

## Coda

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Dante Gabriel Rossetti's pen-and-ink drawing *Christina Rossetti in a Tantrum* (Figure 12.1), most likely from the spring of 1865, depicts his sister smashing up the living room with a hammer in a fit of rage, following a recent review of her verses. On 11 January 1865 in *The Times*, D. S. Dallas had compared the poems of Jean Ingelow with Christina Rossetti's first major volume of poetry, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862).<sup>1</sup> Although singling out the superiority of the latter, Dallas had, it would appear, called forth the tempestuous temper of the poetess at the suggestion, perhaps, of the faultlessness of her verses.<sup>2</sup> In the left side of the drawing, the artist had scrawled 'Miss Rossetti can point to work which could not easily be mended', with 'Times' underlined. Apparently 'given to outbursts and tantrums as a child',<sup>3</sup> Christina was now acting out her brother's imaginary of artistic, female rage (and perhaps that complex blend of sibling rage and love, too). Raising (and certainly also stamping) her feet, Christina is swinging a rock hammer high above her head, of the type used for mountaineering and breaking up rocks and stones in geology and fossil-hunting. She has already smashed a table in half, and a mirror, window, chair, and a bust are cracked and shattered, the curtain torn to shreds. No doubt a copy of *The Times* is what is burning in the grate. In the foreground of the drawing, those psychoanalysts left still deluded as to the probability of penis envy might well attribute the snapped column of the table and the broken clock lying with its innards spewing out as classic phallic objects,<sup>4</sup> but this must be left to Dante Gabriel Rossetti's unconscious, not that

<sup>1</sup> D. S. Dallas, 'Modern Poets', *The Times* (11 January 1865), 12.

<sup>2</sup> 'The poetical art of Miss Rossetti, although her book has as yet not received the same favour from the public, is simpler, firmer and deeper [than Ingelow's work]. Miss Ingelow is but a child of promise – of great promise certainly, but still only of the future. Her work as yet, with all its glow and radiance, is too nebulous, and much of it seems to come of that facility which is a young poet's greatest danger. Miss Rossetti, on the other hand, can point to finished work – to work which it would be difficult to mend. She is not so ambitious in her choice of subject as Miss Ingelow, and perhaps that is one reason why in what she attempts she is more successful'.

Quoted in the Rossetti Archive, <<https://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s601.raw.html>>, accessed on 26 August 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Katharine McGowan, 'Introduction', *Selected Poems of Christina Rossetti*, rev. edition (Ware, Herts: Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2001), v–xxiii, vi.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the opening lines of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 3: 'Is a pen a metaphorical penis?'



Figure 12.1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Christina Georgina Rossetti in a Tantrum and Destroying the Contents of a Room*, 1865, pen and wash on paper, 39.2 x 33.4 cm, Wightwick Manor, West Midlands, reproduced with the kind permission of the National Trust.

of his sister. In fact, only a few years later, on 28 April 1871, he would compose a limerick on the critic D. S. Dallas who had caused his sister's tantrum, leaving no one in doubts about the phallic practice of reviewing:

There is a poor devil named Dallas,  
 Who tends, as I'm told, to the gallows,  
 Yet if not so well hung,  
 He might never have swung,  
 For it's mostly along of his phallus.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the Rossetti Archive, <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/37-1870.blms.rad.html>>, accessed on 26 August 2024. The manuscript for the limerick is in the British Library.

Yet, ‘as in the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, phallic sexuality must finally destroy its object’,<sup>6</sup> and the impulse to destroy is a pre-phallic phenomenon. The psychoanalyst Melanie Klein attributed a sadistic period up to a child’s second year, proposing that thereafter rage and self-destructive urges decrease.<sup>7</sup> As Klein argued, the difference between infantile and adult phantasy (or creative) life may only be significant in as far as in infancy the unconscious lies nearer to the surface and influences behaviour more strongly. Yet this is not how Donald Winnicott saw it. Purposeful object-relating for Winnicott is a sophisticated and continued use of fantasy supporting reality. He argued: ‘It is generally understood that the reality principle involves the individual in anger and reactive destruction, but my thesis is that the destruction plays its part in making the reality, placing the object outside the self’. ‘A new feature thus arrives in the theory of object-relating. The subject says to the object: “I destroyed you.” “I love you.” “You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.” “While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) *fantasy*.” Here fantasy begins for the individual’.<sup>8</sup> (Winnicott’s emphasis).

Similarly, for Simone Weil,

Love needs reality. What is more terrible than the discovery, that through a bodily appearance, we have been loving an imaginary being. It is much more terrible than death, for death does not prevent the beloved from having lived. That is the punishment for having fed love on imagination. It is an act of cowardice to seek from (or to wish to give) the people we love any other consolation than that which works of art give us. These help us through the mere fact that they exist. To love and to be loved only serves mutually to render this existence more concrete, more constantly present to the mind.<sup>9</sup>

Weil sees love as mediated through art as a kind of consolation for that punishment. To be loved and to love need existence, concrete presence, through creation as an ‘act of love’. Weil’s preposition that ‘we participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves’ sits within her reflection on grace,<sup>10</sup> where we might suggest it is love in the long nineteenth century. If creation is an act of

<sup>6</sup> Barnaby B. Barrett, *Psychoanalysis and the Postmodern Impulse: Knowing and Being since Freud’s Psychology* (Abingdon: Routledge 2015), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Melanie Klein in Viktoria de Rijke, *The Untimely Art of Scribble* (Bern: Springer 2023), 57.

<sup>8</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, ‘The Use of An Object and Relating Through Identifications’ in Lesley Caldwell and Helen Taylor Robinson, eds, *The Collected Works of D. W. Winnicott*, 12 volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 8: 355–64, <<https://doi.org/10.1093/med:psych/9780190271404.003.0066>>.

<sup>9</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario van der Ruhr (London: Routledge Classics, 1952), 65.

<sup>10</sup> Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 33.

love, Weil sees renouncing all its baggage – or its decreation – as vital to finding an energy which is free and capable of understanding the true relationship of things that allows for the grace not to remove but to transform our troubles. However deep love may be, Weil sees a ‘breaking point’ (like that sparked into rage by Christina Rossetti’s love for her work) as a key moment in its transformation. The social processes of love have brought our attention to the created aspects of nineteenth-century cultures – and cultures of love – made and remade by Ginev’s ‘faithful practitioners’ and their surroundings. Yet, where Winnicott would see Christina’s destruction of all the objects in her living room as a creative act of remaking her reality, Weil would perhaps see the Rossetti drawing as exemplifying reaction, destruction, re-creation.

In her essay ‘Doubting Love’, Judith Butler holds the idea of love as an abstraction in suspicion, stating: ‘when asked what my idea of love is, I always founder.’<sup>11</sup> Like Winnicott and Weil, Butler underscores the notion of love as through and beyond abstraction, as an event, a transformation; a thing that destroys, is destroyed and is remade again:

The idea of love is an assault against ideation itself. One knows love somehow only when all one’s ideas are destroyed, and this becoming unhinged from what one knows is the paradigmatic sign of love. Again, in the face of such views, I am full of admiration and I think that the people who believe that love shatters the idea of love are the ones who truly know what love is, who have love, who have done it, undergone it, had it done.<sup>12</sup>

If we compare the Rossetti drawing to the Hammershøi interior scene discussed in our ‘Introduction’, and at even greater length by James Hall, we can speculate that Christina is perhaps the wife that never was. This is Hammershøi’s ‘Rückenfigur’ turned around 180 degrees, acting out her passions and frustrations and insisting on not being the ‘angel in the house’. Like her sister Maria, Christina remained unmarried her entire life and had by 1865 turned down two suitors, both related to her Pre-Raphaelite brothers: the painters John Brett and James Collinson. Later, she would also reject the linguist Charles Bagot Cayley, translator of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, a codified collection of love poems if ever there was one. Hammer in her hand, she is ready to destroy and make the world anew in her poetry as words on paper. The 1862 volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems* had contained a poem inspired by her rejection of John Brett, an extraordinary piece of female

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<sup>11</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Doubting Love’, in James L. Harmon (ed.), *Take My Advice: Letters to the Next Generation from People who Know a Thing or Two* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 62–66.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, ‘Doubting Love’, 64.

agency, of a mid-Victorian woman speaking out her own desires not to marry, not to go along with a male suitor's sense of entitlement. Although Christina Rossetti is in many ways one of the very finest of Victorian love poets, her frank offer of friendship rather than love and marriage may serve as a healthy (proto feminist) counterweight to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's enumeration of the elements of conjugal love:

No, Thank You, John

I never said I loved you, John:

    Why will you tease me, day by day,  
And wax a weariness to think upon  
    With always 'do' and 'pray'?

You know I never loved you, John;

    No fault of mine made me your toast:  
Why will you haunt me with a face as wan  
    As shows an hour-old ghost?

I dare say Meg or Moll would take

    Pity upon you, if you'd ask:  
And pray don't remain single for my sake  
    Who can't perform that task.

I have no heart? – Perhaps I have not;

    But then you're mad to take offence  
That I don't give you what I have not got:  
    Use your common sense.

Let bygones be bygones:

    Don't call me false, who owed not to be true:  
I'd rather answer 'No' to fifty Johns  
    Than answer 'Yes' to you.

Let's mar our pleasant days no more,

    Song-birds of passage, days of youth:  
Catch at to-day, forget the days before:  
    I'll wink at your untruth.

Let us strike hands as hearty friends;

    No more, no less: and friendship's good:  
Only don't keep in view ulterior ends,  
    And points not understood

In open treaty. Rise above

    Quibbles and shuffling off and on:  
Here's friendship for you if you like; but love, –  
    No, thank you, John.

‘Catch at today’, Rossetti urges, ‘forget the days before. / I’ll wink at your untruth’. Any art historical and literary investigation of the long nineteenth century demands recognition of the tensions and slippages that result between what counts as love’s truths or evidence and modern interpretation, speculation and theorisation after the fact. Avoiding generalisations or universalisms, this collection does not imagine it could simply answer exactly where love might be found in the period. However, it does model and suggest that art historians and readers look in unusual places for the settings that signal love, by poking in corners and at the fringes of usual research interest. By way of examining literary and aesthetic corners, doorways, chairs, clocks, lightbulbs, letters, photographs, trinkets and more, the dark, dirt and the light, the self-referentiality of love *and* the ontological groundedness of love have found equal place in this collection. There is no doubt that the period was a hugely transformative one, going well beyond any stereotype of Victorian repression and propriety (wink at *that* untruth!) to grapple with everything love might mean, including cultural shifts from its utility to sentiment to commercial commodification, staging love in ways suggestive of a paradigm shift where complex and non-normative ‘becoming’ would be privileged over ‘being’. The sheer diversity and intensity of where and how love happened – the multiple social lives of love explored here – across the long nineteenth century demonstrate the period still has much to teach us about the continuing cultural practices of love today.

The claims we have made about love and material objects are ongoing and are now global, digital, as is evident by the collection of *The Museum of Broken Relationships*. As it explains, it ‘is a physical and virtual public space with the sole purpose of treasuring and sharing your heartbreak stories and symbolic possessions. It is a museum about you, about us, and the ways we love and lose’.<sup>13</sup> Pieces in the collection include such surprising items as belly-button lint, two sets of dreadlocks, a ‘stupid frisbee’ and a ‘toaster of vindication’, as well as more familiar love tokens such as rings, photographs, postcards, and so on. While this collection is an important archive for the loss of love and the broken-hearted, we also end here to continue to decreate and enliven the clichés of happily ever after. Worthy of special mention is the therapeutic ‘Exe Axe’, posted from Berlin, which tells this story:

She was the first woman that I let move in with me. All my friends thought I needed to learn to let people in more. A few months after she moved in, I was offered to travel to the US. She could not come along. At the airport we said goodbye in tears, and she

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<sup>13</sup> *The Museum of Broken Relationships*, <<https://brokenships.com>>, accessed on 27 August 2024.



**Figure 12.2.** The Exe Axe, Museum of Broken Relationships, ‘An Exe Axe’ in *The Museum of Broken Relationships*, <<https://brokenships.com/feed/an-exe-axe>>, accessed on 27 August 2024.

was assuring me she could not survive three weeks without me. I returned after three weeks, and she said: ‘I fell in love with someone else. I have known her for just 4 days, but I know that she can give me everything that you cannot’. I was banal and asked about her plans regarding our life together. The next day she still had no answer, so I kicked her out. She immediately went on holiday with her new girlfriend while her furniture stayed with me. Not knowing what to do with my anger, I finally bought this axe at Karstadt to blow off steam and to give her at least a small feeling of loss – which she obviously did not have after our break-up. In the 14 days of her holiday, every day I axed one piece of her furniture. I kept the remains there, as an expression of my inner condition. The more her room filled with chopped furniture acquiring the look of my soul, the better I felt. Two weeks after she left, she came back for the furniture. It was neatly arranged in small heaps and fragments of wood. She took that trash and left my apartment for good. The axe was promoted to a therapy instrument.<sup>14</sup>

‘Unlike “destructive” self-help instructions for recovery from grief and loss, the Museum offers the chance to overcome an emotional collapse through creativity’.<sup>15</sup> Ending with the compelling rhyming sentences, ‘It was neatly arranged in small heaps and fragments of wood. She took that trash and left my apartment

<sup>14</sup> ‘An Exe Axe’ in *The Museum of Broken Relationships*, <<https://brokenships.com/feed/an-exe-axe>>, accessed on 27 August 2024.

<sup>15</sup> *The Museum of Broken Relationships*, at <<https://brokenships.com/explore>>.

for good', and overall reading with the precision of a well-organised piece of conceptual art, this writing speaks exactly to the creation and destruction of the process of heartbreak, and what bell hooks describes as 'love's truths as we live them and the social life of love'.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 14.