

MOUNTING THE “KINDLED STAIRS,” AESTHETICALLY

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“I choose the stairs that mount above,” the speaker of “The Convent Threshold” informs her lover, “Stair after golden skyward stair” (4-5). He, alas, prefers to look “earthward” (17). Published in Christina Rossetti’s first volume, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), the text depends upon two symbolic spatial domains to make its case for renunciation. The overthought, to borrow Hopkins’s term (2:584), concerns the design of the religious house where the speaker will endure a penitential life to expiate the “stain” of past sexual sins deftly but decorously suggested by the “lily feet [that] are soiled” with “scarlet mud” (12, 7-8). The underthought is more complex: a biblical and Dantean world of stairs both purgatorial and paradisaical. In the spirit of steps that can lead one up, down, and variously (but closer to Rembrandt’s *Philosopher’s Staircase* than M.S. Escher’s *Relativity*), this intermedial essay traces the staircase motif from Pre-Raphaelite elaborations to a parody of aestheticism, from a Danish ballad translated twice for Victorian readers to a translation of the *Purgatorio*. Brief considerations of Dante’s stairways and William Blake’s Dante will be enfolded. Throughout, the ways in which stairs connect and make bodily motion possible will be explored, how their natural and architectural iterations have become stages for human drama. I will also consider the cultural narratives embedded in texts and readers, artifacts and viewers. Many works take advantage of deeply engrained presumptions; one painting in particular perplexes the tradition that human bodies going upstairs are affirmative, aspirational, and bodies going downstairs are either threatening or threatened.

“They Stood up upon the Stairs ... and Cried with a Loud Voice”

Long before Christina Rossetti’s golden stairs, there were the steps of Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, and historians. Solomon’s temple appropriately includes central “winding stairs” (1 Kings 6.8); Ezekiel notes every significant stairway in walled cities’ ramparts; the Israelites reassert their desire for heavenly sanction and support by standing “upon the stairs” and crying out to

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