



The Dynamics of Progress and Regress in Rossetti's "Eden Bower": Lilith as a Degenerative Force?

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ABSTRACT

The Victorian period was characterized by scientific discoveries in various fields, most notably Darwin's theory of evolution, which had an enduring influence and triggered various responses from the social and natural scientists of the period. This interdisciplinary dialogue on the topic paved the way for the emergence of the evolutionary discourse in which the terms "progression", "regression", and "degeneration" occupied a central place. Likewise, Dante Gabriel Rossetti problematized the dichotomy between progress and regress in his ballad "Eden Bower," which revisits the biblical narrative of the Fall. This study argues that Dante Gabriel Rossetti actually comments on the Victorian discussions on the alternative routes of evolution through his treatment of Lilith as a metamorphosing protagonist. It explores how Rossetti represents Lilith's mobility on the ladder of evolution to reveal the Victorian anxiety concerning the degenerative nature of women and present the reader his understanding of history. Delving into Rossetti's juxtaposition of the metaphysical and the scientific accounts of the history of human kind, the essay responds to the existing scholarship on the poem that tends to interpret Rossetti's treatment of Lilith in terms of moral conceptions and the stereotypical figure of the Victorian femme fatale.

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So Sunday I spent at Ravenside and there wrote some fourteen stanzas of my *Lilith* poem, which I think will be a good one. If not falling so easily into shape as *Troy Town*, and turning out necessarily rather longer, I nevertheless found it yield ample suggestions for a central representative treatment of its splendid subject. I call it *Eden Bower*, and will send you a copy if finished soon, as I dare say it will be a day or two. (Rossetti, *Letters* 746)

[I]n woman the whole structure and life rallies more closely and obviously round the sexual function than in man [...] Woman is the more primitive, the more intuitive, the more emotional. [...] [I]n a way she is nearer the child herself, and nearer to the savage. (Carpenter 39–40)

Lilith was among Dante Gabriel Rossetti's favorite characters and she becomes his protagonist in various works such as his sonnet "Body's Beauty" (1866), painting *Lady Lilith*, drawing *Eden Bower* (1869), and refrain ballad "Eden Bower" (1870). While the first two of these works have greatly attracted the attention of critics, Rossetti's treatment of Lilith in his ballad "Eden Bower" has been put into a secondary position. In spite of Rossetti's excitement about the ballad, as evident in his above-quoted letter, which was written in 1869 after completing the fourteen stanzas of the poem, it has been mostly interpreted in comparison to his aforementioned sonnet and painting. Likewise, the drawing *Eden Bower* has been ignored almost completely. Rossetti's representation of Lilith in his sonnet "Body's Beauty" and the painting *Lady Lilith* is mainly examined with regard to how Lilith stands as a dangerous femme fatale: for Virginia Allen, Lilith, in these works, instantiates "the legendary hazards of female sexuality," thus "the New Woman, free of male control" and resisting "the patriarchal Victorian family" (Allen 286).¹ Accordingly, existing criticism of "Eden Bower" foregrounds Lilith as a perilous sexual icon: Philip Pittman, for instance, argues that Lilith is "sterile" and "sodomistic" and her "exercise of love" in "Eden Bower" is "physical" and "self-gratifying" (45). She is hence the epitome of a "recognizable facet of human nature" that causes "fall[ing] away from" a better state to a worse one (Pittman 54). For Jean Wasko, Lilith, as the emblem of erotic love instead of the "spiritual", reveals Dante Gabriel Rossetti's "moral perspective" with regard to "destruction and death" that physical love may cause (Wasko 334–335). Similarly, Elizabeth G. Gitter interprets Lilith in the ballad as a "terrifying," "deadly," and "dangerous" female, "endowed with reptilian phallus" as a result of her "perverse" intercourse with her old lover, the Snake (950).²

I agree with all these critics since such sexual connotations abound in these works. However, I believe that they have overlooked, in Rossetti's terms, one of the "ample suggestions," which the poem yields, that is, how Lilith in "Eden Bower" reflects Victorian scientific debates and concerns about evolution with respect to the role of the female, as exemplified by the initial quotation by Edward Carpenter. Departing from previous approaches to the topic, this study explores how and why Rossetti re-handles the biblical narrative on the origin of mankind by re-imagining Lilith, metamorphosed from a snake to a woman, as the initiator of the Fall. Rossetti's treatment of Lilith in the poem, I argue, is informed by the Victorian scientific discourse on the dichotomy between progress and regress, thus revealing his conception of history as a constant and inevitable shift between these two movements. Drawing on various Victorian texts in the field of natural and social sciences and building especially on Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) and *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), this essay responds to the existing scholarship on Rossetti's engagement with Lilith by highlighting how "Eden Bower" problematizes Victorian discussions on the nature and possible routes of evolution.³

1 The term "New Woman" was coined in the 1890s to refer to newly emerging modern, feminist, independent, and well-educated women. See: Carolyn Christensen Nelson's Introduction to *A New Woman Reader: Fictions, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s* (pp. ix-xiv).

2 Such interpretations stem from the stereotypical understanding of deviant feminine sexuality in the fin-de-siècle. On the topic, see Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture*.

3 *The Origin of Species* was first published in 1859. My essay uses its sixth edition (published in 1876) as it is the latest version including all of Darwin's modifications in his theory and text. It should be especially noted that I use various critical texts on the evolutionary theory, which were produced in the nineteenth century, either before or after the publication of "Eden Bower" in 1870. Although he might not have had first-hand knowledge of these texts, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, I argue, employed the discourse of nineteenth-century evolutionary studies in his ballad.

"Eden Bower" introduces Lilith by foregrounding Rossetti's original contributions to the story of the Fall: Lilith was not human, but "made like a soft sweet woman" to become the first "wife of Adam" (ll. 1–4). The poem starts at the moment when she was driven from Eden Bower and meets her old lover, the Snake. The very first words she speaks to the Snake reveal Rossetti's take on the biblical account: "To thee I come when the rest is over;/A snake was I when thou wast my lover." (ll. 11–12). The reader learns that Lilith is metamorphosed from a snake to a woman, and the motive behind this transformation was to make her Adam's wife. Her metamorphosis in "Eden Bower" is clearly related to early beliefs in the nature of demons in the Talmudic tradition: as the demons were "created so late on Friday", God could not finalize them, and thus they became "bodiless spirits" (Briggs 132). They were believed to be in constant search for "men's semen" to create a body for themselves (Briggs 132). Initially, Lilith in "Eden Bower" has a serpent body, yet it turns out to be a fluid one: God bestows upon her the female body to become the wife of Adam. Yet, after being banished from Eden Bower, Lilith seeks to return to her former form. In addition to the Talmudic tradition, *Genesis* stands as another potential religious source for Rossetti's re-imagining of Lilith as Adam's first wife (Briggs 132). In the Bible, there are different accounts of how God created a female companion for Adam: on the one hand, it says "male and female created he them" (*King James Version*, Gen. 5.2). On the other hand, the second chapter places man in a primary and woman in a secondary position by saying "the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man" (*King James Version*, Gen. 2.22).⁴ Here, there is an ambiguity with regard to how and when woman came into life, and whether God created two women at different times. Rossetti plays with this gap by portraying Lilith as Adam's first wife, who has metamorphosed from a snake into a woman to fulfil this role.

Besides these religious accounts, Lilith's transformation in "Eden Bower" has further connotations in terms of the new status she has acquired as the wife of Adam. Before she is dismissed from the Garden of Eden, Lilith enjoys her newly acquired position as the female companion of "the earth's new creature" (l. 16). She strolls down memory lane and evokes the memory of sexual joys they had: "All the day and the night together / My breath could shake his soul like a feather. // 'What great joys had Adam and Lilith! -'" (ll. 27–29). Moreover, she describes their marriage in terms of power relations by saying "Adam was thrall to Lilith" and "Lilith was queen of Adam" (l. 21 and l. 25 respectively). These lines are highly suggestive in terms of what Lilith's transformation denotes: turning from a snake into a woman, Lilith ascends in the hierarchy of being although she is still the weaker sex. It justifies the reason for Lilith's metamorphosis into a woman by referring to her crucial role as the wife of Adam, and thus her ascension up the ladder of being totally depends upon this marital bond. Accordingly, she expresses their relationship as an empowering force for herself. Metamorphosis, in Lilith's case, signals upward mobility, betterment in her condition, and thus progression.

From a historically informed perspective, such a portrayal of Lilith as a figure making progress through metamorphosis is highly suggestive, especially with regard to what the notion of "change" signified for what is taken to be the Victorian frame of mind. The first half of the Victorian period was characterized by the rapid growth of 'civilization' as a result of industrialization and the development of science, which triggered an epistemological turn. "The geologists and palaeontologists of the early nineteenth century created the first realistic outline of the history of the earth and its inhabitants based on the fossil record" (Bowler 4). Scientific discoveries and debates not only reshaped most educated Victorians' perception of life on the earth, but also made them highly conscious of living in a new world that was in a constant state of flux and resisted interpretation in light of old categories. This idea of progress was common in nineteenth-century Europe, so much so that Kingsley Martin notes "progress was the religion of the nineteenth century, just as Catholicism was of the Middle Ages" (299). Published in 1859, Darwin's *The Origin of Species* epitomized the newly emerging attitude towards the biblical narrative of the origin of humankind. Evolutionary ideas had already been under discussion in his period. However, what is radical in Darwin's account was that he defines the working mechanism of evolution with the term "natural selection,"

⁴ On the subject of how the legend of Lilith "sprang out of" this ambivalence, see Briggs 132.

which, according to Darwin, “works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to *progress towards perfection*” (Darwin, *Origin of Species* 428 emphasis mine). His formula, thus, equates change with progress and betterment. Discussions on the concepts of change and progress were limited not only to the field of evolutionary studies in the natural sciences, but also conspicuous in the social sciences, which triggered the construction of the term “Social Darwinism.” Referring to how Darwin’s evolutionary theory can be employed in disparate social disciplines, the term has no single definition. Yet, it stems from the idea that “Darwin’s theory of evolution” is valid with respect to the “struggle for existence amongst animals and plants;” and “[t]his same notion of a struggle for existence is [...] equally applicable to human individuals and/or human societies” (Strawbridge 103). Most importantly, some Victorians believed that the evolutionary transformation such a struggle triggered was “*developmental and progressive*” (emphasis mine Strawbridge 103). For these Victorians, as progress was promoted and “positively valued,” evolutionary alterations were to be “cultivated and nurtured” (Strawbridge 103).

Viewed from this angle, Rossetti’s Lilith in “Eden Bower” is indeed ‘blessed’ with a sudden evolution thanks to her metamorphosis from a snake into a woman along with having the privileged position of “the earth’s new creature” (l. 16). Becoming Adam’s wife gives her a domestic role that can only be realized by becoming a woman and she fulfils the necessities of her new position, such as having “bright babes” (l. 33). This tallies with the Darwinian principle of evolution since natural selection works through the survival of the fittest:

This principle of preservation, or the survival of the fittest, I have called Natural Selection. It leads to the improvement of each creature in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life; and consequently, in most cases, to what must be regarded as an advance in organisation. (Darwin, *Origin of the Species* 102–103)⁵

Rossetti’s Lilith, in a similar vein, changes in accordance with the conditions of her new life. At first sight, the result of her transformation appears to be progress, almost mirroring that of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. It is nearly impossible for the Victorian reader not to recognize the positive connotations of Lilith’s metamorphosis as the public was highly aware of living in an age characterized by a constant shift aiming for the good of all. This mindset is best exemplified by John Stuart Mill’s self-conscious remarks on his age in “The Spirit of the Age” (1831):

The conviction is already not far from being universal, that *the times are pregnant with change*; and that the nineteenth century will be known to posterity as *the era of one of the greatest revolutions of which history has preserved the remembrance*, in the human mind, and in the whole constitution of human society. (emphasis mine 52)

Mill reflects on the awareness of social transformation and how the Victorians embraced such changes in “The Spirit of the Age.” This shows that social scientists were also under the influence of the evolutionary theory, or at least evolutionary ideas, thus welcoming change, which was believed to trigger progress. Rossetti’s treatment of Lilith at the beginning of “Eden Bower” is replete with an understanding of history as progression, denoting a continuous improvement.

However, Rossetti’s Lilith also shows signs of abnormality, a detail which signals that her transformation is not complete. For instance, she describes her children as “[s]hapes that coiled in the woods and waters, / Glittering sons and radiant daughters,” which reminds the reader of Lilith’s previous body as a snake (ll. 35–36). Therefore, the lines signal that she cannot fully fit into her new environment. In this way, the poem immediately challenges the illusion of progress it has created by presenting the reader the other side of the coin, that is, the possibility of degeneration. This is in line with the Victorian trend from optimism about evolutionary progressivism to anxieties about survival in the second half of the nineteenth century. The next part of this essay will focus on how Lilith in “Eden Bower” epitomizes the possibility of regression with regard to the Victorian fear of degeneration, characterizing the end of the century.

⁵ Upon reading Darwin, Herbert Spencer coined the term “survival of the fittest” in his *Principles of Biology* (444–445), and Darwin employs it in the fifth and sixth editions of the *Origin of Species*.

YEARNING FOR THE FORM OF THE SNAKE: THE REGRESSIVE TURN IN “EDEN BOWER”

Lilith's metamorphosis from a snake into a woman creates the impression of advancement and betterment in her condition, yet her less than full transformation leads one to question to what extent her bodily change signifies progression. This is further problematized by her dismissal from heaven. The reader learns that Lilith “was the first that thence was driven” and Eve replaces her as Adam's wife (ll. 7–8). Although she is expelled from Eden Bower, Lilith still has a female body. She meets her old lover, the Snake, to assume her previous form. She begs the Snake, saying

‘Strong is God, the great God of Eden:

(*Sing Eden Bower!*)

Over all He made He hath power;

But lend me thou thy shape for an hour!” (ll. 57–60)

On the one hand, what she asks for contradicts the evolutionary and positivist dream of progression, which, in Lilith's case, is transcending an animal history. On the other hand, it chimes with the evolutionary principle of adapting to the circumstances of the new environment in order to survive. Due to her dismissal from heaven, Rossetti's Lilith seeks revenge on God, Adam and Eve, and to do so, she would like to hide her identity by taking once again the form of a snake. Here, the reader recognizes another original touch of Rossetti: Lilith unravels her revenge plan to the Snake by saying she will return to Eden Bower in the shape of the Snake and tempt Eve to eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which will lead to the Fall of humankind (ll. 93–104).⁶ To achieve this aim, she is eager to descend the ladder of being. This is in line with the Victorian anxiety concerning the possibility of degeneration. Darwin's *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) exemplifies this idea through various warnings about the route evolution can take. He states that “[w]e must remember that progress is no invariable rule” and “[n]atural selection acts only in a tentative manner” (*The Descent*, 177 and 178 respectively). Likewise, the biologist E. Ray Lankester, in his *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880), criticizes the common European fallacy with regard to how they viewed their place in history:

In accordance with a tacit assumption of universal progress- an unreasoning optimism- we [the white races of Europe] are accustomed to regard ourselves as necessarily progressing, as necessarily having arrived at a higher and more elaborated condition than that which our ancestors reached, and as destined to progress still further. On the other hand, it is well to remember that we are subject to the general laws of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress. (59–60)

Lankester gives voice to Victorian doubts about progressivism by arguing that the individual's response to his/her environment does not always lead to progress, but on the contrary, to regression if the environment is not encouraging enough to trigger betterment in one's condition (60–61). Likewise, after falling from heaven, Rossetti's Lilith tries to fit into her environment by borrowing the form of the Snake so that she can be strong enough to fight against God and his creatures. For her, this is the only way to “let God learn how I [Lilith] loved and hated / Man in the image of God created” (ll. 47–48). She admits that “[s]trong is God, the fell foe of Lilith,” but tells the Snake that they “will smite him” if he follows her plan (l. 53 and l. 56 respectively).

Moreover, Lilith's strategy in persuading the Snake to lend her his form complicates the question of degeneration. She says

‘Help me once against Eve and Adam!

(*Sing Eden Bower!*)

Help me once for this one endeavor,

And then my love shall be thine for ever! (ll. 49–52)

6 Some critics compare this shapeshifting element Rossetti introduces into the Biblical narrative of the Fall to John Milton's re-imagining of the Snake as Satan in *Paradise Lost*. See Briggs 135 and Pittman 53.

The reader encounters a bargain in which Lilith offers her love and body in exchange for the shape of the Snake. She manipulates him by saying

'Would'st thou know the heart's hope of Lilith?

(Sing Eden Bower!)

Then bring thou close thine head till it glisten

Along my breast, and lip me and listen. (ll. 73–76)

Lilith narrates the steps of her revenge plan by seducing the Snake through sexually evocative words. She addresses him by saying

'O my love, come nearer to Lilith!

(Sing Eden Bower!)

In thy sweet folds bind me and bend me,

And let me feel the shape thou shalt lend me! (ll. 89–92)

Rossetti not only represents Lilith as a degenerate dismissed from heaven, but also as a deviant female, trying to have intercourse with an animal. She offers the Snake various sexual joys to borrow his form. This image of the perverted woman is of great importance as it exemplifies how Victorian anxieties about regression trigger scapegoating. The figure of the femme fatale was wandering in the corridors of the Victorian mind as an emblem of regression. The construction of such a sexually manipulative and threatening female image is linked to the role of the female sex in the evolutionary studies of the period. Nicola Gauld dwells on this topic, arguing that “[b]y the end of the 19th century [...], it was generally agreed that by their ability to procreate women were closer to nature than men, and by default, were also closer to the animal” (37). Rossetti plays on the conventional link between nature and women: his female protagonist Lilith was originally a snake and is now eager to have sexual intercourse with her old lover, the Snake, in order to resume an animal body. Lilith's bestial origin has an enduring effect on her even after she becomes Adam's wife, so much so that she cannot give birth to humans but to “glittering sons and radiant daughters” which “coiled in the woods and waters” (l. 36 and l. 35 respectively). For the Victorian frame of mind, “the female body [...] became a site of reflection, increasingly endowed with erotic potential and meaning, exemplifying the darker, more dangerous and threatening side of humanity, while posing the threat of regression to the 19th century's favourite, and most controversial topic, man's bestial origins” (Gauld 37). Depicting Lilith as a femme fatale with a bestial background, Rossetti expresses the Victorian fear of degeneration by referring to the scientific discourse of the period, which conceives the position of women on the evolutionary ladder as standing close to the beasts.

Furthermore, Lilith's endeavors to make a pact with the Snake carry traces of the language of evolutionary studies especially with regard to the so-called strengths and weaknesses of women. It has been argued that Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin exerted influence over each other's studies. This is evident in Spencer's “Psychology of the Sexes” (1873), interpreted as an example of Social Darwinism. In this work, Spencer utilizes the evolutionary theory to come up with some “mental traits” associated with the two sexes (33). He claims that sex-differences “result[] from a somewhat earlier arrest of individual evolution in women than in men, necessitated by the reservation of vital power to meet the cost of reproduction” (Spencer, “Psychology of the Sexes” 31–32). Reproduction prevents women from reaching the level of men's intellectual capacity (“Psychology of the Sexes” 32). Women hence have improved certain characteristics to survive, such as their “ability to please,” “conceal[ing] their antagonism,” and “the arts of persuasion” (“Psychology of the Sexes” 33). Spencer explains the first of these qualities by saying “among women living at the mercy of men, those who succeeded most in pleasing would be the most likely to survive and leave posterity” (“Psychology of the Sexes” 33). Similarly, Rossetti's Lilith makes sure she pleases the male Snake: first asking “[a]m I sweet, O sweet Snake of Eden?” (l. 77), she unravels the plan she is going to realize (l. 80). At the very beginning of the poem, Lilith distinguishes herself from others as “the fairest snake in Eden” (l. 13) and later, as the female who is given the prestigious position of being Adam's wife by “the earth's will” (l. 15). To seduce the Snake, she even narrates the sexual joys she had with Adam by saying her “breath could shake his [Adam's] soul like a feather” (l. 28). Thus, she singles herself out as a woman with a greater capacity to please men. In addition

to emphasizing her ability to please, Lilith meets Spencer's second criteria in terms of how she includes an element of metamorphosis in her revenge plan. Spencer argues that women who were successful in "conceal[ing] their antagonism" survived in the patriarchal societies of the past; hence this feature has become a characterizing trait of women ("Psychology of the Sexes" 33). Likewise, Lilith knows that she cannot take revenge on God, Adam and Eve on her own, and needs to deceive them by covering her identity. If she goes back to Eden in the shape of a snake,

'Then Eve shall eat and give unto Adam;

(Alas the hour!)

And then they both shall know they are naked,

And their hearts ache as my [Lilith's] heart hath ached. (ll. 109–112)

Lilith acknowledges her weakness and her enemy's strength by saying "God's strong will our necks are under" (l. 43), yet, as her intricate plan indicates, this does not stop her from taking revenge. Thus, she has to persuade the Snake, exemplifying the third Spencerian mental trait associated with women. Spencer argues that "the arts of persuasion enabled women to protect themselves, and by implication their offspring" ("Psychology of the Sexes" 33). However, in the case of Lilith, it is not a matter of self-protection or protecting her children, but more of attacking and beating a stronger enemy. She tells the Snake that when her plan is realized, she will come back to the Snake. Hearing the cries of Eve and Adam, which will echo in Eden Bower, Lilith and the Snake will engage in sexual intercourse: "How shall we mingle our love's caresses, / I in thy coils, and thou in my tresses!" (ll. 149–152).

EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF DEGENERATION: THE CONSEQUENCES OF LILITH'S REVENGE

That Lilith mentions how the desperate screams of Adam and Eve will be heard all over Eden Bower has further significance with regard to the way her revenge is going to proceed. She says

'With those names, ye echoes of Eden,

(Sing Eden Bower!)

Fire shall cry from my heart that burneth,-

"Dust he is and to dust returneth!" (ll. 153–156)

The immediate result of Lilith's plan is the Fall of humankind, hence mortality, which can be seen as a regress from their previous state of immortality in heaven. Moreover, Lilith foresees that its consequences will be manifold and complex. She thus informs the Snake about the upcoming catastrophes by saying "[w]rap me round in the form I'll borrow / And let me tell thee of sweet to-morrow" (ll. 159–160). The resonating cries of Adam and Eve refer to how Lilith's plan will have echoes in the future in the sense that in time, Lilith's plan will cause degeneration at multiple levels. She dwells on these outcomes by asking the rhetorical question "[w]hat of Adam cast out of Eden?" and says he will have to endure the burden of cultivating the land for food while Eve will suffer from the hardships of childbirth as she will be the "mother of all men living" (l. 173 and l. 180 respectively). That Lilith organizes a revenge which will unfold step by step in the future has great significance in terms of how the Victorians viewed the process of degeneration. In nineteenth-century England, "the prospect of the direct destruction, extinction or impotence of the state was on the whole seen to be implausible" and "[t]hose who portrayed the social danger [of degeneration] in such sensational terms were [...] coded as scare-mongers" (Pick 184). Instead, as Pick argues, the Victorians envisaged "a slower, mediated process of decline in which a relative deterioration in the body of the city population in turn undermined the 'imperial race' with ensuing disintegrative effects upon the nation and empire" (184). In a similar fashion, Lilith's revenge will cause degeneration gradually as the consequences of her plan come to pass one after the other.

It is apparent that Eve's womb is a special target for Lilith, saying "[t]o Eve's womb, from our sweet to-morrow, / God shall greatly multiply sorrow." (ll. 183–184). The lines are a clear reference to Chapter III in *Genesis*, in which God tells Eve that "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow

and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children” (*King James Version*, Gen. 3.16). In Rossetti’s “Eden Bower,” Lilith foresees God’s punishment, which paves the way for the degeneration of humankind at greater intensity. Aiming for more than the death of Adam and Eve, Lilith foretells that the Fall of Adam and Eve will turn into the original sin of mankind, and hence will influence all forthcoming generations. This reveals the broad scope of her revenge: it not only triggers the Fall of Adam and Eve from Eden Bower, but the regression of all humankind. By portraying Lilith’s attack on Eve’s womb, Rossetti suggests that all future embryos will contain the seeds of the degeneration of humankind. In terms of the evolutionary studies of the Victorian period, Lilith’s interest in future generations is suggestive, especially if one thinks about the initial use of the term “evolution.” It “had originally been applied to the growth of the embryo, and took on its modern meaning only in the mid-nineteenth century through a deliberate extension into all areas of development” (Bowler 10). Dwelling on this shift in the usage of the term, Bowler argues that “[o]ne of the most popular expressions of nineteenth-century evolutionism was the recapitulation theory – the claim that the past evolution of the species is displayed in the growth of the modern embryo” (10).⁷ The modern embryo inevitably carries traces of its ancestors according to the recapitulationists. The embryo, thus, for the evolutionist Victorian frame of mind, stood as a powerful symbol of the progression of human beings to their current state. The concern with progeny was very common in the nineteenth century as the quotation from Mill’s “The Spirit of the Age” expresses through its focus on how “posterity,” in Mill’s terms, will receive the achievements of the Victorians (52). This interest in their reception by upcoming generations was turned into a source of anxiety in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in regard to whether their descendants would improve upon the current conditions or regress owing to traces of degeneration they carry within themselves. Similarly, through its representation of Eve’s womb as the site of regression, Rossetti’s “Eden Bower” expresses the Victorians’ distress regarding the fate of their offspring.⁸ Thus, the poem touches on the late nineteenth-century paranoia of how degeneration will lead to the regression of innocent people.

ROSSETTI’S CONCEPTION OF HISTORY: THE INTERFACE BETWEEN THE METAPHYSICAL AND THE SCIENTIFIC

Rossetti’s Lilith is not only responsible for the disasters which befall humankind and trigger regression, she also causes the first murder in history. After causing Adam and Eve to turn into mortal creatures with her plan, Lilith makes them suffer Abel’s death and Cain’s fratricide. She refers to Cain and Abel as “two men-children born for their [Adam and Eve’s] pleasure” (l. 192). The line depicts Adam and Eve’s offspring as the outcome of their sexual intercourse. Jealous of this sexual intimacy, Lilith includes these two figures in her revenge, and hence explains to the Snake how the scope of the degeneration they have initiated will be widened in the future:

‘The first is Cain and the second Abel:

(*Sing Eden Bower!*)

The soul of one shall be made thy brother,

And thy tongue shall lap the blood of the other.’

(*Alas the hour!*) (ll. 193–197)

In the Bible, Cain murders Abel after God accepts the offering of Abel, but not Cain’s (*King James Version*, Gen. 4.1–4.9). While Cain becomes the first human born on the earth, Abel is the first to be murdered. In Rossetti’s re-visiting of the biblical narrative, this event, again foreseen by Lilith, is one of the results of her plan. By narrating it as a consequence of her revenge, Lilith shows how the degeneration of humankind will be realized through the offspring of Adam and

⁷ Although there have been various critiques written on the recapitulation theory, Ernst Haeckel is generally considered as one of its main developers. He expressed the theory through his motto, “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” (qtd. in Gould 217). See Chapter VII, (Part 27, pp. 214–222) in Gould’s *Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History*.

⁸ From a different perspective, Virginia Allen analyzes Rossetti’s painting *Lady Lilith* with regard to Lilith’s possible effects on men and their offspring. She interprets Lilith’s relation to future generations by saying “Lilith, and later femme fatales, not only destroy men, but also their hope of progeny: their posterity. Through her, they are doomed not merely to Death and Hell, but to permanent obliteration” (294).

Eve: birth brings death, pleasure leads to pain, and hence each progression in history inevitably contains in itself the seeds of regression.

Throughout the poem, Lilith offers a conception of history with regard to the dynamics of progression and regression. “Eden Bower” shifts between different time frames: Lilith goes back to the past when she narrates her memories of being with Adam, the reader witnesses her endeavors to seduce the Snake in the present, and she foretells forthcoming disasters that will take place in the future.⁹ In this sense, Rossetti’s “Eden Bower” has a fluctuating time frame: the past, the present and the future all merge into each other in the poem. Both the results of Lilith’s plan and the temporal structure of the poem attest to the idea that progression and regression cannot be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are integrated into each other, as the birth of Cain and Abel and Cain’s fratricide exemplify. Re-handling the biblical narrative on the origin of humankind within the evolutionary discourse of the Victorian period, Rossetti offers his conception of history as a combination of progression and regression intertwined in a circular manner.

This is reminiscent of how he depicts Lilith and the Snake in his drawing *Eden Bower* (1869).¹⁰ Unlike the intricate depiction of Lilith in his painting *Lady Lilith*, which is full of various symbols such as her Victorian outfit and the mirror, Rossetti illustrates the *Eden Bower* Lilith in a plain manner: a black-and-white drawing shows Lilith naked. She caresses the head of the Snake, who wraps himself around her body.¹¹ Their erotic coiling makes the two figures look like a whirlpool.¹² This effect is further supported by Lilith’s posture along with her high-volume hair: with her loose and wavy hair, Lilith leans slightly back and crosses her legs, which creates the impression of a widening movement from the bottom- to the upper-part of the picture. This can be compared to the temporal structure of the poem: in “Eden Bower” Rossetti shows that there will be no linear progression, hence no continuous improvement upon current conditions, but progress will always entail regression, as his version of the biblical origin story epitomizes. Owing to her progression on the ladder of evolution (as evident in her metamorphosis from a snake into a woman), Lilith is able to trigger regression in humankind, that is, the Fall. This very same regression becomes the source of humankind’s progression on earth. In this sense, the poem depicts history as repetitive: each progress signals regress and vice versa. The spiral posture of Lilith and the Snake in the drawing, likewise, offers a circular movement instead of a linear one.

Rossetti’s treatment of history as repetitive is most evident in how he puts the scenes of Lilith’s seduction of Adam and her manipulation of the Snake side by side. At the beginning of the ballad, Lilith recalls her relationship with Adam, saying “[a]ll the threads of my hair are golden, / And there in a net his heart was holden” (ll. 23–24). She employs a similar image of female hair as a trap for her lovers towards the end of the poem by addressing the Snake: “[w]reathe thy neck with my hair’s bright tether, / And wear my gold and thy gold together!” (ll. 139–140). It is evident that she employs the same tactics in seducing Adam and the Snake at different times. Thus, Lilith exemplifies how history can be seen as a repetition with difference: the only

9 The act of foreseeing, in Lilith’s case, stands as an empowering asset: Rossetti gave the privilege of a (supernatural) gaze to a female character, which was quite unusual in nineteenth-century English literature. On the contrary, authors generally portrayed women as objects of the male gaze, as Tennyson did in his “The Lady of Shalott.” With an allusion to Tennyson’s poem, Kathy Alexis Psomiades coins the term “the Lancelot moment,” “at which a masculine observer stands mystified before a beautiful, insentient feminine body” and “in which ‘[s]he has a lovely face’ might finally be the only adequate response to the feminine figure” (40). Lilith in “Eden Bower,” however, resists being reduced to such a beautiful yet passive character. Brian Donnelly dwells on this subject with regard to how “Rossetti’s work of the 1860s” portrays various female protagonists, who “stake a claim to the space within which they operate” (113). See Donnelly’s third chapter, entitled “Fleshly Designs” in *Reading Dante Gabriel Rossetti: The Painter as Poet* (83–124).

10 For a copy of the drawing along with information on its production and transmission, see William E. Fredeman’s “A Rossetti Gallery” (166 and 186). Fredeman highlights that “[t]he drawing has nothing in common with *Lady Lilith* [...], which illustrates his *House of Life* sonnet ‘Body’s Beauty’ (LXXVIII)” while the drawing includes some lines from the ballad “Eden Bower” (166).

11 Gauld refers to Rossetti’s ballad “Eden Bower” as a source of inspiration for John Collier’s 1887 painting *Lilith*, which depicts a female figure embraced by a snake (39).

12 For various images of coiling in “Eden Bower,” see Chapter VII in Ronnalie Roper Howard’s *The Dark Glass: Vision and Technique in The Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (148–150).

thing that changes is whom Lilith lures by using her hair as an enchanting weapon.¹³ The notion of 'repetition with difference' is indeed what characterizes the Darwinian evolutionary path: the source of change is the necessity to adapt to the conditions of a new environment. To this end, some traits are retained while certain differences arise from one generation to the next. Yet, difference does not necessarily signal betterment. This is the reason why Darwin says "it might be argued that the struggle for existence had not been sufficiently severe to force man upwards to his highest standard" as "there has always been sufficient variability in the intellectual and moral faculties, for their steady advancement through natural selection" (Darwin, *The Descent* 180). Likewise, Rossetti's Lilith is inclined to lower her status and go downwards on the evolutionary ladder in order to realize her revenge through her sexual manipulation of the Snake, which stands for her moral flaw. This is analogous to Cain's fratricide: by referring to Cain and Abel, Lilith supplies the reader with a specific example of how the offspring of Adam and Eve will carry traces of her revenge plan. It is evident that future generations will repeat similar moral errors.

The ballad further instantiates the notion of history as repetition with difference through its alternating refrains.¹⁴ While the narration of upcoming events proceeds with each stanza, it is continually disrupted by the two alternating refrains written in parenthesis and italics. The first stanza, for instance, explains how Lilith became the wife of Adam through metamorphosis and includes the refrain "[s]ing *Eden Bower!*" (l. 2). In the next stanza, the persona narrates Lilith's dismissal from heaven with the second refrain, "[a]las *the hour!*" (l. 6).¹⁵ While Lilith's upward mobility on the ladder of evolution is presented in a celebratory mood, the second stanza creates the impression of bemoaning her expulsion from Eden Bower through the grieving tone of the latter refrain. This may lead the reader to think that the ballad honors progression through the first refrain while it condemns degeneration with the second one. However, by employing these two refrains alternately, the poem holds praise and lament in balance, showing the reader their co-existence. As Howard argues, the refrain has "a ballad effect, impeding the progress of the poem while making that progress seem inevitable" (146). That the narrative is both developed and interrupted by the refrains attests to Rossetti's conception of history since it offers a repetitive model of advancement in time, expressing progression and degeneration as two sides of the same coin.¹⁶

Problematizing the dynamics of progression and regression through the use of evolutionary discourse, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, I argue, indirectly comments on the contemporary debates on the route of evolution, hence humankind. His most original point is that he did so by revisiting the biblical origin story, which lost its authority among many intellectuals of the time as a reliable account of the history of the world and human beings owing to studies on the theory of evolution in the Victorian age. Pre-Raphaelite poets and artists are well-known for their interest in the past. As the name of the brotherhood indicates, "[t]hey were interested in late medieval and early Renaissance art, that is to say the art *before* Raphael" (Giebelhausen 63). Their search for "freshness" and "sincerity" in art, Giebelhausen contends, led them to delve into religious topics in their artworks, which "dominated the artistic production of the late Middle Ages" (63). From this perspective, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's return to the biblical account of the Fall is not surprising for readers familiar with Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. However, what is radical in "Eden Bower" is that, by adapting the metaphysical material to evolutionary discourse,

13 Delving into Dante Gabriel Rossetti's depiction of Lilith's hair, William Michael Rossetti notes that besides the Talmudic legend, Goethe's *Faust* is another source for D. G. Rossetti's re-imagining of Lilith (*Dante Gabriel Rossetti* 239). On the use of hair imagery in "Eden Bower," see 950 in Elizabeth G. Gitter's "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination."

14 For a detailed account on the ballads written by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, see Chapter VI (353–384) in William Sharp's *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: A Record and a Study*, which includes a brief discussion of "Eden Bower" as a dramatic lyric (362–366).

15 Focusing mainly on the representation of "duplicity" and "eroticism" in the ballad, Jean Wasko interprets the tension between these two refrains by referring to their "earlier versions": while "*Sing Eden Bower!*" is a shortened form of "*Sing the bower in flower*" and "*Eden Bower's in flower*," "*Alas the hour!*" is "revised from '*And it's O the day and the hour!*'" (339). According to Wasko, the first refrain represents Eden as "fruitful, happy and safe" whereas the second one signals the possible threats it poses, such as Lilith's "deception" and "the impending fall" (339).

16 Howard notes the overall repetitive structure of the ballad and draws the reader's attention to how the first line of each stanza (except for the last one) "ends in 'Adam', 'Eden', and 'Lilith'", which, according to Howard, "provide[s] a repetitive link from stanza to stanza and [...] emphasizes the erotic relationship between Adam and Lilith, [and] the motive for revenge" (145).

Rossetti shows that both accounts of history are indeed characterized by a constant movement between progression and regression. Thus, he challenges the nineteenth-century tendency to privilege the scientific over the metaphysical. William Michael Rossetti states the aim of the Pre-Raphaelites in the introduction to the 1901 facsimile reprint of *The Germ*: the brotherhood is characterized by “the temper of rebels: they meant revolt and produced revolution” (6). Dante Gabriel Rossetti, similarly, gives voice to the rebellious spirit in “Eden Bower” through his treatment of Lilith as an avenger, and reacts to the common inclination towards favoring newly emerging scientific outcomes over earlier metaphysical views. The poem shows that from the very beginning of history human beings are destined to degenerate as much as they progress.

CONCLUSION

All in all, through the evolutionary discourse of the period, Dante Gabriel Rossetti plays on the duality of progress and regress in his revisiting of the biblical narrative on the Fall, juxtaposing the metaphysical and the scientific. Rossetti problematizes Lilith’s reactions to the change in her environment, and her upward and downward mobility on the ladder of evolution with regard to the relation between her gender and her revenge plan, designed to cause the degeneration of future beings. Thus, “Eden Bower,” I contend, is informed by the Victorian discourse on the alternative paths of evolution, encompassing progress and regress, and the anxiety felt in nineteenth-century discussions on the topic. Rossetti’s treatment of Lilith as the prime mover of history reveals his conception of progression and regression, which co-exist in human history.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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