

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI IN THE ERA OF THE NEW WOMAN AND *FIN DE SIÈCLE* CULTURE

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*Where are the songs I used to know,
Where are the notes I used to sing?
I have forgotten everything
I used to know so long ago.*
– Rossetti, “The Key-Note”

What are the “notes I used to sing?” Perhaps the lost notes belong to an earlier, pre-conscious knowledge prior to Rossetti’s first lyric writing. Perhaps the lost notes refer to a state of amnesia in which that early writing itself has been lost. “The Key-Note” stands first in *A Pageant and Other Poems* after the dedicatory sonnet to her mother. It signals that the dominant note of these 1881 poems, the poems of her maturity, will be different from past work.¹ A new subject, in a double sense, is to appear – new themes, and a different subjectivity or lyric “I.” In a typically chiasmic phrase the poet’s song will both “break and cheer,” like the Robin’s, the “unlovely rest” of winter, the unlovely sleep of the late century. What appeared in 1881 was a new order of lyric that is inconspicuously daring. The “Key-Note” poem’s fearlessly succinct patterns of repetition, its internal tonalities, and its effortless capacity to redistribute metrical weight – there is a ghost of a caesura between “know” and “so” in the last line – are as consummate as ever. Rossetti did not remake her poetic language to sound a new keynote. Rather the components of her writing are exposed with an imperturbable nakedness. But the crystal timelessness of her language is deceptive – a trait she shares with her contemporary, Thomas Hardy. Now, in 1881, her language is put to different uses. It throws out a challenge to *fin de siècle* culture and creates a new philosophical lyric.

The meanings bound up in the word “pageant, a sequence of images passing and transforming themselves before the eyes, and specifically the many meanings of “passing,” are at the centre of this new lyric project. And, as “The