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Fragment and Disease: Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Bride's Prelude*

Although Rossetti in 1881, near the end of his life, found it to be "unelevated and repulsive" (*Letters* 4:1861), *The Bride's Prelude* had been for him an ongoing preoccupation. At least five times in his life he adverted to it. In 1847-49, he wrote the first 530 lines; in 1859-60 he attempted but failed to complete the poem, adding 430 lines. During 1870-72 he drew two studies for a painting of an incident from the poem, and in 1878 he proposed in prose a plan to complete the poem, possibly inspired by Elizabeth Siddal's 1860 watercolor, *Woeful Victory*. In 1881 he reluctantly included the still incomplete and now "repulsive" fragment in his *Poetical Works*, in order to make the new volume "as big as I can."¹ Rossetti's inability and/or unwillingness to complete *The Bride's Prelude* and his growing distaste for it indicate that we should read it as a true fragment. *The Bride's Prelude* suggests, as Levinson argues romantic fragments do, "an ideal integrity and extensiveness" (25), which would reveal itself in the case of the narrative *The Bride's Prelude*, if both the reason for Alonse's fear of marrying Urscllyn, the once loved father of her child, and the whereabouts of this child were presented. As a fragment, it anticipates a subsequent narrative performance, which, if present, would resolve the "prelude" into a complete narrative performance, and allow the poem to achieve what Levinson identifies as "ideal integrity." Yet this subsequent and anticipated performance remains uninscribed; "the poem's irresolution is experienced by the reader as a determinant or shaped absence" (Levinson 25).

It is my argument that *The Bride's Prelude* is what Levinson designates a "true fragment," a text which attempts to reverse the process of literary transformation and to restore poetry "to its originary condition as natural discourse or experience" (Levinson 73). *The Bride's Prelude* fails to complete itself as a narrative, transforms itself from a prelude with an anticipated,

concordant resolution to a fragment through both Alonse's narrative technique and that of her narrator. This technique decomposes both Alonse's narrative and the narrative of her narrative by reminding us of other possible narratized sequences of images.² These primarily auditory interruptions indicate that the foregrounded narratives of *The Bride's Prelude* are only two of many possible narrative sequences. Fragments of these other sequences are consistently evoked to interrupt, delay, and suspend the text, thereby insuring it will never complete itself. The effects of Alonse's unspecified "old sickness," which affects her again after her affair with Urscllyn, defines not only her narrative mode but the narrative mode of *The Bride's Prelude*.

I had such yearnings as brought tears.
And a wan dizziness:
Motion, like feeling grew intense;
Sight was a haunting evidence
And sound a pang that snatched the sense.
(ll.591-95)

It is not, therefore, inaccurate to describe *The Bride's Prelude* as a diseased text. As a fragment it is a morbid deviation from an implied normalcy. As a narrative it is diseased in its dizzying and painful emphasis on aleatory auditory detail, an emphasis so exaggerated that it arrests Alonse and her narrator in their parallel narrative acts.

In his very polemical *Degeneration* (1892), Max Nordau discusses the Pre-Raphaelites as one example of *fin-de-siècle* mental degeneration, "the unbalanced condition of a weak and diseased brain" (68). For Nordau, Pre-Raphaelite art and poetry manifest the "stigmata" of mysticism. "The healthy man is in a condition to obtain sharply-defined presentations, and to comprehend their real connection. The mystic, on