

“THE LOWEST PLACE”: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
AND THE PROBLEM OF BOREDOM

Rebekah Lamb

During the summer of 1849, having recently recovered from a serious though undiagnosed bout of poor health (bearing many of the symptoms of a nervous disorder), Christina Rossetti travelled on her own to Pleasley Hill, a village close to Mansfield in Nottinghamshire, to visit the family of her then fiancé, James Collinson. Throughout Rossetti’s month’s stay with the Collinsons, James was away in Wales, working on landscape paintings of the Isle of Wight. During her visit, Rossetti’s letters to her family are marked by a tone of increasing restlessness, bearing the symptoms of a boredom similar to the kind found in some of her most developed female characters: Maude from *Maude: A Monodrama* (1850), the Princess from “The Prince’s Progress” (1866), and the Charlmont sisters in her novella, *Commonplace, A Tale of Today* (1870). Despite enjoying the tranquillity and beauty of the English countryside, Rossetti often found the rhythms and social norms of country-living tedious. This reaction is especially seen in one of her letters to William Michael, in August 1849, in which her tone modulates drastically, albeit subtly, revealing a series of frictions between her own desires on the one hand and the social expectations and conventions of her hosts on the other. At turns, she is acerbic, playful, discontented, or bordering on the quietly desperate. Nevertheless, the persistent tone Rossetti conveys throughout the letter is one of boredom, of “being held in limbo” (105), to borrow Martin Heidegger’s description of how situational boredom, stemming from frustrating social circumstances and the routines of everyday life, radically affects one’s sense of subjectivity:

Though my visit here is extremely tolerable, still the postman is quite an event in my existence.... Local converse wearies me somewhat; yet this advantage it possesses – I cannot join in it; so may, during its continuance, abandon myself to my own meditations.... The talk of *beaus* is as perpetual here as at Mrs. Heimmann’s: however, few jokes have been passed on me then might have been anticipated.... In my desperation I knit lace with a perseverance completely foreign to my nature.... Ah Will! If you were here we could write *bout-rimés* sonnets, and be subdued together. (*Letters* 1:18-19)

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