

A walk in Willowwood: Decoding the 'Willowwoods' of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh

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O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood ...

Today, it is unlikely that those who shop for bargains on bustling Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow are aware that they are walking in what was once a meadow of willow trees. Whatever landscape inspired the Gaelic name for this thoroughfare is long buried under a sea of concrete and pavement. Sauchiehall Street was just as busy in the *fin de siècle*, when Glasgow was still considered the Second City of the Empire, and shoppers – ladies in particular – needed a place to pause for refreshment from their efforts. Catherine Cranston, the formidable matriarch of her own tea-room empire in Glasgow, knew this and in 1903 selected a narrow four-storey tenement on that street to transform into her final, and perhaps best, catering establishment. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who had already proven himself a radically inventive architect-designer in his work for Cranston at the Buchanan Street and Ingram Street Tea Rooms, was given the full commission to redesign the building inside and out.¹

Mackintosh remodelled the façade of Cranston's building in modern white stucco that still sets it apart from its neighbours (Fig.1). He also added an extension on the back of the building to allow for both more dining space and natural light from a new glass roof. The public rooms were arranged on different levels: a general tea room on the ground floor front, with another set on a mezzanine level above it so that both gained the benefit of the natural light. The upper floors contained a smoking and billiards room for gentlemen, while the crowning jewel of the Willow, the *Salon de Luxe* – a lavender and silver-toned tea room, intended to appeal to a female clientele – took pride of place on the first floor of the building, taking full advantage of the northern light from Mackintosh's new stained-glass bow window.

For the interior of this dazzling room, Mackintosh enlisted the aid of his wife,

Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh. The pair had previously completed an equally stylish Ladies Luncheon Room for Cranston at the Ingram Street Tea Room in 1900, the year of their marriage. Through the impressive gesso panels *The May Queen* by Macdonald



1. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, street façade of the Willow Tea Room, Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow.

Photo author's collection

2. Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *O Ye, All Ye That Walk In Willowwood*, 1902. Painted gesso on hessian, set with glass beads.

Photo courtesy Glasgow Museums, Kelvingrove Art Gallery



and *The Wassail* by Mackintosh (both now in the collection of Glasgow Museums, Kelvingrove Art Gallery), they established a symbolic narrative of seasonal celebration as the theme for this exquisite white dining room.² At the Willow, they accomplished something no less stunning, adopting the 'Sauchiehall' theme in an even more complex manner by incorporating a new source of inspiration: the 'Willowwood' sonnets by the Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti.³ Specifically, Macdonald crafted a gesso panel for this room, arguably amongst her most beautiful, titled after the first line in the third sonnet of this cycle of four, *O Ye, All Ye That Walk In Willowwood* (Fig.2).

This essay seeks to explore the ways in which the Mackintoshes – specifically Macdonald – took as inspiration the symbolic narrative in Rossetti's poetry to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a total work of art) in the *Salon de Luxe* on both an overtly visual and a subconscious level. Despite the fact that the average patron would not necessarily have known this source, the literary connection allows us to gain insight into how the Mackintoshes collaborated on a theme for their interior, and to think about how their work fits into the larger context of decorative art and design history at the time. The Mackintoshes were among those versatile late Victorian/Edwardian artists whose work defies easy classification. Elements of Pre-Raphaelitism, the Arts & Crafts Movement, Aestheticism, and Art Nouveau can all be found within their oeuvre. However, they are least discussed (though perhaps best fit) as Symbolist artists, despite the fact that they actively engaged with such themes and literature in their work.⁴ The *Salon de Luxe* is a quintessential example of how the Mackintoshes engaged with Symbolist practices in the creation of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

To interpret this room, it is important to understand Rossetti's sonnet cycle from which Macdonald's gesso panel takes its name. The panel may be viewed as a narrative key to understanding the space's meaning. The first part of this essay will provide a literary analysis of the poems, and then relate this discussion back to the tea room in the second part. Rather than dive into this interpretation, however, I ask the reader to pause a few moments to read and consider Rossetti's poems, which accompany this essay (Appendix, p.31).

Rossetti's Willowwood

The 'Willowwood' sonnets form the heart of a larger work by Rossetti, *The House of Life*. Rossetti scholar Jerome McGann tells us '*The House of Life* project grew out of the composition of these four poems in December 1868' and argues that the Willowwood sonnets are a sort of miniaturised version of *The House of Life*, both expressing 'a problem about love and the hope of its fulfilment'.⁵ There are varied interpretations of the sonnets and of the work as a whole, but in Rossetti's own words: 'I should wish to deal in poetry chiefly with personified emotions; and in carrying out my scheme of the House of Life (if ever I do so) shall try to put in action a complete 'dramatis personae' of the soul.'⁶ On other interpretations, McGann observes: 'Everyone agrees, however, that the ambiguities all pivot around [Rossetti's] complex love-commitments, and especially his commitments to his wife Elizabeth, on one hand, who died in early 1862, and his friend's wife Jane Morris, on the other.' The sonnets, told in first-person narrative, suggest that the speaker is Rossetti himself. To clarify the discussion here, the three main characters in this drama will be referred to in the following manner: the Poet (the narrator), the Lost Love (the vision of a lost love), and Love (personified).

The first sonnet opens with The Poet sitting with personified Love by a 'woodside well.' Upon Love's touching of his lute, the Poet recalls the voice of his Lost Love, and begins to weep. His tears fall into the well, and the rippling of the water creates a vision. With the sweep of Love's wing-feathers touching the water, the vision of his lost love rises to meet him, and the Poet leans down to touch his lips to hers on the surface of the water. This image is quite important, as it is symbolically represented in the *Willowwood* panel, as shall be seen.

Here, Rossetti establishes important contrasting themes for the rest of the work: passion and sorrow, love and loss. 'Willowwood I' also serves as an introduction for iconography in the work, and as a reminder of Rossetti's influences, chiefly Italian art and poetry such as Dante Alighieri's *Vita Nuova*, which is similarly centred on the narrator's pining for an unattainable Love, mediated by encounters

3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti,
Beata Beatrix, c.1864-70.
 Oil on canvas.

Photo © Tate, London 2012

and discourses with personified Love. Rossetti comes to this theme repeatedly in his poetry and art, such as in his famous *Beata Beatrix* (Fig.3), appropriating Christian iconography and transforming it into his own symbolic conventions to relate an imagined moment from the *Vita Nuova*. In a letter of 1873 to William Graham, for whom he painted a replica, Rossetti explained *Beata Beatrix* in the following manner:

The picture must of course be viewed not as a representation of the incident of the death of Beatrice, but as an ideal of the subject, symbolized by a trance or sudden spiritual transfiguration [...] and in sign of the supreme change, the radiant bird, a messenger of death, drops the white poppy between her hands.⁷

Thus instead of a white dove or a red rose, symbols that are more familiar Christian signifiers, he appropriates the bird/flower iconography of the god/virgin relationship, and creates a red bird/white poppy messenger of death. The symbolic language is familiar, yet not, like a different iconographic dialect.

Rossetti's twisting of iconography appears in both his painting and poetry, foreshadowing later Symbolist interventions. Take for example, the central component of the well in Willowwood (which we shall see in the central formal element of the gesso panel, the green oval). Symbolically, wells are meeting as well as drinking places, which is an intriguing consideration for a tea room theme. In 'Willowwood I', we witness two metaphysical meetings, as seen through the gaze of the poet: first, with Love, whose eyes he meets in the waters below, and second, with the Lost Love who comes forth from the reflected eyes of Love in the water. The well itself is a liminal space, a site for the Poet to encounter his Lost Love, whether she is the spectre of a dead woman, or simply someone out of his reach. Both images suggest a moment between the physical and spiritual, suggestive of sensuality and desire through the encounter with Love and the kiss.

The second sonnet opens with the words 'And now Love sang', which would seem to suggest we are about to hear his song. Instead, Rossetti makes us wait, and rather describes the nature of the song, as well as the rising action of the drama that occurs while Love sings, indicated by the first words of the last line of the sonnet: 'And still Love sang'. Rossetti describes the song in complex terms, and while it has been argued



that these lines may somehow reference souls waiting for the 'second coming,'⁸ there is precedent for another more esoteric theme here, that of reincarnation. In 1854, Rossetti wrote the poem 'Sudden Light' while vacationing with Elizabeth Siddal in Hastings:

I have been here before,
 But when or how I cannot tell:
 I know the grass beyond the door,
 The sweet keen smell,
 The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

You have been mine before,—
 How long ago I may not know:
 But just when at that swallow's soar
 Your neck turned so,
 Some veil did fall,— I knew it all of yore.

Has this been thus before?
 And shall not thus time's eddying flight
 Still with our lives our love restore
 In death's despite,
 And day and night yield one delight once
 more?⁹

There can be little question that reincarnation is the theme of this poem, signalled by the opening of each verse: 'I have been here before ... You have been mine before ... Has this been thus before?' In Willowwood, Love's song is akin to one 'disused souls' would sing, 'meshed with half-remembrance' when their 'new birthday tarries long'; in other words when they are waiting to reincarnate, and filled with fading memories of their

former life. This interpretation is especially poignant when considering the subsequent lines about the dumb throng, the mournful forms which emerge from the wood, whom the Poet recognises as their former selves, 'The shades of those our days that had no tongue.' They could be memories, but could also be shadows of past lives. All of this happens in the same moment as the kiss upon the water, at which these shades cry out in longing as we are returned to the song of love, which is the subject of the next sonnet.

This third sonnet is the most important for the purposes of this study, as its first line is the title of Macdonald's panel. This sonnet is actually Love's song, but rather than being a 'romantic' ballad sung by Love as troubadour, it is a mournful song that offers a poignant message: pining for lost love is fruitless, and will bring naught but more pain.

Here is an appropriate place to address a question that is perhaps the most important in interpreting both Rossetti's poem and Macdonald's work: what, in a larger sense, is a willowwood? In a literal sense, it is the wood of willows next to the well in which the action takes place. But willowwood also carries with it several symbolic connotations. The associations of the willow with sorrow and mourning are evident. In an agricultural light, willows are found near riverbanks, and their roots are excellent for preventing soil erosion. Thus, they are associated with water (also a signifier of continuity), which is represented by the well in the poem. It is also an ancient medicinal plant. The bark and leaves are rich in salicin, a natural glucoside akin to the active ingredient in aspirin, acetylsalicylic acid. The most common way of utilising the willow's healing properties was to boil its bark in water and drink it; in other words, *to make tea*. Finally, willows were also considered guardians, and planted around cemeteries to keep spirits bound. This could apply to the 'shades' in 'Willowwood II' that manifest themselves each next to a tree, but have no voice to speak with, and which do not approach the action of the scene.

The place that is Willowwood is defined by all of these associations, and also by the substance of Love's song. Those who 'walk in Willowwood' are those who mourn yet yearn ('hollow faces burning bright'), those who have been left behind in 'soul-struck widowhood', whose existence has become 'one lifelong night'. This last could have a double meaning: night, as in the darkness, but also as in the time when spirits can be

seen (and perhaps even touched). The song goes on to suggest that these souls cultivate their sorrow in vain, those who 'wooed your last hope lost' and 'in vain invite your lips to that their unforgotten food'. This is a direct reference to the Poet's action of kissing the vision in the well, which the shades – manifestations of the lovers – lament in longing. Thus Willowwood is a place of mourning, if not a place of the dead, where yearning souls (living or not) dwell, those who attempt in vain to be with those lost to them.

The sextet that follows offers even more insight into the painful nature of Willowwood:

Alas! the bitter banks in Willowwood,
With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort burning
red:
Alas! if ever such a pillow could
Steep deep the soul in sleep till she were
dead,—

Here we again find Rossetti's colour symbolism: red and white used interchangeably for love, passion, life and death. This is reinforced by the rhyme scheme: the second line of the octet ends 'burning white', while the second line of the sextet ends 'burning red'; and each has its own associations within its verse – 'white' rhymes with 'night', 'invite', and 'light'; and 'red' rhymes with 'dead'. The word associations within the rhyme serve a similar function to the visual symbolism discussed above in *Beata Beatrix*, to connote colour and words in crafting a reinvented system of signification.

Like these plants, dwellers in Willowwood are weakened by their tears and burning with their rage and passion. Also interesting to note is the bitter nature of each of these plants: spurge is an invasive plant that consumes and takes over wherever it takes root, and bloodwort was used medicinally to induce vomiting (spurge carries within it a milky white sap, while the red roots of bloodwort were used to make dyes). Thus in a beautiful crafting of language and imagery, Rossetti uses the natural plant-life found on an English riverbank as a tool to describe the bitter emotion involved in this sort of longing. Willowwood here is not just a place of mourning, but the mourning itself made manifest in the bitter banks of which Love laments that one cannot 'steep deep the soul in sleep till she were dead' (and here, one cannot help but think of Elizabeth Siddal, who steeped herself in sleep with laudanum, then died from it).

The closing lines of the sonnet/song carry the potent message that love wishes to relate:

'Better all life forget her than this thing,
That Willowwood should hold her wandering!'

But far from offering closure, Love has planted the seed of hope in the midst of his song. The last line of the octet, in the middle of his song, declares: 'Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!' Recall its rhymes, which when said together read, not coincidentally, 'white night invite light'. This promise of light foreshadows the ambiguously hopeful ending of the final sonnet.

The cycle closes with a description of the end of the encounter, and an enigmatic image of hope. In the final sonnet, Rossetti analogises the ending of the kiss as two clinging roses who, having withstood the 'wind's wellaway' or Love's lamentation, at the end of the day drop their leaves that had been loosened 'where the heart-stain glows'. The opening line of the octet is also a double-entendre recalling the action of the second sonnet, the 'meeting rose and rose' (and the importance of rose symbolism to the Mackintoshes is well known). The vision/phantom of Lost Love fades back, 'drowned' from view, and the Poet reveals uncertainty



4. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the *Salon de Luxe* of the The Willow Tea Room, c.1903.

Image courtesy The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

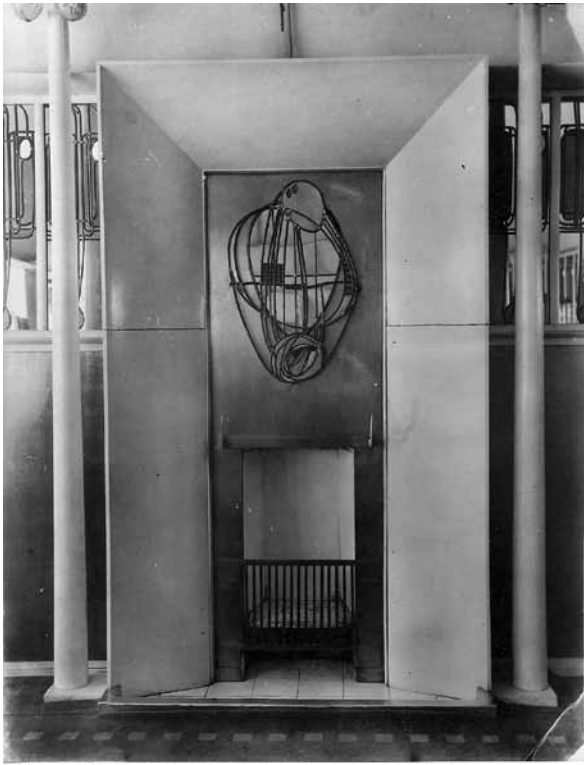
that he will ever see Her again. Yet at the end, Rossetti offers a hopeful twist: as the Poet takes a last draught of his Lost Love's presence, Love leans forward and graces him with a blessing through his touch, his 'moan of pity and grace', and finally, in a potent visual image, moves his head 'till both our heads were in his aureole'. It is rather ambiguous as to whom the 'both' refers to, Love and the Poet, or the Poet and his Lost Love, but a potent case could be made for the latter if one recalls the themes of Dante's *Vita Nuova* and the repetition of trinitities. By encompassing both of the lovers'

heads in his aureole, Love joins the three of them, gracing them with his blessed halo and making profane love sacred. It is this interpretation of the Willowwood, as a place of unrequited love, where sorrow and longing mingle passionately with longing and hope that provides the most compelling interpretation of Macdonald's *Willowwood*, and the *Salon de Luxe*.

Willowwood in the Salon de Luxe

The Salon de Luxe, or 'Room de Looks' as a satirical exchange in *The Evening News* called it, both delighted and perplexed its Glaswegian clientele.¹⁰ As a tea room, the *Salon de Luxe* is not easily or obviously contemplated as a symbolic work of art. The connection to Sauchiehall Street, the 'alley of the willows', mentioned at the start, was perhaps the first and most obvious reason for the name and theme of the tea room. In addition Miss Cranston's special design of the 'Willow Pattern' china first produced by Minton around 1790 was used in the tea room.¹¹ The tale of the Willow Pattern (a British invention, well known at the time) is, like Rossetti's poem, one of love, life, and afterlife. Sauchiehall Street and Willow Pattern china were more accessible references for the typical customer; Rossetti's poetry is more obscure, yet the titling of Macdonald's panel informs us that there was, at least for the creators of this room, a connection. Thus we can consider symbolic interpretation of space here, and in that the *Salon de Luxe* is rather complex. Multiple layers, from the feminine colour scheme to the interplay of the pristine interior with the grey city glimpsed through the windows offer an array of possible readings. Like Mackintosh's other projects, the décor at the Willow had a psychological effect, suggesting elegance and refinement that would reflect, or perhaps even instruct, on matters of behaviour, style and taste.

Fantastical doors, white framed with ornate stained glass patterns reminiscent of willows and wild roses marked the entrance to the chamber (Fig.4).¹² These created a liminal space in both the literal and psychological sense, as patrons passed through them to the luxurious salon within. Beneath the vaulted ceiling, myriad coloured glass balls hung from a chandelier, casting dancing light over the patrons below. High-backed silver chairs upholstered in purple velvet stood behind carefully set silver tables. Across from the threshold the wide stained-glass bow window, patterned with stylised



wandering the wood. The green oval at centre is the well, and the face that hovers inside it is that of the Lost Love. The similar features and hairstyles, plus an understanding of the poem, tell us that the other two figures are her shades, walking in a circular fashion about the well, inside the wood that is represented by the rhythmic gesso lines on the surface. The Poet and Love are also present, however. A ghostly hand hovers on the surface of the well – the Poet touching the surface of the water. The ripple this creates is in the form of a rose: this rose, along with the others found throughout the composition, denotes the presence of Love. However, the particular rose that is beneath the hand serves a dual function: it is positioned just over the Spirit's lips, and is therefore also representative of the meeting of lips – the kiss – described in 'Willowwood I'.

Both the panel and the hearth were situated in altar-like frames that lent a votive quality to each (Figs 5, 6). As with other

5. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, fireplace in the Salon de Luxe, Willow Tea Room, c.1903.

Image courtesy The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

6. Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, *O Ye, All Ye That Walk In Willowwood*, gesso panel in situ at the Salon de Luxe, c.1903.

Image courtesy The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

willows, cast soft pink and purple designs about the chamber. A frieze of mirrors, in lead and glass, repeated this pattern around the room and back to the doors. The overall effect of the colour, light, and texture suggests a dense forest with a lush, ethereal atmosphere.

On the flanking walls, a decorative hearth sat opposite Macdonald's gesso panel *O Ye, All Ye, that Walk in Willowwood*. The panel is undeniably beautiful in its serene figures, graceful lines, rich texture and subtle colouring, and displays Macdonald's progressive mastery of gesso technique. The *Willowwood* panel depicts three female figures that emerge from an intricate, naturalistic linear design. The full-length foreground figure is in three-quarter view facing front, her head tilted downward, her eyes downcast. The background figure, which is turned mostly away from us, is in profile, head and eyes similarly downcast. Her body is obscured by a large green oval at centre, at the top of which is a light-toned face looking straight out at the viewer. The array of linear surface decoration flows over the figures like a beaded curtain. The rich green of the oval offsets the golden glow of the surface, and the cabbage-like roses hover about the image in a delicate yet richly textured pattern.

The *Willowwood* panel is a symbolic illustration of Rossetti's poems. It is in fact a continuous narrative of the vision of the Lost Love in the well, and the shades of her



panels she made for Mackintosh's interiors, the placement and framing, no doubt conceived in concert with her husband, is another key to interpreting the work. The gesso panel is reflected in a decorative stained glass mirror above the fireplace opposite it: the well and the mirror, in a symbolic sense, both represent manners of passage that evoke the liminal, metaphysical nature of Rossetti's poems.

Surely it was a simple logic which moved the Mackintoshes to borrow from Rossetti's willow-themed poetry; but the Willowwood sonnets also embraced perhaps the most idealistic motif of the Mackintoshes' life and work: love. There is a melancholy hopefulness to the theme – that in some other place we shall find those we love, that they wait, and that we should not linger on their loss. In the context of the design scheme, the *Salon de Luxe* is like a liminal space – somewhere not quite otherworldly, but also hardly typical of a public dining room; a chamber of glittering silver and lavender juxtaposed against the grey city beyond the windows; the musical clinking of china and whisper of voices versus the noise of the street. If the *Willowwood* panel depicts Rossetti's sonnets, and the theme extended about the room in mirrors and leaded glass (like water, reflective surfaces), then the room itself becomes the wood in which she dwells. Her accompanying shades are the patrons who come for tea, passing through the fantastical doors to the otherworldly spaces, touching their lips to their libations as the Poet who drank from the well. The *Salon de Luxe* is, symbolically, *Willowwood*.

NOTES

- 1 For more on Mackintosh's work for Cranston, see Perilla Kinchin, *Taking Tea with Mackintosh: The Story of Miss Cranston's Tea Rooms*, Rohnert Park: Pomegranate 1998. Special thanks to Professor Pamela Robertson at the Hunterian Art Gallery and Alison Brown at Glasgow Museums for their advice and insight on this topic.
- 2 The Ladies Luncheon Room has been partially reconstructed at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery. For more on this space, see Wendy Kaplan, ed., *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, London: Abbeville Press in association with Glasgow Museums 1996; for more on the symbolic narrative in this space, see Robyne Erica Calvert, 'Two for Tea: The Tea Room Designs of Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh and Charles Rennie Mackintosh', Masters Thesis, University of Oregon, Department of Art History, 2009, ch.3.
- 3 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Willowwood (Sonnets XXIV,

XXV, XXVI, and XXVII)', in *Poems*, 1st edn, London: F.S. Ellis 1870, pp.212–15.

- 4 Although this essay deals with the writing of Rossetti, a Pre-Raphaelite, it should be noted that the Mackintoshes also made work on themes of Symbolist writers such as Maeterlinck. See Pamela Robertson, 'Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh: The Seven Princesses,' in *Ein Moderner Nachmittag: Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh und der Salon Waerndorfer in Wien [A Thoroughly Modern Afternoon : Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh and the Salon Waerndorfer in Vienna]*, Bohlau 2000, pp.41–78.
- 5 Jerome J. McGann, ed., *The Complete Writings and Pictures of Dante Gabriel Rossetti [Rossetti Archive]* (freely distributed by IATH and the NINES consortium under a Creative Commons License, 2008), <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/index.html>. Comprising sonnets written between the years of 1847 and 1870, the text ranges in size depending on its publication date, from the first 16-sonnet sequence published in the *Fortnightly Review* in March 1869, under the title 'Of Life, Love, and Death: Sixteen Sonnets'; subsequently added to and restructured until the final version of 45 was published 1 March, 1870.
- 6 Dante Gabriel Rossetti in a letter to his friend Thomas Gordon Hake. Quoted in Jerome J. McGann, 'Willowwood - Collection Introduction,' *The Rossetti Archive*, n.d., <http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/14-1869.raw.html>.
- 7 Dante Gabriel Rossetti in a letter to William Graham, March 1873. Quoted in Lady Frances Horner, *Time Remembered*, London: Heinemann 1933, p.25.
- 8 A footnote for this poem in the 'The Norton Anthology Online Archive' states: 'as souls unused in death's sterility may sing when waiting for the second coming (i.e. 'new birthday').' http://www.wnorton.com/college/english/nael/noa/pdf/27636_Vict_U13_Rossetti.pdf.
- 9 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems, A New Edition* London: Ellis & White 1881, p.242.
- 10 Kinchin (n.1), pp.59–61.
- 11 Miss Cranston's partiality for Willow Pattern must have contributed in some way to the willow theme here. She used her special make of it throughout her tea rooms. Lutyens fell in love with it at the Buchanan St tea rooms in 1897: see Perilla Kinchin, *Tea and Taste: The Glasgow Tea Rooms 1875–1975*, Oxford 1996, p.52.
- 12 Although the Willow Tea Room is extant and functional today, this analysis uses the past tense to consider the original plan, which greatly differs from the current arrangement of space. Functional replicas of the doors had been in place for many years, but recently, the building's owners have reinstalled the original doors, which had been in the care of Glasgow Museums. However for conservation purposes, they have been covered in protective perspex mounted on the floor and fixed in the open position, which makes it impossible to view the continuous frieze Mackintosh crafted, nor does the visitor gain the same impact that passing through the doors once created.

Appendix

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Willowwood', from *The House of Life*, 1st edn, 1870

I

I sat with Love upon a woodside well,
Leaning across the water, I and he;
Nor ever did he speak nor looked at me,
But touched his lute wherein was audible
The certain secret thing he had to tell:
Only our mirrored eyes met silently
In the low wave; and that sound came to be
The passionate voice I knew; and my tears
fell.

And at their fall, his eyes beneath grew hers;
And with his foot and with his wing-feathers
He swept the spring that watered my heart's
drouth.

Then the dark ripples spread to waving hair,
And as I stooped, her own lips rising there
Bubbled with brimming kisses at my mouth.

II

And now Love sang: but his was such a
song,
So meshed with half-remembrance hard to
free,
As souls disused in death's sterility
May sing when the new birthday tarries long.
And I was made aware of a dumb throng
That stood aloof, one form by every tree,
All mournful forms, for each was I or she,
The shades of those our days that had no
tongue.

They looked on us, and knew us and were
known;
While fast together, alive from the abyss,¹⁰
Clung the soul-wrung implacable close kiss;
And pity of self through all made broken
moan
Which said, 'For once, for once, for once
alone!'
And still Love sang, and what he sang was
this:—

III

'O ye, all ye that walk in Willowwood,
That walk with hollow faces burning white;
What fathom-depth of soul-struck
widowhood,
What long, what longer hours, one lifelong
night,
Ere ye again, who so in vain have wooed
Your last hope lost, who so in vain invite
Your lips to that their unforgotten food,
Ere ye, ere ye again shall see the light!

Alas! the bitter banks in Willowwood,
With tear-spurge wan, with blood-wort
burning red:
Alas! if ever such a pillow could
Steep deep the soul in sleep till she were
dead,—
Better all life forget her than this thing,
That Willowwood should hold her wandering!'

IV

So sang he: and as meeting rose and rose
Together cling through the wind's wellaway
Nor change at once, yet near the end of day
The leaves drop loosened where the heart-
stain glows,—
So when the song died did the kiss uncloze;
And her face fell back drowned, and was as
grey
As its grey eyes; and if it ever may
Meet mine again I know not if Love knows.

Only I know that I leaned low and drank
A long draught from the water where she
sank,
Her breath and all her tears and all her soul:
And as I leaned, I know I felt Love's face
Pressed on my neck with moan of pity and
grace,
Till both our heads were in his aureole.