' – grace in action – promises to hold all things buoyant, and the poem's prayer for understanding anticipates Pope Francis' lines in 'Laudato Si': 'Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined / to everything that is'<sup>95</sup>. Rossetti's non-dualist reading of a primordial green grace is not only inclusive of all things, but it founds its thinking of creation on the earth's most prevalent life form: 'all green things'. Her plant thinking not only helps to position her in an ongoing Anglo-Catholic movement opposed to those forces that delude humans into thinking they are separate from other things; it also serves to break down the false distinction between Christian tradition and environmentalism by heralding a Franciscan ecology of togetherness<sup>96</sup>.

**Emma Mason**

## RIASSUNTO

Il saggio identifica in Francesco d'Assisi una delle influenze più significative apprezzabili nella poesia di Christina Rossetti. La visione del mondo espressa dalla poetessa è alimentata dal processo di reimmaginazione della figura di Francesco messo in atto dalla cultura inglese ottocentesca, e si basa sull'idea di una continuità esistente tra religione e ecologia, grazia e natura. Attraverso la nozione di un "pensare vegetale" dalla cifra tipicamente francescana, la poesia di Rossetti presenta la grazia come un fenomeno dinamico e associativo che si colloca al cuore di una società frammentata e scismatica, e elabora un linguaggio cristiano della fratellanza che tiene insieme la dimensione religiosa e quella ecologica.

<sup>95</sup> Pope Francis, *A Christian prayer in union with creation*, in *Laudato Si: On Care for our Common Home* (May 24, 2015), p. 71, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

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