

“The Sea-limits”
—Rossetti’s “Self-limits”—

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It was in September, 1849 that Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt left England for the European continent. While they were on the continent for about three months, they visited France, the Netherlands and Belgium and saw the most famous paintings done by the greatest European painters. On their way to Paris, Rossetti created a poem dealing with his impression of the sea he saw from the top of a cliff in the northern French city Boulogne-sur-Mer. The poem was sent to William Michael Rossetti along with several lines written about his first experience of going abroad.¹⁾ Later, it was newly titled “From the Cliffs: Noon” and appeared in the Pre-Raphaelite magazine *The Germ* published in March, 1850:

The sea is in its listless chime:
Time’s lapse it is, made audible, —
The murmur of the earth’s large shell.
In a sad blueness beyond rhyme
It ends: sense, without thought, can pass
No stadium further. Since time was,
This sound hath told the lapse of time.

No stagnance that death wins, — it hath
The mournfulness of ancient life,
Always enduring at dull strife.
As the world’s heart of rest and wrath,
Its painful pulse is in the sands.
Last utterly, the whole sky stands,
Gray and not known, along its path.²⁾

Rossetti, not only as a poet but as a painter, used various images in his works. Some images can be found exclusively in his poems, that is, according to Johnson, there are ones “wholly literary and do not enter into the backgrounds of his pictures; and an important example is the sea, ...”³⁾ As Rossetti associates the sea with time in lines 1–2, apparently its perpetual movement does not fit, but antagonizes, his “frequently static and almost timeless pictures.”⁴⁾

In his “From the Cliffs: Noon” Rossetti shows his earliest contemplation of the sea. However, its two stanzas, after he revised and added another two stanzas to them, were recreated into “The Sea-limits” to be included in *Poems 1870*. In this paper I will deal with “The Sea-limits” as a core of argument to clarify the characteristic nature of the sea images presented by Rossetti in his poetry.

I.

Whoever reads “The Sea-limits” aloud will quickly and surely notice the sound effects the poet uses elaborately in it. Not only in rhyming words positioned at each end, but in many words in the lines, closely interplaying with each other, as seen in several repetitions and alliterations of consonants and vowels, Rossetti produces an auditory image of the sea, which conveys to the readers’ minds the tireless and perpetual repetitive movement and the boundless space of the sea:

Consider the sea’s listless chime:
 Time’s self it is, made audible —
 The murmur of the earth’s own shell.
 Secret continuance sublime
 Is the sea’s end: our sight may pass
 No furlong further. Since time was,
 This sound hath told the lapse of time.
 (st. 1)⁵⁾

Particularly [s] sound scattered and repeated in the lines functions remarkably to signify the movement of the waves which have always beaten against the shore. In addition to this, such consonants as [d], [m] and [f] in several words are also effective here. It is this device in sound that sets up the languid but sublime tone dominant in this stanza. And this is also true of the other three stanzas.⁶⁾

The sea spreads before the eyes of the poet. Since a time before which no hu-

man can know, the waters of the sea have ceaselessly rhythmically, continued their movement. Here, he begins his contemplation. He associates the sound of the sea with time, as is shown in "Time's self it is, ..." On the earth innumerable lives have been born and have perished in the frame of mortality, the frame which is given by birth and death. In simple terms, time itself. It cannot be ignored that "chime," the kindred word for "time," promotes this acute sense of mortality, reminds us of the bell, which tolls time that dominates us in this world. Although "[T]he murmur of the earth's own shell" can be interpreted literally as the sounds of the waves beating against the beach, it seems to imply that the voices of the dead can never reach the poet clearly.

The phrase "Secret continuance sublime" in the latter half of this stanza depicts the vast contrast between the mortal and the sea as a huge clock which defines "the lapse of time." In other words, a great inequality exists between human beings always exposed to changes and that which brings those changes. The sea has seen and known all that has happened, every sort of vicissitudes of lives that have developed under the control of fate, on the earth. It seems that the subjectivity of the poet is wholly swallowed by the unfathomable presence of the sea in front of him. That is why he writes, "our sight may pass/No furlong further." It is quite impossible that our perception covers and comprehends the physical limits, much less its metaphysical value, as the two adjectives "[S]ecret" and "sublime" demonstrate. "The Sea-limits" may well signify the very limits of human perception and intellect.

The tone of transiency and momentariness of life becomes more acute in the second stanza. Immumerable human lives that have vanished from the world do not rest peacefully but give cries of great sorrow every time the waves beat and echo upon the land. The sea has stood by and watched indifferently each striving, never ceasing its movement. It has prevented their souls from resting quietly even after their death. The poet, however, suspects in his contemplation that the sea itself may suffer from its own everlastingness, for it has never been released from its monotonously repeating movement, while it is possible that death can mercifully end any human's most severe affliction. So "the mournfulness of the ancient life" and "dull strife" suggest momentary life, birth and death and the struggle with time that human beings have perpetually repeated. It also suggests the sea's monotonous movement, which has also lasted since time immemorial:

No quiet, which is death's, — it hath
 The mournfulness of ancient life,
 Enduring always at dull strife.
 As the world's heart of rest and wrath,
 Its painful pulse is in its sands.
 Last utterly, the whole sky stands,
 Grey and not known, along its path.

(st. 2)

The sea is described as if it were a huge clock of the world, moved by some power beyond human intelligence and telling “the lapse of time,” and is connected here with an organ, the heart. It connotes that, life, common to both, human and sea, links time and heart. “The world's heart of rest and wrath” is the mystic source of the seawave motion, the sound of time, in the sea. Its presence is, of course, well beyond the comprehension of an individual man. And both “rest” and “wrath” imply the motion of the wave, sometimes calm, sometimes violent, sent out by the heart's pulsation. Like the blood which circulates through the human body, the seawater, after being pumped out from “the world's heart” as seawaves, beats the land and then soaks into the sands before it returns to the sea.

It is self-evident that human circulation will end while the seawater will never stop its movement. The poet uses the word “painful.” Not only it does before an alliteration with “pulse” but it does remind us of the never-easing pains the sands have suffered:

Let no man awe thee on any height
 Of earthly kingship's mouldering might.
 The dust his heels holds meet for thy brow
 Hath all of it been what both are now;
 And thou and he may plague together
 A beggar's eyes in some dusty weather
 When none that is now knows sound or sight.

(st. 2)⁷⁾

As Rossetti tells thus in “Soothsay (1871),” man will die and return to dust. “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”⁸⁾ The silent sands, beaten by the sea and soaking up the seawater, are what the perished lives on the earth used to be.

The last two lines in the stanza of "The Sea-limits" present us with a monochromatic visual image of the grey sky wrapped over the sea. Although, in "From the Cliffs," Rossetti writes, "sense, without thought, can pass/No stadium further," and suggests the possibility of reaching the limits of the sea, the focal point of the mystery in life and death, by the use of "thought," here the lines are revised into "our sight may pass/No furlong further." And it is true that Rossetti uses the image of the horizon, the very line where the sea and the sky border on each other, in a positive sense in some poems. For example, the sea-line in "The Lover's Walk (1871)" effectively describes one static moment of ecstasy between two lovers, perfectly free from any fear of time and change. The blue sky resting on the calm sea, the two entwined at the horizon, implies the never broken tie between the lovers. Their bodies and souls secure within the god of love, closeness of their contact with each other, represent the absoluteness of their love:

Even such their path, whose bodies lean unto
 Each other's visible sweetness amorously, —
 Whose passionate heats lean by Love's decree
 Together on his heart for ever true,
 As the cloud-foaming firmamental blue
 Rest on the blue line of a foamless sea.

(11. 9–14)⁹

The sea-line is the point of contact between mortality and immortality the mortal cannot reach and it suggests limitlessness. Yet, as a contrast in the color words "Grey" and "blue" used in these two poems shows, the sea-line which appears in "The Sea-limits" is much more ambiguous, producing a rather negative tone. The air seems to be rather close to what Rossetti describes in one of his letters:

There are dense fogs of heat here now, through which sea and sky
 loom as one wall, with the webbed craft creeping on it like flies, or
 standing there as if they would drop off dead.¹⁰

In 1854 Rossetti wrote the letter to one of his friends, William Allingham, while he was staying in Hastings with his wife Elizabeth, who had been suffering from illness. The sea and the sky, with their ambiguous boundaries, produce a melancholic air. An acute sense of transiency of life wraps the poet as seen in

his figurative reference to “flies” caught in cobwebs to describe the craft floating on the sea. The scene is monochromatic here, too.

Furthermore, in the last stanza of “The Cloud Confines (1871),” Rossetti paraphrases his sense of transiency even more philosophically by the use of the image of the sea and the sky:

The sky leans dumb on the sea,
 Aweary with all its wings;
 And oh! the song the sea sings
 Is dark everlastingly.
 Our past is clean forgot,
 Our present is and is not,
 Our future's a sealed seedplot,
 And what betwixt them are we? —
 We who say as we go, —
 ‘Strange to think by the way,
 Whatever there is to know,
 That shall we know one day.’

(st. 5)¹¹⁾

Words such as “past,” “present” and “future” evidently indicate the poet’s concern about the momentariness of human existence. These lines seem to epitomize what until now we have seen in the two stanzas of “The Sea-limits,” though they were written in 1871. The sight of the sky, along with the sound of the sea, triumphantly envelopes the poet in the clouds of agnosticism. However, in the ninth line, the agnostic tone slightly shifts its direction. Asking one grave question on human existence itself, fully aware of the limits of man’s perception, “And what betwixt them are we?” levels and calms the unstable agnostic tone of resignation. It seems that the poet, like an innocent and curious boy wanting to know everything, asks the question here.

The last four lines, except that a small change from “Still we say as we go, (sts. 1–4)” to “We who say as we go, (st. 5)” is made, are repeated in every stanza of the poem. “Whatever there is to know,/That we shall know one day” signifies the very truth of human beings which has been, is, and shall be kept secret. What is more, considering Rossetti’s characteristic belief in the immortality of the soul, whose basis lies in love, it may also imply the core of the mystery. The poet will know, if he should be allowed to touch only a small part of it, whether or not the soul is really granted to survive perpetually.

So the poem ends with the tone not wholly pessimistic but rather neutral.

As we have seen in this part, to Rossetti, the sea, very closely related with time, seems to comprehend the great mystery of life and death in itself, which is absolutely unknown to any man. Its limitlessness can suggest both an optimistic view and a pessimistic view toward him, who considers and longs for immortality, under the inescapable frame of mortality; its perpetual movement and sound, beating the land, forces him to become conscious of the perished lives returned to dust or sands as their fates ordered to them. Rossetti, though sometimes suffering from agnosticism, still seems never to deny the mystery however enigmatic he may become.

II.

The third and fourth stanzas were newly added in the re-creative process where the original "From the Cliffs" was changed into "The Sea-limits." The three kinds of sound, which seem to be the key of human existence, are presented here:

Listen alone beside the sea,
 Listen alone among the woods;
 Those voices of twin solitudes
 Shall have one sound alike to thee:
 Hark where the murmurs of thronged men
 Surge and sink back and surge again, —
 Still the one voice of wave and tree.

(st. 3)

The sea and the trees or leaves and branches swaying and rustling in the wind give the "voice of twin solitudes." In the word "solitudes" can be expressed the separation of the poet's subjectivity from the outer world under an acute sense of transciency, since the world around him, where the mystery of the great universe may execute its power, transcended him. If the sea and the wind knew and could reveal this very mystery to him, all he would do is listen in order to catch some answer, but evidently that is absolutely impossible. And the more he does concentrate upon listening to them, the more acute the sense of transciency becomes; the distance between the mystery and his very self becomes greater and greater until he is perfectly detached from the world he is in; or his existence melts away into the world outside into nothingness. Finally these sounds of the sea and the wind, remind him of "the murmurs of thronged men" under the perfect

control of the fates. The line, "Surge and sink back and surge again," with its emphasis in sound, shows clearly that the movement of the sea has something in common with that of human beings, who have been repeating the same process of birth and death.

The three sounds here might be interpreted as those which reflect the strivings each man has done in the limit of life; those strivings of all lives, both past and future, are connected with each other in the listener's present life. They are the sounds telling the struggles with time in life, the vacant cries from human beings under perpetual suppressions of time, regardless of when and where they are born, live and die.

The last stanza in "The Penumbra (1869)," the poem dealing with a bitter memory of a love now lost, also demonstrates the passage of time with metaphors of the sea and the wind, both of which imply constant change in life of the poet:

So shall the tongues of the sea's foam
 (Though many voices therewith come
 From drowned hope's home to cry to me),
 Bewail one hour the more, when sea
 And wind are one with momory.

(st. 6)¹²⁾

Obsession with past and future lives is one of the characteristics of Rossetti. The sea sighs and gives to the poet those moments which are past and remained unaccomplished in one past love he lost. While he is listening to the sea, "many voices" of love and hope already sunk deeply and deposited in his memory, stir heavily, and begin to vividly float to the surface of his mind. To his present moment are added the past moments of love, and his present feeling of sorrow and regret increase in intensity. Ignoring the difference caused by the passage of time, the sea and the wind are repeating the same sounds as then in his memory. Thus the two sounds here, more concretely in theme than in "The Sea-limits," help intensely accentuate the vicissitudes in momentary life.

The three kinds of sounds presented in the third stanza are integrated in the last stanza:

Gather a shell from the strown beach
 And listen at its lips: they sigh
 The same desire and mystery,

The echo of the whole sea's speech.
 And all mankind is thus at heart
 Not anything but what thou art:
 And Earth, Sea, Man, are all in each.

(st. 4)

It is on the beach that the sea, repeating its motion, and the earth, on which the life cycle from birth to death has been repeated innumerable times, touch each other. The echo from a seashell picked up from the beach covers all three sounds. The echo is permanent to those who returned to the sands, to those alive, and to those who are to be born, the shells on the beach sound the same echo. It is "[T]he same desire and mystery," in which all human beings have struggled in their lives. In one small shell, which holds the total history of human beings and also sounds the permanent "echo of the sea's whole speech" to them, perfectly included are "Earth, Sea, Man." In other words, all the traces of human beings, fully surpassing any knowledge and any subjectivity of an individual man has. Thus, the everlasting sea also suggests, its universality, that which swallows the subjectivity of the poet, his perception and intellect, renders it nothing.

In "Adieu." written in 1876, six years before Rossetti's death, we come across the visual and auditory images equivalent to the ones in "The Sea-limits." These combinations of "trees" and "the breeze," "seas," "[W]inds" and "the shell," and "skies" and "clouds," respectively described in each of the three stanzas, integratedly produce an inescapable mood that death is approaching the poet. Sounds and motions in the world outside commonly give an exact knowledge of the approach of the moment of death to the poet, who is in full recognition of the uncertainty of life:

Waving whispering trees,
 What do you say to the breeze
 And what says the breeze to you?
 'Mid passing souls ill at ease,
 Moving murmuring trees,
 Would ye ever wave an Adieu?

Tossing turbulent seas,
 Winds that wrestle with these,
 Echo heard in the shell, —

'Mid fleeting life ill at ease,
 Restless ravening seas, —
 Would the echo sigh Farewell?

Surging sumptuous skies,
 For ever a new surprise,
 Clouds eternally new, —
 Is every flake that flies,
 Widening wandering skies,
 For a sign — Farewell, Adieu?

(sts. 1–3)¹³⁾

As shown in the use of the words related to constant movement and such expressions as “passing soul at ease” and “fleeting life ill at ease,” it is evident that Rossetti is sufficiently conscious of the uncertainty of life. Yet, this impression is not true of in the last stanza:

Sinking suffering heart
 That know'st how weary thou art. —
 Soul so fain for a flight, —
 Aye, spread your wings to depart,
 Sad soul and sorrowing heart, —
 Adieu, Farewell, Good night.

(st. 4)

He does not necessarily seem to believe that the approaching death will put an end even to his soul. Rather, death itself might be regarded as an opportunity for emancipation from his own weary and painful struggle with life. Therefore Rossetti does not wholly deny nor approve the possibility of his soul's survival after his body's vanishment from the world.

Until now, Rossetti's characteristic belief in soul has been mentioned only incidentally. It should be considered here, as this idea frequently appears in his poems and prose. The next part will deal with this.

III.

Fundamentally, Rossetti's strong belief is in the pre-existence of the soul and its immortality. Fully conscious of the cleavage between soul and body, he strives with this duality. “The Sea-limits” and his other poems present the images of that which exists in his external natural world, among which is the sea. As

A. C. Benson writes, "He was essentially an indoor poet."¹⁴⁾ His artistic activities were secluded in his own soul and picked up in fragmentary moments deposited in his memory. To him memory means not only that which was experienced in the limited birth-to-death frame of mortality, but also the experiences of his immortal soul, which, he believes, roams infinity. Thus, every experience can be comprehended in the name of the soul, and then changed and presented as his characteristic poetic truth:

I shut myself in with my soul
And the shapes come eddying forth.¹⁵⁾

A Sonnet is a moment's monument,—
Memorial from the Soul's eternity
To one dead deathless hour.

(ll. 1-3)¹⁶⁾

Lo! the soul's sphere of infinite images!

(l. 8)¹⁷⁾

It is natural that his artistic activities, as he is fully conscious of the soul's memory, be controlled by his intense subjectivity. What offers him the basis of his thoughts regarding "the Soul's eternity" and the mystic relationship between soul and body is his love for woman. The karma existing between the previous existence and the life after death is strengthened by the idea, that in earthly love, one will search for and then recognize the partner whose soul is destined to be paired with one's own. A moment of epiphany will both suddenly and intuitively come to him from the area, which, he seems to believe, his senses and intellect cannot reach. Then, he will know the absolute truth. For example, "Sudden Light" deals with one of these moments of epiphany:

I have been here before,
But when or how I cannot tell:
I know the grass beyond the door,
The sweet keen smell,
The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.
You have been mine before, —
How long ago I may not know:
But just when at that swallow's soar
Your neck turned so,
Some veil did fall, — I knew it all of yore.

Has this been thus before ?
 And shall not thus time's eddying flight
 Still with our lives our love restore
 In death's despite,
 And day and night yield one delight once more ?¹⁸⁾

Here, a familiar psychological phenomenon, *déjà vu*, is described. Besides *déjà vu*, Rossetti, whose chief concern seems to lie in the function of the mystic mechanism of the soul's memory, also uses *Doppelgänger* motifs in some of his poems and paintings. The *Doppelgänger* enables him to present the past, the present and the future at one time in the form of doubles on the same coordinate of time and space.¹⁹⁾ In this poem, *déjà vu* serves as another suitable motif, for it implies some possibility of life after death, combining the past with the present in his intuitive recognition. Moments buried in oblivion long ago and sunk deeply in the soul's memory, suddenly, revive in the poet's consciousness in one moment. He longs for the future life after death based on the idea of accomplishing eternal and ideal love between him and his partner.

The poem, written in 1854, was firstly included in *Poems 1870*, but the last stanza was revised when republished in *Ballads and Sonnets*. The following is how the original stanza appeared in the former work:

Then, now, — perchance again !
 O round mine eyes your tresses shake !
 Shall we not lie as we have lain
 Thus for Love's sake,
 And sleep, and wake, yet never break the chain !²⁰⁾

Comparing these last stanzas, rather sensual descriptions such as "round mine eyes your tresses shake" and "we have lain" in the original stanza, both of which suggest the closest contact of lovers, are omitted in the revised one and, seemingly, the distance between them is kept consciously. Instead of "Love," love god, in the former one, as of the greatest enemies to love, time and death appear in the latter. As for the two negative interrogative sentences which begin with "shall," the difference between their subjects is aroused by the revision of "we" into "time's eddying flight," and shows that Rossetti shifted his viewpoint from the present to the life after death. That is, from the continuation of the present love to its reproduction after death.

The ideal always stand side by side with the real; longing for immortality

through ideal love cannot be exempted from the pressure an occasional sense of mortality gives. What always stands in front of him is the conflict with time. As a result, the comparison of these two stanzas tells us that the revised one leaves a stronger impression, as Rees suggests, that "[L]ike many other of the deep-rooted ideas in Rossetti's imagination, this of reincarnation is double-faced" or is the stronger uneasiness Rossetti feels about afterlife.²¹⁾

As already quoted and discussed in Part I, Rossetti wrote the letter, in which he described the sea, to Allingham, in 1854. This was in the same year as "Sudden Light" was written. The description was adopted in the third stanza of "Even So (1859)." The tone of the poem is constantly melancholic. We can find the image of the sea and the sky as one vast wall standing in front of two lovers, as if the wall interfered with the fulfillment of ideal love. The uneasiness the poet suggests in the last stanza of "Sudden Light" is clearly expressed here.

One side in his idea of reincarnation, a rather positive belief in the possibility, which he comprehends intuitively through *déjà vu* in "Sudden Light," changes here into a negative one. There is an acute agnostic feeling, akin to abandonment, here:

So it is, my dear.
 All such things touch secret strings
 For heavy hearts to hear.
 So it is, my dear,
 Very like indeed:
 Sea and sky, afar, on high,
 Sand and strewn seaweed. —
 Very like indeed.
 But the sea stands spread
 As one wall with the flat skies,
 Where the lean black craft like flies
 Seem well-nigh stagnated,
 Soon to drop off dead.
 Seemed it so to us
 When I was thine and thou wast mine,
 And all these things were thus,
 But all our world in us?
 Could we be so now?
 Not if all beneath heaven's pall
 Lay dead but I and thou,

Could we be so now?²²⁾

Similarities between the sky and the sea, seaweed and sands, surrounding two lovers, ironically help the poet notice the separation that time brings about. Formerly, love between them seemed to last forever, but now, the poet is doubtful of it. The world outside of them has not changed, but meanwhile, their phase of love has been continuously exposed to both external and internal changes. Even if they were free from death, internal changes in their minds might cause the separation. Rossetti seems to show his double sense of agnosticism; to the possibility of their blessing with eternal life by way of ideal love, and to the stability and continuity of earthly love between them. Thus, "secret strings" found in the first stanza can be considered as his reference to the very mystery controlling life and death.

And it also can be said that sounds produced by these "secret strings" has something in common with these sounds that Rossetti describes in "The Sea-limits." Upon carefully re-reading the first stanza of "Sudden Light," is it possible for us to closely relate with the sea such words as "the sighing sound" or "the shore" in the fifth line? If so, the sea also appears in the poem, implying that its scene is not far enough away for the sounds of the sea to become inaudible to the two lovers. Bearing this in mind, some close relation of the sea not only with time but also with several effects time brings about. In particular, the personal aspects of Rossetti's changes can be at least somewhat clarified. He becomes conscious of these changes, optimistically or pessimistically, through introspection and the contrast of his experiences in the continuity of time in his mind with his characteristic viewpoint of "the Soul's eternity."

Rossetti's positive affirmation of the value of the soul's immortality and limitless nature, is shown by the image of the sea in the third sonnet of "The Choice," and by the forth stanza of "Soothsay." "The Choice," written in his youth, about 1847, consists of three sonnets in which three different philosophies of life are presented; Carpe Diem or "the theory of physical enjoyment" in the first one, that of "religious asceticism" in the second one and profundity of truth, or that of "self-development," in the third one, as William Michael Rossetti explains.²³⁾ Beginning with "Think thou and act; to-morrow thou shalt die," the third one is developed by a narrator, a mask for Rossetti. In its octave the narrator refers to his companion's statement. "Man clomb until he touched

the truth; and I, / Even I am he whom it was destined for.' (ll. 5-6)" after his (=Man) laborious life-long pursuit, for the meaning of life. Then, he begins to argue against his companion in his statement to the narrator in the latter part of the octave. His words in the sestet sound quite persuasive, supported by the metaphoric use of the sea:

Nay, come up hither. From this wave-washed mound
 Unto the furthest flood-brim look with me;
 Then reach on with thy thought till it be drown'd.
 Miles and miles distant though the grey line be,
 And though thy soul sail leagues and leagues beyond, ...
 Still, leagues beyond those leagues, there is more sea.²⁴⁾

Here the visual image of the sea, exclusively appealing to the eyes, is used so that the narrator, Rossetti, can make those who are in a different opinion from his have a sensuous and intuitive understanding of the profundity of the truth men cannot reach in life by their use of "thought" or intellect.

The illimitable value of soul is affirmed in the description of "thy soul" which may keep on sail ahead only to know that "there is more sea." The soul is defined here as never ceasing its pursuit for its own value, sailing the sea of profundity. Death will put an end to the function of human intellect, but it will not be able to stop that of the soul. On the contrary, it will be, as Rees says "a stimulus to high endeavour"²⁵⁾

The function of the soul, whose value is illimitable, is closely concerned with its very mystery. While the possibility of its immortality is feasible, the truth may be that "ultimate truths are unknowable."²⁶⁾

The fourth stanza of "Soothsay" also tells us about the permanent value of the soul too:

The wild waifs cast up by the sea
 Are diverse ever seasonably.
 Even so the soul-tides still may land
 A different drift upon the sand.
 But one the sea is ever more:
 And one be still, 'twixt shore and shore,
 As the sea's life, thy soul in thee.²⁷⁾

(st. 4)

Individuals will experience and suffer a variety of changes in life, while the hu-

man soul is eternal. Rossetti describes this contrast by tightly associating the soul with “the sea’s life.” The sea carries various things to the land by its everlasting tides, though the sea itself will never change. A succession of vicissitudes in life move “the soul-tides” externally and evoke various sentiments in the individual, though still the soul itself remains the same internally, never diminishing its own innate value.

Thus, as we have seen in this chapter, Rossetti puts his utmost value on the soul. The sea sometimes tortures him with its incomprehensibility and sometimes encourages his implicit belief in the validity of his soul. The sea, like his own soul, is also incomprehensible. It is, to him, the external focal point of the mystery of human existence. Internally, he is obsessed with the function of the soul, which is the other focal point of the mystery of his own existence.

IV.

Now the discussion will return to the reconsideration of the last stanza of “The Sea-limits.” We can see what is equivalent to Rossetti’s artistic activities, whose basis lies in the soul, in the meaningful action of listening to an echo from a seashell by introducing the idea of macrocosm and microcosm.²⁸⁾

A shell on the beach can be interpreted as a microcosm of the sea. Instead of listening to the actual sea, according to what Rossetti presents in the stanza, it is possible for the individual to recognize “[T]he same desire and mystery” that all human beings have and to hear “[T]he echo of the whole sea’s speech” by listening at a shell’s lips. “All knowledge is sensual apprehension ... everything that man can know is in the sound of the shell,” as Riede suggests.²⁹⁾ In addition, “thou” can be considered as another macrocosm; one individual who listens to the echo from the shell. As Rossetti declares in the stanza, the sound which signifies a total comprehension of “Earth, Sea, Man” seems to represent human beings. “All perception is thus reduced to what man feels upon his pulse,” since the echo heard from the shell is “...only the sound of his own blood rashing in his ears.”³⁰⁾ In the end, reviewing lines 4–5 in the second stanza, “the world’s heart of rest and wrath” and “[I]ts painful pulse” in the sands may, in fact, be his own heart and his own pulse, respectively. The external world around man, a macrocosm, is replaced with his internal world, a microcosm by the action of listening to the echo from the shell. His subjectivity, seemingly swallowed by the sea’s objectivity, is kept as it is in the form of “a complete solipsisism.”³¹⁾

Again, we are reminded of Benson's words which describe Rossetti as "an indoor poet." The reduction of the external world into the internal one shown in this stanza is very characteristic of him. And, paying special attention to the word "mystery" in "[T]he same desire and mystery," which the echo from the shell conveys to man, here "thou," who listens to the shell alone, can be identified with Rossetti himself. With enough precision, in his artistic creation, where he concentrates his senses upon his interior in order to grasp the "mystery" between the finite spaces of life and death. As his thought expands externally toward the limits of the sea, and reduces internally to himself, as is suggested in this poem, it is possibly concluded that the title of the poem "The Sea-limits" unfolds the self-limits of Rossetti. Both of the "limits" are connected tightly with each other, both are wrapped with the mystery.

Comparing the tones of the poems with some of the sea images previously discussed, they can be roughly divided into the three tone groups; the positive, the neutral and the negative ones in the degrees of suggesting possibilities of being blessed with eternal life. "The Sea-limits" may belong to the neutral one at a first glance, but reconsidering it can lead to a maze where we can hardly decipher its complicated tone. Yet, at least, it can be said that the poem presents the positive and the negative aspects at once to blur the boundaries, as the sea-line visually forms the focal point of the mystery with the grey sky above. The echo from the seashell conveys the other through its inclusiveness of the three key sounds of the world and the universe. The echo is anything but man's own pulsation, to the internal world. It is this kind of pseudo-duality, since the two phases of the matter are inseparable because the mystery wraps their boundary forever. It is one of the most challenging spheres Rossetti's artistic activities, one that stimulates and forces his creation to continue.

As has been discussed in Part 3, his longing for eternal life cannot be separated from "the Soul's eternity" whose value he believes in to the utmost. His belief in the soul has its basis on the possibility of accomplishing ideal love, of achieving eternal unity of his soul with his partner whose soul destined to be entwined with his in earthly love. So, some similar uses of pseudo-duality, presenting both positive and negative aspects of the mystery with no clear boundary between them, can also be found in his love poems; among them the octave of "The Dark Glass:"

Not I myself know all my love for thee:
 How should I reach so far, who cannot weigh
 To-morrow's dower by gage of yesterday?
 Shall birth and death, and all dark names that be
 As doors and windows bared to some loud sea.
 Lash deaf mine ears and blind my face with spray;
 And shall my sense pierce love, — the last relay
 And ultimate outpost of eternity?³²⁾

The octave is made up of the three questions on the possibility of ideal love, which enables man to transcend the frame of "birth and death," reaching beyond the mystery between earthly life and afterlife of eternity. As the third question in lines 7–8 "love" is paraphrased into "the last relay/And ultimate out post of eternity," it is clear that "love is the means of transcending the limitations of life, the link with the eternal" and "only love can throw any light on the profound mystery of existence."³³⁾ In lines 4–6, however, the sea, "the familiar symbol of mystery," appears and functions effectively as simile.³⁴⁾ Rossetti compares "birth and death." He cannot clearly perceive what truth lies behind the violent lashing seawaves whose large sounds and spray make human ears deaf and sight blind. And "all dark names," in which "birth and death" are included, are compared to "doors and windows," behind which is directly exposed to "some loud sea." These dark "doors and windows" as the contact point of the inside and the outside are out to sea, which man longing to reach eternity through love has to go beyond. The lush and spraying sea also implies the strong force of change he must suffer and endure. In this sense, the sea outside the "doors and windows" becomes a sphere of pseudo-dualism. This is another use of the sea's image that auditorily and visually suggests the mystery of human existence. And the "doors and windows" imply that "I" keep his subjectivity when trying to meet the world beyond the mystery from being swallowed by the sea's presence outside. However, he may well become deaf and blind because of his own agnostic feeling toward his achievement of ideal love.

The Blessed Damozel, an oil painting with a predella, is another example of such pseudo-duality characteristic to Rossetti.³⁵⁾ It is based on one of his most famous poems, "The Blessed Damozel."³⁶⁾ The poem deals with a damozel who died and ascended to heaven, leaving his lover on the earth, and, along with her deep affections toward him, her wish for the reunion with him in the heavenly

sphere of the future, in a place beyond time and space, is conveyed to us by the narrator. Rossetti painted some pictures under the same title. Taking up one painted in the years 1871–79, it is composed of a predella in which her lover on earth is depicted and a major part where the damozel is shown with three beauties and several couples embracing and enjoying their reunion.³⁷⁾ Between these two parts is a frame which signifies the vast and unimaginable distance between earth and heaven. In the poem, her words are shown in quotation marks, while his words are in parenthesis.

This device also effectively implies the distance between them.³⁸⁾ On earth he is in the daydreaming about his lover in heaven, longing for "endless unity (l. 100)" with her by the help of God. His moods are closely connected with her actions and moods in heaven; when she leans from "the golden bar of Heaven (l. 2)," he feels her lean over him and her hair fall about his face; when she dreamingly describes their reunion with the sentences beginning with "We too," he says, "We two, we two, thou say'st ! /Yea, one wast thou with me/That once of old (ll. 97–9)." When she smiles and weeps with her face between her hands, he says, "I saw her smile (l. 157)" and "I heard her tears (l. 162)." Bearing in mind the dramatic irony which is shown in this close connection between the damozel and her lover, a particular effect, in which the composition of the painting, the two different spaces divided by the frame, is produced in us.

The Blessed Damozel seems to present to us both positive and negative phases of love. Since the possibility of their reunion is wrapped in the mystery, it describes the distance between the two lovers that only, the Deity, can allow him to fill. The distance between them is represented by the frame dividing the stage into the two parts; yet, the love between them seems to suggest that they might transcend the mystic gap between them. This pseudo-duality causes the effect which drives those looking at the painting to pierce the mystery, then only to draw them into the middle of the mystery itself. As they cannot tell clearly whether or not the two lovers will be able to meet in the heavenly sphere, they will inevitably share the enigmatic mystery. In addition, this pseudo-duality is presented, though beyond time and space itself, both synchronously and diachronically; in both ways, it affects people who look at *The Blessed Damozel*.

These effects of the pseudo-duality, which Rossetti presents in a number of his poems and paintings, characteristically expresses his chiefest interest in the

mystic core of human existence, which is also the core of his artistic creation. Reversely, when he is successful in presenting this pseudo-duality, though he seems to be agnostic or solipistic in dealing with the subjects, his most characteristic and finest works are created. Furthermore, behind this always is his belief in the illimitable value of the soul, which is the key to his interpretation of both external objects and internal ideas. Many of the subjects he deals with in the process of artistic creation reflect this interpretation.

The sea itself, an external object of the world always suggested to Rossetti its innate pseudo-duality, "an unspeakably mysterious bond between the universe and the soul of man (macrocosm and microcosm)." He himself constantly tried to reconcile the duality of soul and body through his belief in "the Soul's eternity."³⁹⁾ Again, as the title of "The Sea-limits" implies, the sea is also his "self-limits." His "self-limits" seem to be always characterized with "pseudo-duality"; the negative and positive sides of a matter is presented at one time, fully related with mysticism. In other words, Rossetti describes in the sea a scene where decisive contradiction between two phases of a matter can be cancelled, not logically, but only intuitively. As a result, it destined to be difficult to clearly distinguish these two phases from each other. As readers of "The Sea-limits," we are perpetually put in the same position as the poet. We are perpetually put in the repetitive continuity of limitlessness and limitedness. To put it differently, we can be compared to a person confronted with a large TV screen, on which all he can see is a figure of himself watching the TV screen. Carefully watching the TV screen, he will surely find himself. And more carefully, perceiving himself appeared on the screen, he will find himself there again. In this way, Rossetti presents his characteristic "pseudo-duality" in the image of the sea he describes in "The Sea-limits."

Notes

- 1) "To William Michael Rossetti," 27 September 1849, Letter 46, *Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. Oswald Doughty and J. R. Wahl (London: Oxford Univ. Press), I, pp. 60–4.
Hereafter, abbreviated as *Letters*.
- 2) *The Germ: Thoughts towards Nature in Poetry, Literature and Art*, A Facsimile Reprint, introd. William Michael Rossetti (New York: AMS 1965), p. 129.
- 3) Wendell Stacy Johnson, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Painter and Poet," in *Victorian Poetry*, 3 (1965) 9–18; rpt. in *Pre-Raphaelitism: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. James Sambrook (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974).

- p. 222.
- 4) Johnson, p. 222.
 - 5) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Collected Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London: Ellis & Elvey, 1887), I, p. 254.
Hereafter, abbreviated as *Works*.
 - 6) For details, see Ronalie Roper Howard, *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 1972), p. 56.
 - 7) *Works*. p. 334.
 - 8) Genesis 3–19
 - 9) *Works*, p. 182.
 - 10) "To William Allingham," 26 June(?) 1854, Letter 176, I. 203–4 in *Letters*.
 - 11) *Works*, p. 318.
 - 12) *Works*, p. 284.
 - 13) *Works*, p. 333.
 - 14) Arthur C. Benson, *Rossetti. English Men of Letters* (London: Macmillan, 1906), p. 96.
 - 15) *Works*. p. 379.
 - 16) "Introductory Sonnet" for *The House of Life: A Sonnet Sequence*, *Works*, p. 176.
 - 17) "The Soul's Sphere," *Works*. p. 208.
 - 18) *Works*, p. 295.
 - 19) Davide G. Riede, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Limits of Victorian Visions* (London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 25–32.
Riede, taking up the four drawings done by Rossetti in his younger days, observes the beginning of "Rossetti's lifelong concern with the idea of the Doppelgänger." Besides three illustrations to "The Raven" and drawing titled as "Ulalume," *How They Met Themselves* (118), which is a more familiar painting of Rossetti's, and two drawings of Hamlet with Ophelia (152, 189) are discussed. Doppelgängers also can be seen in some of Rossetti's poems: "Lost Days," "Willowwood" and so on.
 - 20) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems*, ed. Oswald Daughy, Everyman's Library 627 (New York: Dent & Dutton, 1961), p. 131.
 - 21) Joans Rees, *The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Modes of Self-Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), p. 50.
 - 22) *Works*. p. 297.
 - 23) William Michael Rossetti, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti as Designer and Writer* (London: Cassel & Company, 1889; rpt. New York: AMS, 1970), p. 239.
 - 24) *Works*, p. 213.
 - 25) Rees, p. 164.
 - 26) Riede, p. 164.
 - 27) *Works*. p. 334.
 - 28) Howard, p. 57.
 - 29) Riede, p. 103.
 - 30) Riede, p. 103.
 - 31) Riede, p. 103.

- 32) *Works*. p. 193.
- 33) Howard, p. 174.
- 34) Howard, p. 172.
- 35) Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Blessed Damozel*, Fogg Museum of Art, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.
- 36) *Works*. pp. 232–6.
- 37) Virginia Surtees, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti 1828–1882, The Paintings and Drawings A Catalogue Raisonné*, (London: Oxford Univ. Press 1971), I, pp. 141–2. *The Blessed Damozel* is categorized as no. 224.
- 38) See, Rees, pp. 48–9
- 39) Florence Saunders Boos, *The Poetry of Dante G. Rossetti: A Critical Reading and Source Study* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), p. 238.

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