

# Introduction

## The Medusa Effect

### DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI'S REFLECTIONS OF MEDUSA

It is a very straightforward work.

—Dante Gabriel Rossetti, on “Aspecta Medusa”

In explaining what I mean in this book by Medusa effect, I begin with an extended example, a reading of a poem and a proposed painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In July 1867, Rossetti received a commission from Charles Peter Matthews, a Scottish brewer and art collector, for a painting of Perseus showing Andromeda a reflection of Medusa's severed head in a large basin, intended by Matthews for display in the drawing room of his home in Havering, Essex. Matthews commissioned the painting, to be called “Aspecta Medusa” (literally, Medusa Beheld), after having been shown preparatory sketches by Rossetti (Figures 1 and 2) and after having approved the reflection theme and Rossetti's overall design.

Taking his motif from “representations of it on vases & in wall-decoration of classic times,” Rossetti had been working on the subject for several years.<sup>1</sup> But he never completed the actual painting, as Matthews eventually cancelled the commission, writing to Rossetti, “I cannot all get over the horror and repugnance with which I have always regarded that which according to your original design, is to be one of the chief features in it—I mean of course the *severed* head of Medusa. And I cannot help thinking that the repulsive portion of your design would admit of some modification.”<sup>2</sup>

In response to the cancelled commission, Rossetti declined to modify his design and attempted instead to reassure Matthews that his misgivings were unfounded. In a letter to Matthews of November 12, 1867, he defends his planned treatment of the reflection motif against the charge that it would willfully aim to provoke horror and repugnance in the viewer:



FIGURE 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Aspects of Medusa*. Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery. Photo: Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery Picture Library.

[Medusa's] head, treated as a pure ideal, presenting no likeness (as it will not) to the severed head of an actual person, being moreover so much in shadow (according to my arrangement) that no painful ghastliness of colour will be apparent, will not really possess when executed the least degree of that repugnant reality which might naturally suggest itself at first consideration. I feel the utmost confidence in this myself, as the kind of French sensational horror which the

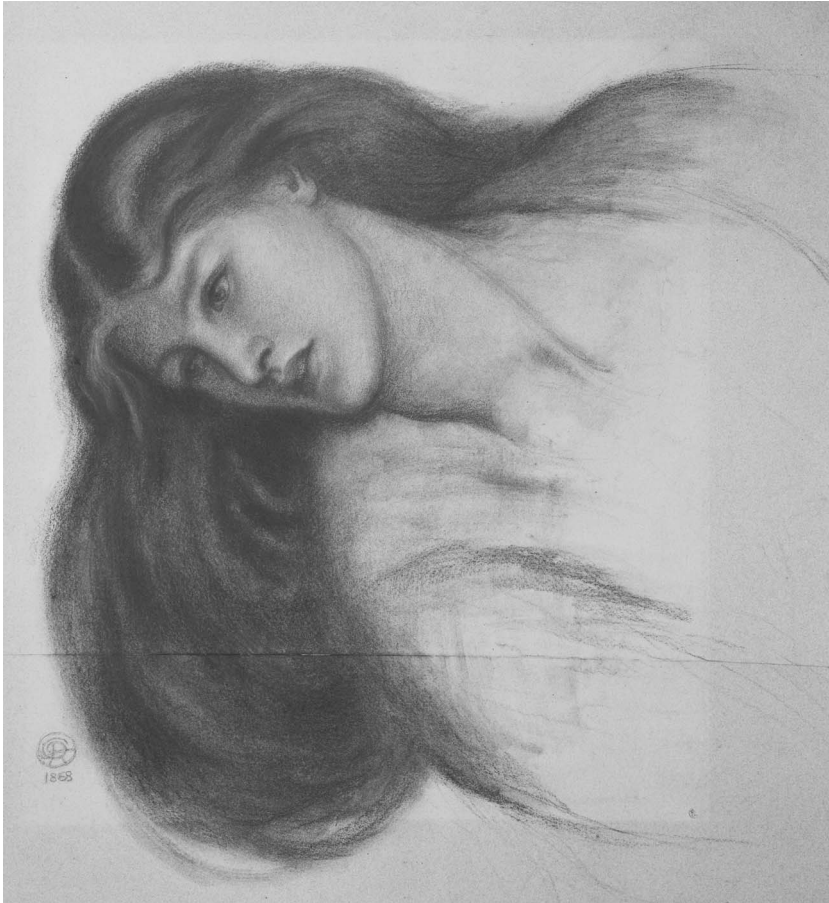


FIGURE 2. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Study for *Aspects Medusa*. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Photo: Victoria & Albert Museum, London / Art Resource, NY.

realistic treatment of the severed head would cause is exactly the quality I should most desire to avoid. (C 3:590)<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the contrast between Pre-Raphaelite idealism and “French” naturalism, what is striking about Rossetti’s description is the implied analogy between the proposed painting and the reflection the painting depicts: just as Perseus shows Medusa’s head to Andromeda in the form of a reflection in water, the painting will present the severed head “so much in shadow” to its viewer. In the case of the reflection as in the case of the painting, a horrifying object that should not be shown or looked at directly—Medusa’s

head in the first case, the decapitated head of a corpse in the second—is to be shown and seen obliquely. Rossetti evokes an implicit series of analogies that follows from this first analogy: between Perseus and himself, between Andromeda and Matthews, and between Medusa’s head and “the severed head of an actual person.” So at one level, the depicted scene can be interpreted as an allegory about the very painting in which it appears. The painting may *show* a severed head, Rossetti suggests to Matthews, but it will not *be* a Medusa’s head to those who look at it. For the spectator, any feeling of horror potentially provoked by seeing the decapitated head will be tempered by Rossetti’s artistic presentation of the subject, just as for Andromeda, the petrifying power of Medusa’s head is negated by Perseus’s reflection of the head in water. Complementing this specific analogy between the scene and the proposed painting, Rossetti’s description also evokes a more general set of analogies: between Perseus and the artist, between Andromeda and the viewer, between Medusa’s head and “repugnant reality,” and between the head’s reflection and visual art. At this latter level, the painting, like many of Rossetti’s paintings, can be interpreted as an allegory about painting itself: about its Apollonian function, for instance, or its potential power to convert repugnant reality into “pure ideal.”

Given the reflection motif’s thematic emphasis on vision and mirroring, it is not surprising that Rossetti would choose it as the subject of a painting. Nor is it surprising that he would choose it as an allegory about painting. The motif obviously lends itself to a visual representation, and it also lends itself to commenting on painting and visual representation as such, a use to which Rossetti alludes when he writes to Matthews that his objection to the painting “has given me matter for reflection” (C 3:590). Rossetti’s problem as an artist (how to present decorously the decapitated head of a corpse) is strikingly similar to Perseus’s predicament evoked in the picture (how to show Andromeda Medusa’s head without petrifying her). And Perseus’s solution by means of the reflection anticipates Rossetti’s own solution: his shadowy presentation will obscure and simultaneously idealize the reality of the corpse’s head.

The implicit parallel between the picture and the mirroring it depicts is also reinforced by a general emphasis throughout the Perseus myth on the themes of vision and visibility. As Jean-Pierre Vernant has noted about the myth,

One theme is central [in Perseus’s story]: the eye, the gaze, the reciprocity of seeing and being seen. This theme appears already in the sequence of the three Graiai with their single tooth and eye . . . [and] is found again in the *kunee*, the magical instrument of invisibility concealing from all eyes the presence of the one whose head it covers, and also in the detail that Perseus turned his eyes away at the moment of Medusa’s death. He does this when he cuts the monster’s throat, and later too,

when he brandishes her head to turn his enemies into stone and prudently looks in the opposite direction. The theme finds its full development in those version, attested from the fifth century on, that insist on the indispensable recourse to the mirror and its reflection that enables the young man to see Gorgo without having to cross glances with her petrifying gaze. (135–36)<sup>4</sup>

While the thematic concern with the eye and the gaze does not necessarily make the Perseus story into an allegory about visual art, it gives one reason why an artist like Rossetti might appropriate one or another of its episodes, for instance the reflection of Medusa's head in a body of water, for such a purpose. Any painting of Medusa's head, insofar as we can safely look at it, can potentially be interpreted as an allegory about the mitigating power of art described by Rossetti in his letter to Matthews. Caravaggio's famous painting of the decapitated Medusa's head makes this association explicit by depicting the head in the form of its mirror image, as though it were being reflected in a round convex surface, presumably Perseus's mirror shield (Figure 3).

Rossetti's allegory makes apparent that for him, painting's idealizing and elevating function is simultaneously a protective, neutralizing function. This is obvious foremost in the use of Medusa's head as an analogy for what art depicts, for what Rossetti in his letter calls "repugnant reality." It would seem from the choice of image that this reality has for Rossetti a potential element of horror or danger, a potentially Medusa-like effect on the viewer. He refers explicitly to a "French sensational horror which the realistic treatment of the severed head would cause," evoking the canonical association of Medusa's head with horror as an implicit metaphor for the effect of naturalist art, the kind of art that would show reality in all its repugnance, on the spectator. He also refers to his motif's potentially "painful ghastliness of colour," suggesting that the viewer must somehow be protected from being harmed by the painting's subject matter. He then makes explicit that the interposition of an artistic presentation between subject matter and viewer, much like the interposition of the reflecting pool between Medusa's head and Andromeda's gaze, is his means of expelling and purifying the horrifying, painful elements in the subject, and of protecting the spectator: "the head, treated as pure ideal . . . will not really possess when executed the least degree of that repugnant reality which might naturally suggest itself at first consideration." Rossetti describes his painting as a formal execution that as such would purify or sublimate the horrifying natural reality it depicts—the reality of a corpse's head—not unlike the water's reflection of the deadly Medusa's head, which transforms a lethal object into an aesthetic object for Andromeda's contemplation.

When Rossetti wrote to his mother, Frances Polidori Rossetti, to tell her about Matthews commissioning the Medusa painting, he appended to



FIGURE 3. Caravaggio, *Head of Medusa*. Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Nicolo Orsi Battaglini / Art Resource, NY.

his letter a short poem, also entitled “Aspecta Medusa,” noting, “Some lines of mine which I write opposite will explain the [painting’s] subject”:

Andromeda, by Perseus saved and wed,  
 Hankered each day to see the Gorgon’s head:  
 Till o’er a fount he held it, bade her lean,  
 And mirrored in the wave was safely seen  
 That death she lived by.

Let not thine eyes know  
 Any forbidden thing itself, although  
 It once should save as well as kill: but be  
 Its shadow upon life enough for thee. (C 3:557)

The juxtaposition of the poem with the proposed painting is an example of a so-called double work of art, a practice commonly found in Rossetti's oeuvre, where a poem accompanies and interprets a given picture or, conversely, a picture illustrates and comments on a given poem.<sup>5</sup> Here, the poem's first stanza describes the scene to be shown in the painting, and the second stanza provides an explanation of the scene's significance. In an 1870 letter to A. C. Swinburne, Rossetti specifies that he had originally intended the poem to accompany the painting "as an inscription" (C 4:394), and while the painting was ultimately never completed after Matthews withdrew his commission, Rossetti did publish the poem on its own in the collected *Poems* of 1870 under the title "Aspecta Medusa (For a Drawing)." The planned juxtaposition of painting and poem, and the explicit moral provided in the poem's didactic second stanza, make clear that the reflection scene is to be taken as an allegory. The references to eyes and shadow suggest that Rossetti possibly intends the scene as an allegory about painting or visual art, as the painting itself and the accompanying passage from the letter to Matthews imply as well. The phrase "Its shadow upon life" in particular would seem to be, among other things, a reference to the phrase "being so much in shadow" from Rossetti's description of the presentation he intends for the severed head in the painting. The interpretation of the poem as an allegory about painting would follow as well from the addition of the phrase "For a Drawing" to its title, which specifies that Rossetti has written the poem in order to supplement the proposed painting and its preparatory sketches (rather than, say, having made the drawings in order to illustrate the poem).<sup>6</sup> To have written it "for" the picture may also mean in this case to have written it about pictures in general, given the implied exemplarity of the picture in question.

But the apparent simplicity and didacticism of the poem is deceptive, and the second stanza turns out to be less straightforward than it might seem, and more like the oblique reflection of which it is a gloss. The parallel between the two companion pieces, the painting and the poem, goes beyond their shared motif and their shared cautionary message. For as in the painting, there is in the poem an implicit parallel between the scene that is depicted and the depiction itself. In the first stanza Perseus shows Andromeda Medusa's head "mirrored in the wave," while concurrently the poem shows what it calls the "forbidden thing itself" to its reader figuratively, in the image of the Gorgon's head. So just as Medusa's head is rendered by Perseus in the form of its reflection, the forbidden thing and the admonitory lesson about the thing ("be / Its shadow upon life enough for thee") are rendered by the poem in the form of images, in the allegorical figures of Perseus, Andromeda, the Gorgon's head, the wave, the reflection, the forbidden thing, and the shadow. This mode of indirect presentation characterizes the explicitly allegorical first stanza and also the second stanza, which might initially seem to be more straightforward than the first, but

which is ultimately no less figurative. The phrase “forbidden thing itself” is as much a figure as “the Gorgon’s head,” and the many images saturating the second stanza (the knowing eyes, the thing that “once should save as well as kill,” the thing’s shadow upon life) reiterate the figurative nature of the stanza and of the entire poem. Evidently the poem will only show figures to its reader, just as Perseus only shows Medusa’s head to Andromeda in the form of its reflection. Whatever mysterious and presumably dangerous referent, if any, is behind such images as the Gorgon’s head and the forbidden thing, the reader will only know it or see it in the form of those and other images. So the poem, it would seem, is following its own advice and is itself an example of the very lesson it teaches.

Underlying the complex and diffuse set of analogies Rossetti plays on between the reflection, the painting, the description of the painting in the letter to Matthews, the poem’s first stanza, the poem’s second stanza, and the poem as a whole, there is a fundamental parallel between the painting and the poem: both work with shadows, in one case literally, in one case figuratively. Both are indirect presentations of something Rossetti will not show or say directly. The protective capacity of the poem’s figurative shadows (that is, poetic language) is perhaps less obvious than the protective capacity of the painting’s literal shadows (which is explained in the letter to Matthews). Like painting, poetic language and imagery would seem to be for Rossetti a potential form of idealization, a sublimating force akin to what Walter Pater describes in his essay “Aesthetic Poetry”:

Greek poetry, mediæval or modern poetry, projects, above the realities of its time, a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that transfigured world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or “earthly paradise.” (*Selected Writings*, 190)

What Rossetti adds to Pater’s notion of aesthetic poetry’s double transfiguration of the material world is the identification of poetic sublimation as a form of defense against that world, a world his Medusa metaphor defines as inherently threatening. The poem’s second stanza explicitly depicts direct, unmediated confrontations with repugnant realities and forbidden things as dangerous, and indirect confrontations mediated by art as safe: “And mirrored in the wave was safely seen / That death she lived by.” The reflection of Medusa’s head depicted in both painting and poem is thus a self-reflective figure for the protection the painting and the poem are each providing in their respective mediums.

As a figure that reflects as much on what the poem is doing with figurative language as on what the painting is doing with shadows, Medusa’s mirroring indicates that Rossetti’s allegory in the painting and poem goes beyond the Apollonian or sublimating function of certain forms of visual



art (for instance, Pre-Raphaelite art) and is also, on a wider and more fundamental level, about representation as such, about the act of fashioning visual or verbal images as a means of protecting oneself against some kind of threat.<sup>7</sup> More specifically, it indicates that the allegory is about the protective effect of those images that portray the threatening thing itself. Such an interpretation of “*Aspecta Medusa*” suggests itself in that Perseus effectively creates an image or representation of Medusa’s head, namely the reflection, in order to protect Andromeda against its petrifying power. It is substantiated by the traditional narrative and pictorial accounts of Medusa’s decapitation in which Perseus looks into an angled mirror or polished shield so as to avoid looking at Medusa directly and being petrified, for instance the version told by Apollodorus in Book 2 of the *Library*:

The Gorgons . . . turned to stone such as beheld them. So Perseus stood over them as they slept, and while Athena guided his hand and he looked with averted gaze on a brazen shield, in which he beheld the image of the Gorgon, he beheaded her. (157–59)

Another standard account, Book 4 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, also highlights the act of mirroring and its significance as a means of protection:

All through the fields and along the roadways [Perseus] saw statues of men and beasts, whom the sight of the Gorgon had changed from their true selves into stone. But he himself looked at dread Medusa’s form as it was reflected in the bronze of the shield which he carried on his left arm. While she and her snakes were wrapped in deep slumber, he severed her head from her shoulders. (125)

In both accounts, the emphasis is on Perseus using the reflective shield in order to create what is specifically characterized as a representation: “he beheld the *image* [*eikon*] of the Gorgon” (the Greek word *eikon* means likeness, image, or portrait), and “he himself looked at dread Medusa’s *form* [*formam*] as it was reflected in the bronze of the shield” (the Latin word *forma* means form, figure, or shape, and also image, likeness, or model). It is through fashioning an image of Medusa that Perseus protects himself from Medusa’s danger. This association between image making and protection is also evoked in Caravaggio’s Medusa painting (Figure 3), which is simultaneously a shield (one in which the viewer can “safely” see an image of Medusa’s newly decapitated head as if it were being reflected) and a painting of a shield.<sup>8</sup> In Ovid’s and Apollodorus’s accounts of the decapitation, the reflection of Medusa in the mirror shield is not only a means of protection, however, but also the means of defeating Medusa. It is the ruse by which Perseus avoids seeing Medusa directly and by which he is able to kill her, as it allows him to see where to strike so as to cut off the head. Rossetti

alludes to this latter association—between representing a threat and overcoming it—in the image of the head’s reflection in water, which as a kind of reenactment recalls its earlier reflection in Perseus’s shield at the moment of the decapitation.

It would seem, then, that Rossetti’s allegory in “*Aspecta Medusa*” exceeds the immediate contexts of the proposed painting and of visual art in general, and extends to a larger epistemological problematic in which poem and painting are both implicated. This larger context is implied by the image of the mirror, a frequent and equivocal motif in Rossetti’s work, which in “*Aspecta Medusa*” functions specifically as a figure for protective and transfiguring representations, both visual and verbal.<sup>9</sup> It is also implied by the overall imagery in the second stanza: for instance, by the images of the eye, the “forbidden thing itself,” and the shadow, all of which have general epistemological connotations. The injunction “Let not thine eyes know the forbidden thing itself” indicates that for Rossetti, the sight of Medusa’s head is not only a figure for something horrifying or dangerous, for the idea of death, say, or for repugnant realities such as a severed head. It is somewhat more specifically a figure for a dangerous revelation or insight, one that Rossetti insists must be faced and rendered indirectly, in the form of literal or figurative reflections and shadows. Like the mirror’s reflection of Medusa, the indirect presentation of the insight is a form of protection against—and a means of overcoming—the threat to oneself that is posed by the insight. This is the epistemological lesson of “*Aspecta Medusa*,” as it is stated in the poem’s second stanza and of which both the poem and the painting are demonstrations. And so the forbidden insight, whatever it might be literally, is accordingly rendered by Rossetti only in the form of one or another figure: as the Gorgon’s head, as a corpse’s head, as the head’s reflection in the fountain, as “Any forbidden thing itself,” as the forbidden thing’s shadow upon life, as death, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

In “*Aspecta Medusa*,” Rossetti tellingly juxtaposes these various images, which are all variations on an image of death, with accompanying images of life: he does this in the phrase “shadow upon life,” for instance, and also in the phrases “That death she lived by” and “It once should save as well as kill.” These pairings are significant,<sup>11</sup> and constitute a series insofar as they each designate a similar kind of economy: a life given in return for a death, someone’s life saved by another’s death. In the context of the Perseus myth, the lines “That death she lived by” and “It once should save as well as kill” specifically refer to Perseus’s use of Medusa’s head to petrify the sea-monster Ketos and thereby to save Andromeda’s life. It is in that sense that Andromeda is said to have lived by Medusa’s death and to have been saved by something that kills. But these lines and their (playful, ironic) juxtaposition of life and death also have a wider epistemological significance. By clustering simultaneous references to Medusa’s death and Andromeda’s life around the central motif of reflecting Medusa’s head, Rossetti indicates that the

representation of a terrifying insight is not only a way of protecting oneself from it and of negating its power, but is moreover a way of literally or figuratively restoring oneself to life in the process. This sacrificial restoration of life by means of a death is suggested, for instance, in the figure of the saved Andromeda, whom Perseus has delivered from certain death by using as his weapon the head of a corpse, “That death she lived by.” It is also suggested in the phrase “It once should save as well as kill,” which refers specifically to the killing of Ketos and the saving of Andromeda, and more generally to the vivifying potential of Medusa’s fatal power, but which also evokes the prior killing of Medusa upon which any beneficial capacity of her head depends. Finally, it is suggested in the admonition “be / Its shadow upon life enough for thee,” which implies an interdependent relation between the reader’s life and the thing’s shadow. The implication is that the forbidden thing as such must somehow die—that is, become a shadow—so that the reader can safely live. The shadow is a figure for death and is also a figure for an image or representation, so the line establishes a correlation between representing the forbidden thing and killing it, and then defines both kinds of “shadowing” as protective and life-preserving, in accordance with the definition of shadow as a form of shelter. In the context of the overall allegory, all three examples, and in particular the third, make the case that the representation of dangerous insights is also literally or figuratively a form of killing, a sacrifice of someone or something through which one is oneself reaffirmed and revived. More than a gesture of self-protection, then, the making of images is apparently a gesture of self-empowerment, as demonstrated by the figure of Perseus triumphantly holding up the spoil of the severed Medusa’s head and making an (indirect) display of it for Andromeda to see. It seems from Perseus’s gesture, insofar as it reflects back on the poem in which it appears, that the poem is not only a defensive prohibition but also a kind of brandish. “Aspecta Medusa” celebrates the victorious Perseus as a figure for the triumph of life. In so doing it also celebrates by implicit analogy Rossetti’s own survival and triumph over the presumably lethal revelations he has faced and ultimately triumphed over, revelations he then reflects for his readers and viewers in the protective forms of the allegorical poem and painting.

Concurrent with this celebration, however, the image of the shadow also casts some ambivalence on the poem’s epistemological message, and specifically on the indirect representation of “Any forbidden thing itself” which the poem ostensibly prescribes and exemplifies. As an example of—and a reflexive figure for—such an oblique representation, the shadow has connotations not only of shelter and protection, but also of obscurity and ignorance, delusion and deception, and transience and insubstantiality. Despite its ostensibly anti-Platonic moral (“be / Its shadow upon life enough for thee,” an apparent reversal of Socrates’s lesson in the Allegory of the Cave in *The Republic*), Rossetti’s poem remains at the level of its imagery very much

situated within a Platonic scheme, one that fundamentally distinguishes between a “thing itself” and its representations. And within the context of any such scheme, the figure of the “shadow upon life” conveys all the implicit negative connotations associated with the representation as opposed to the thing: with the shadow as opposed to life, the imitation as opposed to the real, the sensual as opposed to the spiritual, the copy as opposed to the original, the sign as opposed to the meaning, appearance as opposed to truth, and so on. So while it may be read as an affirmative image, for instance in the spiritualizing sense that Pater attributes to aesthetic poetry’s “fainter and more spectral” world, the shadow less reassuringly also suggests a condition of being a step dangerously removed from life or truth, a state not unlike that of the prisoners in the Allegory of the Cave, who mistake the shadows they see for realities, or that of Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott, who describes herself as “half sick” of the shadows of the world that appear in her mirror. It echoes the “unreal shapes” and “shadows, which the world calls substance” that are woven by Fear and Hope in Shelley’s sonnet “Lift not the painted veil,” a poem whose cautionary and ambiguous moral several readers have heard echoed in “Aspecta Medusa.”<sup>12</sup> And it recalls the predicament of the speaker and unrequited lover in Rossetti’s poem “The Mirror,” who compares his own mistaking his beloved’s feelings to a man expectantly identifying himself with the “forms that crowd unknown / Within a distant mirror’s shade,” only to discover “his thought betray’d” by the shadowy images he sees, and to find that he “must seek elsewhere for his own” (*Works*, 194). At the level of these kinds of connotations, the shadow in Rossetti’s poem is perhaps no less ominous than Medusa’s head itself, and the reader is left in the dilemma of having to choose between the illusory effect of the one and the fatal effect of the other.

As Rossetti alternately associates representation with sublimation and protection, on one hand, and with a potentially dangerous illusion, on the other hand, he also suggests through the image of Medusa’s head a wholly other insight about representation, specifically the recognition that there is no tenable alternative to our showing and seeing only shadows. To know or to see the forbidden thing in any other way but via its shadow, the Medusa image makes explicit, is not only inadvisable or forbidden, but is simply impossible insofar as it is synonymous with death (that is, with the instant annihilation of the self and of the senses). As a specifically epistemological figure, Medusa’s head is indicative of a truth or thing that can only ever be known or seen figuratively, in the form of images, as any direct seeing of it is not a form of knowing. One could no more see Medusa’s head directly than know one’s own death. In its literal impossibility, Medusa’s head is therefore fundamentally different from an image like the sun in Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, which is also a metaphor for the “thing itself.” In Plato’s case, the sun *can* ultimately be seen directly, albeit with great difficulty and pain, implying that the thing it represents (that is, the good)

can be apprehended directly. As part of the allegory, Socrates tells Glaucon about the prisoner who has been liberated from the cave and has made his way into the light, seeing first shadows and “images of men and other things in water, then the things themselves. . . . Finally, I suppose, he’d be able to see the sun, not images of it in water or in some alien place, but the sun itself, in its own place” (*Republic*, 516b 188). Socrates’s account of the prisoner’s gradual progress reverses the story told in “Aspecta Medusa” insofar as it moves from someone seeing various reflections of a thing to seeing the thing directly, “in its own place.” For Socrates, the movement from seeing the sun’s reflection to seeing the actual sun (which is allegorically to say, to apprehending the good as such) becomes a necessary imperative: “Once one has seen [the form of the good], however, one must conclude that it is the cause of all that is correct and beautiful in anything . . . so that anyone who is to act sensibly in private or public must see it” (517b-c 189). “Aspecta Medusa” makes the opposite argument, since it advocates on behalf of our restricting ourselves to seeing only the shadows of things rather than the things themselves. But in substituting the image of Medusa (that which can only ever be seen in images of it in water or in some alien place) for the image of the seeable sun as the paradigmatic figure for the thing that we would ultimately see and know, Rossetti’s epistemological allegory does not just reverse Socrates’s argument. It essentially breaks with that argument’s (metaphysical, mimetic) foundation, the opposition between the thing and its shadow.<sup>13</sup> Rather than just insisting that we should look at shadows instead of the things themselves, Rossetti questions whether the things could ever be seen as anything but shadows. So the poem’s cautionary moral given in the second stanza may insist contra Plato that we *should* limit ourselves to shadows and reflections of the forbidden thing for the sake of safety, but the Medusa image in the first stanza implies that we *could* in fact do nothing else. As Rossetti’s exemplary metaphor for what it is that we would ultimately know, Medusa’s head—the thing that by definition can only ever be known or seen as a shadow, never as a “thing itself”—suggests that in seeing and knowing what we do, we only see and know shadows and reflections. This suggestion is reiterated by the image of the “forbidden thing itself” in the poem’s more “literal” second stanza, which is as much a figure—that is, a shadow—as Medusa’s head in the first stanza. In showing his reader these two figures, Rossetti is evidently not only being cautious and protective, in accordance with the ostensible moral of his poem; judging from the Medusa image, it would seem that he could show—and we could see—nothing else.

The recognition that we inevitably see and show only shadows shifts the epistemological problematic of “Aspecta Medusa” away from the ambiguity between conceiving of representation as a protective and self-empowering defense, on one hand, and conceiving of it as a potentially harmful delusion, on the other. Both of the latter positions depend on the tenable distinction

between the thing and the representation of the thing. The first position, the one ostensibly advocated by the poem, presumes the existence of a forbidden thing itself that would be distinct from its shadow, a thing from which like Andromeda we could safely avert our gaze and look toward its reflection in the pool of water. The second, more Platonic position, which is also alluded to in the poem, makes the opposite argument insofar as it tells us to turn from the illusory shadow toward the thing itself, rather than vice versa. But it presumes the same distinction between the shadow and the thing, and it presumes as well our ability to turn from one to the other, just as Socrates in *The Republic* presumes an intelligible distinction between being in darkness and being in sunlight, and between the shadows on the walls of the cave and the real things of which those shadows are only reflections. In contrast, Rossetti's Medusa image, insofar as it is the figure for which there exists no thing, no corresponding nonfigurative referent, is irreducible to either a shadow or a thing, or to the entire opposition between the thing and the shadow. As such, it destabilizes both positions that "Aspecta Medusa" ostensibly takes on the question of representation (since both depend on the validity of the opposition) and displaces the poem's epistemological problematic altogether.

The ambivalence about representation in "Aspecta Medusa," it would seem then, goes beyond an awareness of the potential deceptiveness of images, of their potential disjunction from reality or truth. The latter awareness, despite the Platonic skepticism it casts on Rossetti's activity as an artist, is fundamentally affirmative, since it presumes an accessible reality or truth against which images could reliably be measured, and against which illusions could reliably be discredited. The epistemological insight introduced into "Aspecta Medusa" by the Medusa image is that the dangerous truths which representations represent, sublimate, and protect against are always already in one or another way represented. That is to say, they are contained within one or another form of representation, for instance in a poem or painting, rather than being something external and prior to representation. This insight runs counter to Rossetti's statements that explicitly locate the dangerous object or truth outside of representation, for instance his letter to Matthews, which refers to "the severed head of an *actual* person" (my emphasis), the potential horror of which the idealizing painting would mitigate against. Rossetti's formulation implies that the person and the head "actually" precede their representation by the painting. But of course no actual person and no actual severed head exist prior to Rossetti's painting of them. So it is not the case that the painting protects the viewer against the horror of an external threat, even though such a model of representation is precisely what the letter to Matthews and the second stanza of "Aspecta Medusa" construct. Rather, the horror is an internal aspect of the painting itself, as is its mitigation. This is the case in the poem as well. Just as there exists no severed head prior to its representation in Rossetti's

painting, there is no “forbidden thing itself” prior to its figuration in the poem as the forbidden thing, as the thing’s shadow upon life, as Medusa’s head, or as the head’s reflection in the fountain. Insofar, then, as both the poem and the painting are thematically about a danger and the representation of that danger, the image of Medusa’s head (something which is by definition impossible outside of its own representation) implies that the danger in question inheres in the representation itself, not in an object or insight that precedes its representation and that impinges on the artist, reader, and viewer from the outside. And as something that is always necessarily an image, which is to say literally or figuratively a reflection in Perseus’s mirror or in a pool of water, Medusa’s head also suggests—consistent with Rossetti’s statements in the letter to Matthews and in the poem’s second stanza—that the containment of the given danger inheres in representation as well. Thus Rossetti supplements the epistemological problematic he ostensibly constructs (an external threat is represented by art in a way that protects, affirms, and possibly also deceives the artist, viewer, or reader) with a second problematic, one wherein the threat and its mitigation are both aspects of representation itself.

The emphasis of the second problematic on an internal aspect of representation, rather than on the external object of representation, should not be an occasion to simplify Rossetti’s poetics into clichés and received ideas about “autonomy of art,” “formalism,” or the categorical separation of art from reality or life.<sup>14</sup> As the figure of the water mirror makes clear, Rossetti depicts art (and specifically his own art) as a mimesis, albeit one that does not aim accurately to reflect reality as much as to idealize and transfigure it (this is stated explicitly in the letter to Matthews). The water mirror is thus a figure for the affirmative and sublimating power of art, and is also indicative of an external reality that art would reflect and idealize. Supplementing this image is the image of Medusa’s head, which specifies that what art reflects is always already in one or another way a reflection. As such a reflection, Medusa’s head is not only a figure for the thing that art represents but also, like the water mirror, a figure for representation. In the latter capacity, it is like the figure of the shadow: a means for Rossetti to suggest that despite its protective function, representation is not without its own danger; this latter danger does not lie outside of representation, for instance in the gruesome reality of a severed head, but lies within it, just as according to the poem, saving and killing are both simultaneous properties of the one Medusa’s head.

#### THE MEDUSA EFFECT

The tripartite structure I trace in my reading of “*Aspecta Medusa*” is what this book calls the Medusa effect. The first part of the structure posits a subject’s visual confrontation with a dangerous object. This object is the means

by which the subject attains some kind of terrifying insight, an insight into its own mortality, for example, or into the nature of its own sexuality or morality or existence or epistemological authority. This insight threatens in one or another way to destabilize or even to destroy the subject. The second part of the structure is the interposition by the subject of a protective representation of the object, for instance an idealizing painting, or a literal or figurative reflection of the object in water. By means of this representation, the dangerous object would be mirrored safely, the threat of the insight would in one or another way be mitigated, and the imperiled subject would be protected and ultimately revived, much as Perseus in the Medusa myth effectively protects himself by creating a reflection of Medusa's head in his polished shield. Rossetti's poem depicts and also performs both the first and second part of the structure in the allegorical image of Perseus mirroring the decapitated Medusa's head for Andromeda in a pool of water.

The third and final part of the structure is a second insight, an insight that takes place *in* the protective representation, rather than prior to it. Like the first insight, it is the recognition of a certain danger. But the danger it recognizes is of a different kind than the first. It is not a terrifying external object that exists outside of the representation. Instead, it is a danger that inheres within the representation and that pertains to the representation itself, for instance the threat that the representation is in one or another way illusory, deceptive, or unstable. "Aspecta Medusa" implies this kind of danger, for example, in its use of the word *shadow* as a figure for the oblique representations it both prescribes and performs. In this choice of metaphor, the poem calls the reliability of representations (including presumably the representations it itself performs) into question, even while it ostensibly tells its reader that he or she should limit himself or herself to seeing and showing only representations, not the "forbidden thing" itself.

This structure, then, is what I call the Medusa effect: an external threat is mitigated by means of its representation, which in turn prompts in the representation a critical insight into its own nature. It suggests that while the act of representing a dangerous object or insight may protect a subject from the threat of that object or insight, it is not without inherent dangers of its own.

This book finds versions of the Medusa effect in a series of mid- and late-nineteenth-century European writings on aesthetics and in Freud's essays on infantile sexuality and sexual theories. The specific examples I discuss are Freud's writings on the male castration complex, including his 1922 essay fragment on Medusa's head; Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1872); Walter Pater's essay "Leonardo da Vinci" (1869); Algernon Charles Swinburne's essay "Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence" (1868); and George Eliot's gothic novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859).<sup>15</sup> In each case, the author, narrator, or protagonist is confronted with some kind of horrifying recognition: in Freud's texts about male infantile sexual development,



for instance, the little boy recognizes castration's "reality" when he first sees the genitals of a girl or woman; in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the Greeks are confronted with the appearance of terrifying Dionysian festivals and revels, and thereby catch a glimpse into what Nietzsche calls the Dionysian abyss; Swinburne and Pater write about being powerfully fascinated with the frightening existential insights they say are revealed to them in works of visual art by Michelangelo and Leonardo; and in *The Lifted Veil*, George Eliot's anxious protagonist gains insight by means of his telepathic powers into his own and other people's egotism and sense of isolation from one another, while Eliot concurrently has an unsettling recognition via her story that an awareness of others' feelings and thoughts (such as works of literary realism would make possible) does not reliably prompt sympathy and compassion in the reader or viewer.

In each case as well, the author or character responds to this recognition by representing it in a way that would somehow mitigate the threat it poses to himself or herself: in Freud's essays, this protective representation takes the form of what Freud calls symbols and fetishes, figures which indirectly testify to the repressed trauma of the original castration complex in ways that are ambiguous but ultimately reassuring; in *The Birth of Tragedy*, it is the Apollonian artwork and the Apollonian *Schein* (illusion or appearance) which interposes itself between the Greeks and the Dionysian, and by which the frightful Dionysian essence is both contained and also safely intimated; in Swinburne's and Pater's essays, it is the exposition by the critic of the artworks under discussion which would protect against the threat those works pose to the viewer; and in *The Lifted Veil*, Eliot introduces a *Doppelgänger* of her protagonist into her story, a female scapegoat figure onto which she then projects all the misanthropy and antipathy of which she would purge both the protagonist and the narrative.

Thirdly and finally, each example includes a moment of self-reflection, a moment of critical reflection on the act of representation that it performs or describes. As already shown in my reading of Rossetti's poem, this reflection on the representation itself significantly complicates the initial two-part model, the model wherein a threatening insight prompted by an external object is subsequently mitigated by means of its representation. Not only does it complicate this model, however, but it also goes on to destabilize (or at least potentially destabilize) the larger project of each text or writer in question, since each of those projects depends in one or another way on an act of representation, whether explicitly or implicitly. This destabilization of the larger project is compactly exemplified in Rossetti's poem. As I suggest in my reading, the poem is structured by a Platonic scheme that fundamentally distinguishes between the "thing itself" and its representations. Its moral, the ostensibly anti-Platonic lesson that one should restrict oneself to looking at oblique reflections and shadows of the thing itself and not look directly at the thing, depends on the stability of the distinction between

thing and representation. In accordance with his own prescription, Rossetti offers this moral not in literal form, but in the form of a series of allegorical images, which is to say a series of representations. Among other ways, he figuratively represents it in the image of the forbidden thing's shadow and in the image of Medusa's head reflected in water. The shadow is a figure for representation, while Medusa's head is a figure for what representation represents. Both of these images, even as they serve to illustrate Rossetti's point, also run counter to the logic of the poem's argument: counter to the anti-Platonic argument, in the case of the shadow, and counter to the Platonic scheme that underlies that argument, in the case of Medusa's head. The image of the shadow, for its part, has negative implications for the anti-Platonic argument insofar as it suggests a form of illusion or copy that is categorically devalued vis-à-vis the thing itself. As such, it opens up the possibility of reading a Platonic counterargument into the poem, one that would be opposed to Rossetti's manifest message. Yet at the same time, the shadow has positive implications for Rossetti's underlying Platonic scheme because it implies the existence of a thing of which it is the mere image, and thereby affirms the poem's fundamental opposition between thing and image. As a figure for the thing, meanwhile, Medusa's head has an unequivocally destabilizing effect on Rossetti's Platonism. Insofar as it represents a thing that by definition can only ever take the form of images (reflections and shadows), it undermines the fundamental opposition between thing and image on which Rossetti's lesson—regardless of whether one ultimately reads it as anti-Platonic or Platonic—is based.

My reading of Rossetti's poem attempts to show two things: one, that Rossetti critically reflects by means of his choice of metaphors on the representations his poem describes and performs, and two, that by means of this self-reflection, the poem acknowledges certain destabilizing consequences (and also empowering consequences) for its own ostensible argument. This latter acknowledgment is not stated explicitly, and it is not necessarily something that Rossetti can be said consciously to intend. However, it demonstrably does take place in the text, and one could say, speaking in a psychoanalytic idiom, that it is an unconscious recognition (the unconscious manifesting itself here in the form of the literary text).

In discussing writings by Freud, Nietzsche, Swinburne, Pater, and George Eliot, this book proposes that each text or set of texts similarly reflects in one or another way on the representations it performs and describes, representations that are originally prompted as a defense against a perceived external threat. It further proposes that in each case, this reflection on representation culminates in a moment of self-recognition, a recognition about the project and kind of project in which it is engaged. In themselves, these projects are very different from one another: Freud posits the theory of a universal and primal castration complex, and then attempts to construct a far-reaching hermeneutic system by means of which he could reliably

link a vast and diverse series of psychiatric symptoms and cultural symbols “back” to this complex; Nietzsche posits a primal Dionysian essence that precedes and ultimately exceeds any of its formal representations; Pater and Swinburne both identify the specific dangers they find in Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s art, and then attempt rhetorically to mitigate this danger by means of their expositions of selected works; and Eliot attempts to formalize a literary ethics that would respect and acknowledge the otherness of other people. Because each of these projects necessarily depends in some way on representation and acts of representation—for instance, psychoanalytic symbols, Freud’s interpretation of those symbols, Apollonian artworks that mirror or veil the Dionysian, Nietzsche’s own verbal accounts of the Dionysian, Pater’s and Swinburne’s descriptions of the artworks they discuss, Eliot’s figures for the consciousnesses of other people, and so on—the reflection on representation is implicitly a reflection on the nature of the project as a whole, for example on its internal coherence or stability. This is the case whether the given project is aesthetic, ethical, mimetic, hermeneutic, expository, analytical, taxonomic, or some combination thereof.

This book would demonstrate that the texts by Nietzsche, Pater, Swinburne, and Eliot on aesthetic topics reflect no less critically on the representations they describe and perform than do Freud’s writings. Victorian writings on aesthetics and Victorian literature more generally have long been identified by their commentators with a preoccupation with the themes of knowledge and epistemology.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, they have been identified with a preoccupation with dangerous forms of knowledge and with insights that are somehow threatening, whether sexually, aesthetically, ethically, racially, socially, economically, or politically.<sup>17</sup> The texts and authors I discuss in the book are very much situated within this tradition, as Rossetti’s injunction “Let not thine eyes know / Any forbidden thing itself” compactly suggests. Eliot announces an interest in the themes of knowledge and initiation by means of her title, *The Lifted Veil*, and her story bears out this interest in the central motif of gaining access to the consciousness of another person. Nietzsche defines the Dionysian as a traumatic recognition about human nature, including one’s own nature, and about the nature of existence in general. And Swinburne and Pater claim to be drawn to Leonardo’s and Michelangelo’s artworks because of the existential and tragic insights those works provide, insight that are thematically akin to what Nietzsche calls the Dionysian. In the case of each of these examples, the knowledge in question poses an explicit danger. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, the revelation of Dionysian truths threatens to overwhelm and annihilate the Apollonian Greeks. Pater and Swinburne both claim to feel dangerously disoriented and disconcerted by the works they look at, and Swinburne also finds a distinctly sexual threat in Michelangelo’s female portraits. In *The Lifted Veil*, the protagonist’s clairvoyance reveals a moral threat: the shallowness, antipathy, misanthropy, and narcissism in the consciousnesses of the people

around him, in his own consciousness, and in the consciousnesses of the reader and Eliot herself.

The texts I discuss in this study thus each reproduce commonplace Victorian motifs of traumatic initiations and dangerous knowledge. But as my reading of “Aspecta Medusa” anticipates, I argue that they also reveal a specific preoccupation with their own representations of those initiations and that knowledge. My claim is that much like Rossetti’s poem, each of my other examples of what I call the Medusa effect reflects implicitly on the stability and reliability of its own representations, and considers in particular their destabilizing and empowering epistemological effects.

This book proposes that the image of Medusa is a recurring and exemplary means by which the texts I examine reflect on representation itself (on its purposes, for instance, or its objects, or its inherent dangers). As I point out earlier in this introduction, the connection between Medusa and representation would seem more or less to suggest itself, most obviously because Medusa is by definition something that only ever appears—or that can only ever be seen—in the form of one or another representation, a point to which Caravaggio’s Medusa painting explicitly calls attention (Figure 3). In the myth, the reflection of the head is a central motif. In the classical literary accounts of Medusa’s story, for instance, including those by Ovid and Apollodorus cited earlier, and also those by Pherecydes, Lucan, Lucian, and Nonnos, Perseus reflects the head in a polished shield or mirror before decapitating it.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the subsequent episode of the victorious Perseus mirroring the decapitated head in a body of water, a kind of reenactment alluding to the first reflection, frequently appears in classical visual art, specifically in Greek vases, Roman wall paintings, and grave reliefs.<sup>19</sup> Rossetti derives his version of the reflection episode from a Pompeian fresco. And two of his Pre-Raphaelite contemporaries take up the episode as well: Edward Burne-Jones in *The Baleful Head* (1887), one in a series of paintings that collectively make up his Perseus cycle, and William Morris in “The Doom of King Acrisius” (1868), a long narrative poem devoted to the Perseus myth.<sup>20</sup> The central place the myth gives to the motif of reflection thus underscores the myth’s potential relevance to the topic of representation as such.

If the representation of dangerous knowledge and insights is indeed a particular theme in Victorian literature, it follows that the reflection of Medusa’s head in a shield or in water would serve as a privileged figure for such representation. Medusa’s head is canonically not only a figure of horror, but more specifically is a figure for horrifying or dangerous knowledge, as suggested by the specification that it is something that should not be *seen*.<sup>21</sup> In the texts I discuss in this book, each threatening insight is explicitly portrayed as a moment of seeing: Freud’s little boy sees female genitals; the Greeks are said by Nietzsche to stare into the Dionysian abyss; Swinburne and Pater describe themselves looking at artworks; and Eliot’s