

## A Difficult Renunciation: Conflict in the Life and Art of Christina Rossetti

Donald Sturge

### Abstract

Contemporaries report that Christina Rossetti's youthful world view was characterized by appreciation of material and spiritual dimensions of life but, as she grew older, Rossetti increasingly dismissed the material and favored the spiritual. This essay considers biographical information and examples of her writing in an effort to understand the tension between material and spiritual attractions so evident in Christina Rossetti life and so important to her work.

### Introduction

Throughout her life, Christina Rossetti shared an extremely close relationship with the other members of her family. Consequently, it seems difficult for study of her life and work to overemphasise the effect family influences had on the development of her thought and, ultimately, on her poetry. The influences that coursed through Christina Rossetti's family can be roughly divided into two categories, "religious" and intellectual," corresponding to the predominate interests of the mother and father respectively. Frances Rossetti, a devout matriarch with a flair for evangelizing, actively encouraged her children to appreciate the "spiritual beauty" of religious commitment; Gabriele Rossetti, a scholar and poet, encouraged his children to appreciate "worldly beauty" by focussing their attention on artistic endeavors.

While the Rossetti children were all affected by the spiritual and worldly attitudes advocated by their parents, the eldest daughter and son most readily embraced those attitudes. Maria Francesca was "from her earliest years . . . devout;

and, after being confirmed (towards 1840), she made religion her paramount concern, attending little in comparison to anything else.”<sup>1</sup> Dante Gabriel, “ardent, impulsive . . . eagerly susceptible to anything of a poetic, imaginative, or fanciful kind,”<sup>2</sup> was a passionate, rather rambunctious person who quickly learned to apply himself wholeheartedly to reading, writing, and painting. Through her intimate relationship with an elder sister and brother who were only slightly older than she, Christina Rossetti was directly exposed to both spiritual and worldly lifestyles. Subsequently, as her sister and brother became more deeply involved with social currents that influenced her society and her home, Christina also became involved with those currents and her perspectives developed accordingly.

The religious influences that operated within Christina’s family can be identified with the Oxford, or High Church Movement of the Anglican Church,<sup>3</sup> the ascetic, fundamentalist sect to which Christina’s mother was particularly attracted. Begun in the 1830’s by clergymen disgruntled by liberalizing trends within religious and secular society, the High Church Movement rapidly became a force to be reckoned with, “a power in the National Church and an object of alarm to her rulers and friends.”<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the Movement’s reactionary stance had great appeal in a country being shaken by the sweeping social changes that accompanied spectacular scientific and technological developments. Many Anglicans in search of the social and spiritual stability of bygone times were attracted to this “great revival of what may roughly be called Gospel-preaching in the English Church, extending far beyond the limits of school or party.”<sup>5</sup> Those Anglicans eagerly followed a movement that promised to restore the rapidly fading glory of the English Church by Romanizing it and by making it revert to older and seemingly better principles and practices.

Frances Rossetti, “a devout but not sanctimonious member of the Church of England,”<sup>6</sup> was one of the many Anglicans who joined the Oxford Movement and by the 1840’s, her intensive religious education of her children included taking them to High Church services at Christ Church on Albany Street. Her sons soon tired of religion and discontinued churchgoing, but the Rossetti daughters eagerly accompanied their mother to church to hear Reverend Dodsworth, an associate of Oxford Movement leaders. Dodsworth’s preaching profoundly affected all the females of the Rossetti family, but Maria was most powerfully influenced by her priest’s brand of Christianity. Following her mother’s lead in conforming to High

Church practices,<sup>7</sup> Maria ventured ever further on the path of religious devotion and eventually became a member of The Anglican All Saint's Sisterhood, a celibate order of the Church of England that was re-established under the auspices of the Oxford Movement.

According to Sir Edmund Gosse, Christina was affected profoundly by the religious indoctrination her sister accepted so willingly: "The pronounced High Church views of Maria, who throve [sic] on ritual, starved the less pietistic, but painfully conscientious nature of Christina. The influence of Maria Francesca Rossetti on her sister seemed to be . . . a species of police surveillance exercised by a hard, convinced mind over a softer and more fanciful one."<sup>8</sup> By the time she was eighteen years old, Christina was already a staunch believer in High Church doctrines and she possessed attitudes that probably would have led her to assume a life in a convent had she not considered herself too unworthy to accept any position of responsibility in religious society.<sup>9</sup> In fact, even though she remained outside a religious cloister, Christina readily adopted devotional practices that befitted the convent life. Her brother William Michael Rossetti reports that, from her youth, Christina made her life revolve around "her perpetual church-going and communions, her prayers and fasts, her submission to clerical direction, her oblations, her practice of confession."<sup>10</sup>

Intellectual influences that flowed through the Rossetti household reached something of a culmination in the art movement known as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (P. R. B.).<sup>11</sup> In 1848, when he was twenty years old and already something of an accomplished painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and six other young men eager to make their marks on the English art scene formed the P. R. B. with lofty ambition to revolutionize contemporary art forms. Distressed by what they perceived to be shallow and poorly executed art produced by Royal Academy techniques, P. R. B. members wished for a reversion to what they imagined to be the superior art style in use prior to Raphael, an art style that supposedly allowed an artist to balance moral instruction and perfect execution.<sup>12</sup> The "Brothers" felt that the true meaning of art could be expressed only when an artist could abandon the Academy's formalized approach and make a romantic approach to life and art, permitting that artist to "obey his own individual impulse, act upon his own perception and study of Nature, and scrutinize and work at his objective material with

assiduity.”<sup>13</sup> Generally speaking, the P. R. B.'s “natural” approach to art resulted in works that blended realism and fantasy in a presentation that included near-photographic detail of natural surroundings and depiction of emotionally charged scenes adapted from mythical or religious lore.

Ultimately, the P. R. B. failed to revolutionize the Royal Academy’s artistic methods. Within two years, defections began to sap whatever strength the group had and within five years of its inception, the group disbanded entirely. Nevertheless, the P. R. B. became a widely recognized and relatively influential art movement, largely due to favourable responses by the respected art critic John Ruskin, who especially liked Dante Gabriel’s work. Other critics not as charitable toward the P. R. B. as Ruskin attacked Dante Gabriel as the leader of a “fleshy school” of art that was most interested in sensuous depictions of the human body.<sup>14</sup>

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the main driving force of the P. R. B., did much to encourage his sister Christina to participate in the work of his group. Although she was not an official P. R. B. member,<sup>15</sup> Christina became well acquainted with the personalities that made up the group and was sympathetic enough toward their artistic enterprises that she produced poetry for The Germ, the short-lived periodical designed to publicize the Brotherhood’s ideas about art and literature. Christina felt close enough to an organization that tried to elevate life’s worldly beauties to exalted spiritual heights that she sometimes referred to herself as “the least and last of the group.”<sup>16</sup> Clearly, her relationship with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood affected her life and art significantly:

There can be no doubt that association with men so learned and eager, so daring in experiment, so well equipped in scholarship, gave her an instant and positive advantage. By nature she would seem to be of a cloistered and sequestered temper, and her genius was lifted on this wave of friendship to heights which it would not have dreamed of attempting alone.<sup>17</sup>

The story of Christina Rossetti’s ill-starred love affair with James Collinson graphically shows that she was exposed personally to and affected deeply by the powerful spiritual and worldly influences that were introduced by her parents and

reinforced through contact with the High Church Movement and the P. R. B.<sup>18</sup> Christina's abortive liaison with Collinson also shows how she tried to detach herself from worldly attractions because of the religious beliefs she entertained, regardless of whether or not such detachment were painful for her.

James Collinson was a devoutly religious member of the P. R. B. As a result of his friendship with Dante Gabriel, Collinson met Christina and they fell in love with each other. In 1848, Collinson proposed marriage to Christina but she refused him because she thought they were incompatible spiritually; Collinson had converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism and for Christina, the difference in their religious affiliations presented an insurmountable barrier to happy marriage. In an effort to obtain his love's hand, Collinson once again became a member of the Church of England, and Christina happily received him as her fiance. However, within a few months of his conversion to High Church Anglicanism, Collinson realized that he could not remain at peace with himself unless he returned to Catholicism. Early in 1850, Christina terminated the engagement.

Christina's decision to end her relationship with Collinson because of her religious beliefs was a major step in her life, a step with serious repercussions for her. Her brother William Michael Rossetti reports that the shattered love affair "struck a staggering blow at Christina Rossetti's peace of mind on the very threshold of womanly life, and a blow from which she did not fully recover for years."<sup>19</sup> The unhappy resolution of her relationship with Collinson can be seen as an important sign of decay in the delicately balanced, contrasting spiritual and worldly elements that formed Christina Rossetti's world view. The failed relationship with Collinson shows Christina being forced to make an uncomfortable choice between taking a spiritual path and taking a worldly path for her life.

Given the tremendous religious influences to which Christina was exposed in her early years, it is not surprising to find that she was such a devout Christian for practically all of her lifetime. In fact, in just about everything except official title, Christina was a nun like her older sister as she refused marriage on religious grounds and chose to spend her days in quiet seclusion, fortified by Christian meditation and prayer, often nursing infirm relatives in spite of her own chronic illnesses.<sup>20</sup> Among those who knew this Virgin figure who epitomised the humble life of Christian sacrifice, there seems to have been unanimous agreement with William Sharp's

assessment of her as "one of the saintliest of women."<sup>21</sup>

Given the tremendous intellectual stimulus to which she was exposed, it is not surprising that Christina was successful in her efforts to use her writings to persuade other people to develop the same type of spiritual beliefs she professed. Gifted with "the most extreme spontaneity"<sup>22</sup> in literary composition, she used poetry and prose to proselytise her religion and often offered her work in impassioned support of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, a publishing organisation with a distinctly religious perspective. Judging from her admission of being "glad to throw my grain of dust into the religious scale,"<sup>23</sup> nobody should have felt more satisfied and fulfilled than Christina Rossetti as her life inspired those who knew her personally and her writings became printed and reprinted, making her one of the most widely read and best loved devotional authors of her day.

Considering how the contrasting spiritual and worldly attractions of life caused Christina Rossetti so much problem in her relationship with James Collinson, it is not surprising to find that the woman with a childlike "faith pure and absolute"<sup>24</sup> who lived such a righteous life and who did so much to lead others on the paths of righteousness seems to have been troubled by the religious route that she decided for her own life. William Michael Rossetti observes that Christina "always distrusted herself and her relation to the standard of Christian duty which she constantly acknowledged and professed. . . . [A]ll her life long she felt – or rather she exaggerated – her deficiencies or backsliding."<sup>25</sup> William Michael also feels that his sister's religious beliefs caused her to suffer inner conflict because they made her turn against her own natural inclinations, that Christina's religious beliefs made her "shut up her mind to almost all other things save the Bible, and the admonitions and ministrations of priests,"<sup>26</sup> and as a consequence, "her temperament and character, naturally warm and free, became a fountain sealed."<sup>27</sup> Ford Madox Hueffer, a friend and admirer of Christina Rossetti, verifies her brother's suggestion that Christina Rossetti experienced inner conflict because her spiritual beliefs clashed with her innate desire for worldly things: "This tranquil religious [sic] was undergoing within herself always a fierce struggle between the pagan desire for life, for the light of the sun and love, and an asceticism that, in its more than Calvinistic restraint, reached also to a point of frenzy."<sup>28</sup>

Testimony by people close to Christina who had little to gain by portraying her

negatively leaves little doubt that worldly attractions upset the austere ascetic life that Christina tried to bolster with a multitude of devotional practices. It seems that, whether or not she wanted to recognize the facts of her situation, Christina Rossetti was contracted firmly to the physical part as well as to the spiritual part of life. Thus, she could not callously shrug off sensual desire for a fellow human being; thus, she was not always as confident of her ability to renounce worldly attractions as she appears to be when she writes of her faith in her 1883 volume Letter and Spirit:

All our lives long we shall be bound to refrain [sic] our soul and keep it low: but what then? For the books we forbear to read, we shall one day be imbued with wisdom and knowledge. For the music we will not listen to, we shall join in the song of the redeemed. For the pictures from which we turn, we shall gaze unabashed on the Beatific Vision. For the companionship we shun, we shall be welcomed into angelic society and the communion of triumphing saints. For the amusements we avoid, we shall keep the supreme Jubilee. For the pleasures we miss, we shall abide, and for evermore abide, in the rapture of Heaven.<sup>29</sup>

Because Christina Rossetti tried to insulate herself from the mainstream of life and because her literary compositions were “entirely of the casual and spontaneous kind, from her earliest to her latest years,”<sup>30</sup> her writing provides an exceptionally good record of the attitudes that she developed during her lifetime. As C. M. Bowra observes, “no woman could write with this terrible directness if she did not to some degree know the experience which she describes.”<sup>31</sup> R. A. Hellas might be speaking on behalf of Bowra and any other who shares his views about the “terrible directness” of Christina Rossetti’s verse when he describes how her poetry provides a clear reflection of the inner conflict noted by Christina’s contemporaries:

Characteristic poems [of Christina Rossetti], searchingly subjective, reveal the doubts and the anguish of a troubled soul that is in conflict with the world and with itself. . . . The tension and suffering in these poems resulted from the imposition of a code of life—a way of thinking, feeling, and acting—that did not satisfy the needs of Christina’s personality or

adequately explain her experiences.<sup>32</sup>

The present essay concurs with opinions of Bowra and Bellas as it examines Christina Rossetti's self-revealing verses to try shed light on the inner conflict mentioned by William Michael Rossetti and Ford Madox Hueffer. By considering a broad selection of Christina's poetry, including poems rarely seen as being as consequential to the story of her life and art as they are, this essay seeks to trace the development of Christina's troubled soul from innocent youthful peace through the upsets of frustrated love, to the point where religious considerations dominated. Particular attention is paid to poetry composed prior to the publication of Christina's first and probably greatest literary success, Goblin Market and Other Poems (1862), poetry that provides glimpses of Christina during crucial, formative years of her life, when she was trying to wade through the vicissitudes of adolescence and early womanhood and trying to develop a workable philosophy that would serve her well throughout the long lifetime she faced.

It seems appropriate that the very first poem Christina Rossetti is supposed to have written was designed to accompany a gift of flowers for her mother's birthday. During their lifetimes, Christina and her mother shared an extraordinarily close relationship and "were seldom severed, even for a few days together."<sup>33</sup> Written when Christina was just eleven years old, this first poem is a fitting portent of the lifelong love the girl had for her mother, a love that she often expressed poetically:

To-day's your natal day;  
Sweet flowers I bring!  
Mother, accept I pray  
My offering.

And may you happy live,  
And long us bless:  
Receiving as you give  
Great happiness.

27 April 1842<sup>34</sup>



Much of Christina's poetry shows her love and respect for the Christian beliefs that her mother professed and instilled in her from early childhood to adulthood. "Hymn" is a fine representation of how a twelve year old child with a knack for making rhymes could compose her own little prayer in grateful acknowledgement of the religious instruction she was receiving:

To the God who reigns on high,  
To the Eternal Majesty,  
To the Blessed Trinity,  
Glory on earth be given,  
In the sea and in the sky,  
And in the highest heaven.

2 July 1843

Christina once remarked that "[i]f any one thing schooled me in the direction of poetry, it was perhaps the delightful idle liberty to prowling all alone about my grandfather's cottage-grounds."<sup>35</sup> With its emphasis on the sights, sounds, and smells of Nature, "Spring Quiet" exemplifies how Christina uses rhyme to express her appreciation of worldly beauties.

Gone were but the Winter,  
Come were but the Spring,  
I would go to a covert  
Where the birds sing;

Where in the whitethorn  
Singeth a thrush,  
And a robin sings  
In the holly-bush.  
Full of fresh scents  
Are the budding boughs  
Arching high over

A cool green house;

....

'Here the sun shineth

Most shadily;

Here is heard an echo

Of the far sea,

Though far off it be.'

(1-12, 21-5)

Towards May 1847

"Love" illustrates the young Christina's love for the worldly beauty of love itself.

Love is all happiness, love is all beauty,

Love is the crown of flaxen heads and hoary;

Love is the only everlasting duty;

And love is chronicled in endless story

And kindles endless glory.

24 February 1847

Juvenile poems suggest that the youthful Christina Rossetti was a bright, sensitive girl who could use verses to describe an optimistic view of life, a view balanced by appreciation for life's spiritual beauties and physical beauties. Seemingly, Christina could be the happy singing child that she describes in "Eleanor."

Cherry-red her mouth was,

Morning-blue her eye,

Lady-slim her pretty waist

Rounded prettily:

And her sweet smile of gladness

Made every heart rejoice:

But sweeter even than her smile

The tones were of her voice.

....

But if she sang or if she spoke,

'Twas music soft and grand,  
 As though a distant singing sea  
 Broke on a tuneful strand:  
 As though a blessed Angel  
 Were singing a glad song  
 Halfway between the earth and heaven  
 Joyfully borne along.

(1-8, 25-32)

30 July 1847

Despite Christina's appreciation of worldly beauties, even her earliest poetry shows a shadow hovering over her life. The young, innocent child with such a capacity to appreciate simple earthly beauties also shares a somber adult conception that the world's beauty is transient and stained by corruption. "Earth and Heaven" shows how, even at the tender age of fourteen, Christina could qualify her joyful vision of life with ideas that human existence is blighted and that all earthly beauty is flawed:

Water calmly flowing,  
 Sunlight deeply glowing,  
 Swans some river riding  
 That is gently gliding  
 By the fresh green rushes,  
 The sweet rose that blushes,  
 . . . .  
 All these are beautiful,  
 Of beauty earth is full:  
 Say, to our promised heaven  
 Can greater charms be given?  
 Yes, for aye in heaven doth dwell,  
 Glowing, indestructible,  
 What here below finds tainted birth  
 In the corrupted sons of earth:  
 For, filling there and satisfying  
 Man's soul unchanging and undying,

Earth's fleeting joys and beauties far above,  
In heaven is Love.

(1-6, 17-28)

28 December 1844

Even love, something that the young writer has previously regarded as the most precious earthly possession, can be imagined as a transient beauty, a "Love Ephemeral."

Love is sweet, and so are flowers  
Blooming in bright summer bowers;  
So are waters, clear and pure,  
In some hidden fountain's store;

....

Flowers soon must fade away;  
Love endures but for a day.

(1-4, 15-6)

25 February 1845

William Michael Rossetti reports that Christina "was not fully fifteen when her constitution became obviously delicate."<sup>36</sup> Christina's first bout with serious illness was merely the beginning of a series of medical problems that caused her to become "an almost constant and often a sadly smitten invalid."<sup>37</sup> "The Whole Head is Sick and the Whole Heart Faint" shows how Christina could reveal her innermost thoughts in spontaneous poetry as it represents a teenager's realization that illness could prevent her from enjoying the gifts of life:

Woe for the young who say that life is long,  
Who turn from the sun-rising to the West,  
Who feel no pleasure and can find no rest,  
Who in the morning sigh for evensong.

....

For them the fount of gladness hath run dry,  
And in all Nature is no pleasant thing;  
For them there is no glory in the sky,

No sweetness in the breezes' murmuring:  
 They say, "The peace of heaven is placed too high,  
 And this earth changeth and is perishing."

(1-4, 9-14)

6 December 1847

Because the young writer was well-schooled in the belief that the world was a transitory and sinful place even before she finds out about the fragility of her own health, it does not seem surprising that after she becomes aware of her illness, Christina becomes even more deeply committed to trying to divorce herself from worldly attractions that she can never really hope to enjoy. "The Dead City" illustrates the idea that human pride in material felicity causes the destruction of human beings. As it symbolizes her desire to transcend worldly things, the poem can be viewed as a sign of Christina's ability to use poetry as a medium of escape from what must have been often a painful reality for her.

"The Dead City" commences with a description of a speaker who loses her way in a forest. In a "strange dream of hope and fear"(78) the speaker arrives at a marvelous city in which there is a palace of incredible physical beauty:

... amid an ample space  
 Rose a palace for a king;  
 Golden was the turreting,  
 And of solid gold the base.

The great porch was ivory,  
 And the steps were ebony;  
 Diamond and chrysoprase  
 Set the pillars in a blaze,  
 Capitalled with jewelry.

(117-125)

9 April 1847

On entering the palace, the speaker is warned to "[t]ouch not these, but pass them by" (128) and she quickly passes through the building. Outside, she roams through luxuriant palace grounds and arrives at a beautiful secluded bower where the

inhabitants of this strange city are feasting. At first sight, the lavish banquet seems to be a delightful affair:

Lo a splendid banquet laid  
 In the cool and pleasant shade.  
 Mighty tables everything  
 Of sweet Nature's furnishing  
 That was rich and rare displayed;

....

And this feast too lacked no guest  
 With its warm delicious rest;  
 With its couches softly sinking,  
 And its glow not made for thinking.  
 But for careless joy at best.

(166-170, 256-260)

On closer examination, the speaker finds that the beautiful things and handsome people at this banquet are actually parts of the empty beauty of this city. The speaker realizes that this banquet is truly joyless:

Yet no laughter rang around,  
 Yet they uttered forth no sound;  
 With the smile upon his face  
 Each sat moveless in his place,  
 Silently, as if spellbound.

(291-5)

The speaker discovers with horror that she is the only living one at this banquet and that the celebrants are made of stone "with the life-look and smile / And the flush" (278-9) caught forever. The speaker paints a terrifying picture of how the celebrants stay frozen in their places, captured in the midst of sensual indulgence:

Here a dead man sat to sup,

In his hand a drinking-cup;  
Wine-cup of the heavy gold,  
Human hand stony and cold,  
And no life-breath struggling up.

....

Here an old man slept, worn out  
With the revelry and rout;  
Here a strong man sat and gazed  
On a girl whose eyes upraised  
No more wandered round about.  
(291-5, 301-5)

Distressed by what she witnesses, the speaker hides her eyes and when she looks again, the disturbing vision that showed how "for luxury and pride / A great multitude have died" (213-4) has disappeared. The poem ends with the speaker praying that her life can be improved by lessons learned in this visionary experience.

Written in 1847, the same year as "The Dead City," the poem "Vanity of Vanities," also teaches how enjoying worldly things can result sorrow and regret.

Ah woe is me for pleasure that is vain,  
Ah woe is me for glory that is past!  
Pleasure that bringeth sorrow at the last,  
Glory that at the last bringeth no gain.  
(1-4)

In many of Christina Rossetti's poems, ideas about the vanity of human endeavors combine with the idea that death provides an imminent and not altogether undesirable end to earthly activity. Such ideas complement each other in "Night and Death," where Christina personifies Death and Nature as two queens vying to control Creation. From the opening stanzas of "Night and Death," it is clear that Nature will not get a very favorable hearing in this poetic judgment, for the writer views the silence of night, an aspect of Queen Death, as a welcome change from Nature's loud daily pursuits:

Now the sunlit hours are o'er,  
 Rise up from thy shadowy shore,  
 Happy Night, whom Chaos bore.  
 Better is the peaceful treasure  
 Of thy musings without measure  
 Than the day's unquiet pleasure.

(1-6)

28 September 1847

The speaker imagines that Queen Death is more beautiful and more inspiring because Death can erase pain and sadness:

She is fairer far than thou;  
 Grief her head can never bow,  
 Joy is stamped upon her brow.  
 She is full of gentleness,  
 And of faith and hope; distress  
 Finds in her forgetfulness.

(19-24)

The speaker even goes so far as to say that worldly things are valueless: "All the riches of the earth, / Weighed by her [Death], are nothing worth" (21-22) and contends that Queen Death is the most powerful ruler because, in her realm, all transient things are made eternal and are given an entirely new type of existence. Christina makes death not merely the bitter end of temporal existence; death becomes the means whereby temporal existence is improved. The poet turns death into something that can be anticipated joyfully rather than something that must be dreaded:

She [Death] is the eternal birth.

....

When earth's fleeting day is flown,  
 All created things [Death] shall own,  
 Death is Life, and Death alone.



(33, 55-7)

By the time she reaches her late teens, the idea that death provides a beautiful release from the wickedness and pain of earthly life becomes a dominant theme in Christina Rossetti's poetry. "Song" is one of the finest of her representations of this theme and indicates how closely the young writer could identify herself with death and how she could contemplate such a somber theme cheerfully, in song, by viewing death as nothing more than a dream:

When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head  
Nor shady cypress tree:

Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet:  
And if thou wilt remember,  
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,  
I shall not feel the rain  
I shall not hear the nightingale  
Sing on as if in pain:  
And dreaming through the twilight  
That doth not rise nor set,  
Haply I may remember,  
And haply may forget.

12 December 1848

Christina's repeated poetic allusions to death verify and amplify William Michael Rossetti's suggestion that "she was compelled, even if not naturally disposed, to regard this world as a 'valley of the shadow of death.'"<sup>38</sup> Such poetry elaborates on her brother's contention that, because of her illnesses, Christina was inclined to

make “near acquaintance with promises, and also with threatenings [sic], applicable to a different world.”<sup>39</sup> Such poetry provides an impressive record of Christina’s development of ascetic religious beliefs that would, she hoped, help her to transcend difficult life situations.

Clear indications of Christina’s search for religious faith and of the sort of difficulties she encountered during that search are in Maude, a prose and verse novella composed in 1849-1850. Maude is the story of a fifteen year old girl burdened by “a fixed paleness, and an expression, not exactly of pain, but languid and preoccupied to a painful degree,”<sup>40</sup> a girl who writes melancholy poems of which the following sonnet is an example:

Yea, I too could face death and never shrink.  
 But it is harder to bear hated life;  
 To strive with hands and knees weary of strife;  
 To drag the heavy chain whose every link  
 Galls to the bone; to stand upon the brink  
 Of the deep grave, nor drowse tho’ it be rife  
 With sleep; to hold with steady hand the knife  
 Nor strike home:—this is courage, as I think.  
 Surely to suffer is more than to do.  
 To do is quickly done: to suffer is  
 Longer and fuller of heartsicknesses.  
 Each day’s experience testifies of this.  
 Good deeds are many, but good lives are few:  
 Thousands taste the full cup; who drains the lees?

c. 1850

Maude is painfully conscious of her relationship with God. She believes that He may have made her ill because of sins that she committed and she believes that she is too proud in His eyes because she takes pleasure in showing her verses to friends and relatives. Maude feels sinful because her sense of her own unworthiness causes her to refuse to take part in Holy Communion. She feels guilty because she thinks she enjoyed a vain love in church; while she should have been thinking reverently

about God, she was enjoying the music of the church service. Eventually, Maude dies due to a carriage accident, an accident that seems to be some sort of punishment for her “iniquities.”

William Michael Rossetti sees Maude as a personal portrait of his sister as she was trying to order her life according to religious considerations:

My sister’s main object in delineating Maude was to exhibit what she regarded as defects in her own character and in her attitude towards her social circle and her religious obligations. . . . One can trace in this tale that she was already an adherent of the advanced High Church party in the Anglican communion, including conventual sisterhood.<sup>41</sup>

Because Maude was composed while Christina was involved with James Collinson, it is hard not to see in the novella a reflection of her choice between the ascetic and worldly lifestyles that both attracted her. Another interesting example of how Christina uses poetry to aid in her deliberations about her choice of life is in “Three Nuns,” the major poem of Maude, a poem that explores why women enter convent life.

The first nun who speaks in the poem explains that she chose religious life because she could not preserve the innocence that she knew in her childhood:

. . . while yet a child, I thought  
I could live as in a dream;  
Secret, neither found nor sought;  
Till the lilies on the stream,  
Pure as virgin purity,  
Would seem scarce too pure for me:-  
Ah but that can never be!  
(57-63)

The second nun explains that she was led to enter convent life because of a broken love affair:

I loved him; yes, where was the sin?  
 I loved him with my heart and soul:  
 But I pressed forward to no goal,  
 There was no prize I strove to win.  
 (64-67)

The third nun tells how she joined a sisterhood because of her realization that all earthly pleasures are vain and hollow:

Thou world from which I am come out,  
 Keep all thy gems and gold;  
 Keep thy delights and precious things,  
 Thou that art waxing old.  
 My heart shall beat with a new life  
 When thine is dead and cold;  
 When thou dost fear I shall be bold.  
 (152-8)

Christina Rossetti's unease about her choice of a religious path for her life seems to be underlined by the sentiments expressed by the three speakers of "Three Nuns." All of the nuns know some amount of discontentment: the first is upset because the penitent rituals she has imposed on her life do not allow her to enjoy the innocent pleasures she loved in her youth; the second is bothered by the guilt she experiences as she considers her abandoned lover in her prayers; the third feels upset because her wish to be a part of Heavenly life has to be deferred while she has human form. However, despite her recognition of tensions inherent in religious life, Christina seems to use Maude to express confidence that religious life is indeed correct for her. The unease Christina expresses through the three nuns and through the character Maude herself can be seen in a positive light, for that uneasiness is symptomatic of self-redemption in progress. Seen in this way, the story of religious turmoil and young death in Maude becomes something of a happy story for Christina Rossetti, a story that holds the promise of "the hastening of that eternal morning, which shall reunite in God those who in him, or for His Sake, have parted here."<sup>42</sup>

Ideas expressed in Maude beg comparison with ideas expressed in “Two Pursuits” (12 April 1849), a poem created at nearly the same time that also illustrates how human beings may be forced to choose between material and spiritual attractions. In “Two Pursuits,” a speaker interacts with two mysterious voices that represent two diametrically opposed forces, the first being the voice of worldly beauty and the second being the voice of heavenly beauty. The first beckoning voice seems to be able to offer human beings perfect contentment and the speaker obediently follows it into a richly decorated land where “bluest water flows, / . . . where the corn grows” (4-5). But the speaker finds that the bright beauty of this land is illusory and cannot satisfy even sensual desires, let alone spiritual needs. The speaker journeys on in the search for something of lasting value in this place of shallow attractions, but her search is hopeless. Unfulfilled wandering is finally arrested by overwhelming woes and seemingly, there is no vestige of hope for successful life in this world. In time, a second, spiritually oriented voice summons the despairing wanderer to a new and better course, to a path of redemption. This time, the speaker is able to follow a route that will not leave her helpless in a land of empty attractions because her route is marked by a “blessed star” (12). She finds a path guided by heavenly inspiration that ensures stability during physical life as it leads her safely to a higher kingdom where all desires are satisfied.

“Two Pursuits” suggests that when Christina Rossetti faced having to decide between following a material path through life or following a spiritual path through life, she chose the spiritual path, albeit with the kind of soul searching indicated by the main character of Maude. Late in 1850, the year in which she terminated her relationship with her suitor James Collinson, Christina shows her intention to follow a spiritual road through life in the first of the two sonnets of “A Portrait”:

She gave up beauty in her tender youth,  
 Gave up her hope and joy and pleasant ways,  
 She covered up her eyes lest they should gaze  
 On vanity, and chose the bitter truth.  
 Harsh towards herself, towards others full of ruth,  
 Servant of servants, little known to praise,  
 Long prayers and fasts trenched on her nights and days:

She schooled herself to sights and sounds uncouth  
 That with the poor and stricken she might make  
 A home, until the least of all sufficed  
 Her wants; her own self learned she to forsake,  
 Counting all earthly gain but hurt and loss,  
 So with calm will she chose and bore the cross  
 And hated all for love of Jesus Christ.

21 November 1850

Unfortunately for Christina Rossetti, it was not as easy for her to renounce worldly attractions as she might have wished or as poems like “Two Pursuits” or the opening poem of “A Portrait” might indicate. For as her earliest poetry shows, Christina’s capacity to appreciate spiritual values was complemented by a capacity to love worldly things and love itself. No matter how hard she tried, it appears that Christina could never completely deny ordinary human desires. She could not peremptorily dismiss the sensual side of her human nature just because she wanted to assume an austere, ascetic religious stance. “A Birthday” and “An Apple Gathering,” contrasting poems written years after “A Portrait” was written, show Christina remaining internally divided by her love for and by her distrust of earthly beauties, even after making strong commitments to spiritual living.

On November 18, 1857, Christina reveals some of her attitudes toward human life and love in “A Birthday,” an exuberant, joyful song designed to illustrate her idea that worldly life enriched by love is a beautiful and worthwhile experience. In the first stanza of this poem, the speaker compares the happiness she feels to the beauty and fecundity she sees all around her in nature’s nesting birds and trees laden with ripe apples. She imagines her contented, love filled state to be in complete harmony with life’s natural currents, just as a beautiful shell floats peacefully on undisturbed water.

My heart is like a singing bird  
 Whose nest is in a watered shoot:  
 My heart is like an apple-tree  
 Whose boughs are bent with thickset fruit;  
 My heart is like a rainbow shell

That paddles on a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love is come to me.

(1-8)

The second stanza of "A Birthday" continues praise of the love-fulfilled state as it describes the construction of a glorious man-made stage worthy of displaying the marvelous happiness of the human life invigorated by love:

Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
Hang it with vair and purple dyes;  
Carve it in doves and pomegranates,  
And peacocks with a hundred eyes;  
Work it in gold and silver grapes,  
In leaves and silver fleurs-de-lys;  
Because the birthday of my life  
Is come, my love is come to me.

(9-16)

The message of "A Birthday" seems unmistakable: human beings can be so inspired by love that those people can be identified with natural beauties and can be prompted to create works of art that complement natural beauties.

Only five days after "A Birthday" was composed, on November 23, 1857, the young writer presents quite a different appraisal of life and love in "An Apple Gathering." This poem commences with the image of a woman reveling in the flush of youth and love, picking blossoms from the same sort of apple tree as described in "A Birthday," a tree with fruit to fill the baskets of those who know love. However, the speaker of "An Apple Gathering" cannot thrive in the world of love, the world of apple trees, because of the price she feels she has to pay for enjoying sensual pleasures. She believes that the happy hours spent rejoicing in love's enjoyments are wasted and that instead of being directed toward a bountiful harvest of pure love similar to that documented in "A Birthday," she can be tainted by a sinful, degrading type of love for which she must suffer:

I plucked pink blossoms from mine apple-tree  
 And wore them all that evening in my hair:  
 Then in due season when  
 I went to see I found no apples there.

With dangling basket all along the grass  
 As I had come I went the self-same track:  
 My neighbours mocked me while they saw me pass  
 So empty-handed back.  
 (1-8)

The speaker imagines herself to be an outcast from the world, deservedly ostracized by other members of society who can devote themselves to the pursuit of a more rewarding kind of love. She feels isolated and bereft of all love. While her neighbors pass by on fruitful journeys through life, she is left behind, mired in a dismal fallen state, dumbly awaiting a fast approaching destruction.

I let my neighbours pass me, ones and twos  
 And groups; the latest said the night grew chill,  
 And hastened: but I loitered; while the dews  
 Fell fast I loitered still.  
 (25-28)

“A Birthday” and “An Apple Gathering” suggest that the contrasting worldly and religious influences to which Christina Rossetti was exposed during her youth caused her to develop a dichotomous world view. These poems show that Christina was a woman with a keen sense for the world’s lush beauties, even though she was an introspective, spiritually inclined individual who was painfully aware of the danger of focusing too much attention on transient worldly things. Because Christina’s dichotomous world view was not eliminated by her commitments toward religious life, it is possible to find in her poetry reflections of her attempts to incorporate her love for worldly things and her love for spiritual things in a coherent religious philosophy.



Christina's contemplation of the worldly and spiritual attractions that affected her life appears in "The Convent Threshold" (9 July 1858), a poem that displays important aspects of the religious beliefs by which Christina wished to orient her life. "The Convent Threshold" shows how her perception of life became governed to a significant degree by a strong, quasi-Puritanical system of beliefs: the writer makes earth the home of lascivious sin and heaven the haven of the righteous and she imagines human beings to be positioned midway between material and spiritual realms, on a threshold, forced to choose life in one or the other of those realms.

The poem commences with recognition that human beings are bound together in a world constricted by difficult physical barriers:

There's blood between us, love, my love,  
There's father's blood, there's brother's blood;  
And blood's a bar I cannot pass:  
(1-3)

The speaker represents restrictive earthly existence so negatively that even human love is powerless to counteract sin, the "scarlet mud which tells a tale" (8), unless that love becomes elevated by a chastening spirituality. In rich, sensual language the poet condemns worldly life as a drunken merry-go-round where sinful revelry ensnares most of mankind:

Milk-white, wine-flushed among the vines;  
Up and down leaping, to and fro,  
Most glad, most full, made strong with wines,  
Blooming as peaches pearled with dew,  
Their golden windy hair afloat,  
Love-music warbling in their throat,  
Young men and women come and go.  
(31-7)

In contrast to her representation of the world's mass debauchery, Christina imagines a fitting spiritual home for the wretched "offscouring of the world" (27),

those who shun the world and are shunned by it. In images suggesting perfect beauty and peace, the writer conjures up a vision of a celestial realm that is expressly designed to reward people who devote their lives to the pursuit of spirituality:

I see the far-off city grand,  
 Beyond the hills a watered land,  
 Beyond the gulf a gleaming strand  
 Of mansions where the righteous sup;  
 Who sleep at ease among their trees,  
 Or wake to sing a cadenced hymn  
 With Cherubim and Seraphim.

(18-24)

The speaker of this poem may well be identified with Christina herself as she is caught in the tensioned situation that exists between spiritual and material spheres of existence. Even though this poem holds recognition that life is sinful and even though important steps have been taken toward repenting worldly sins, the speaker still feels linked to the earth and to the illicit pleasures she has known there. The speaker's inner tension is dramatically revealed as she relates how she dreamed restlessly and needed to pray for guidance when she began to resist worldly attractions:

For all night long I dreamed of you;  
 I woke and prayed against my will.  
 Then slept to dream of you again.  
 At length I rose and knelt and prayed.

(126-9)

The speaker's only sense of satisfaction is tied to the belief that after worldly things have vanished, it will be possible for her to have a spiritualized consummation of the beautiful love that could not be truly enjoyed in such a sinful world.

When earth with shadow flees away  
 And we stand safe within the door,

Then you shall lift the veil thereof.

....

There we shall meet as once we met,  
And love with old familiar love.  
(142-4, 147-8)

Meanwhile, the speaker feels forced to abandon love for loved ones and she experiences pain and sorrow. However, she is prepared to cross the convent threshold and live like a cloistered nun because of conviction that renunciation of her sensual desires is a necessary step away from the material world toward a spiritual realm that is much more important.

Although not stated explicitly in the poem, Christina's religious convictions provide the underlying principles guiding the development of "Goblin Market" (27 April 1859), where the writer deals with the same sort of issues considered in "The Convent Threshold": her difficulty in confronting life's spiritual and material dichotomy, the temptations of worldly pleasures and the redemption of physical sin through spirituality.

"Goblin Market" presents the conflict between the sensual and spiritual attractions of life when the opening stanza paints a picture of an attractive open-air market, bustling with the sights, sounds, and tastes of life.

'Come buy our orchard fruits,  
Come buy, come buy:  
....  
Currants and gooseberries,  
Bright-fire-like barberries,  
Figs to fill your mouth,  
Citrons from the South,  
Sweet to tongue and sound to eye;  
Come buy, come buy.'  
2-3, 26-31.

A subsequent stanza describes a secluded glen, removed from the world and sheltered

from it, where those untainted by worldly sins can find comfort in heavenly bliss. The writer's symbols of this heavenly bliss are two sisters, Lizzie and Laura, protecting each other from the cold and evil of the world:

Crouching close together  
 In the cooling weather,  
 With clasping arms and cautioning lips.  
 (36-8)

The speaker describes how Laura falls from purity when, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, she is tempted to indulge in a forbidden worldly pleasure even though she knows it to be the work of devilish goblin men. As punishment for her evil deed, Laura is tormented and trapped between her material desires and her spiritual obligations in a disturbed sleeplessness reminiscent of the sleeplessness experienced by the speaker of "The Convent Threshold."

[Laura] crept to bed, and lay  
 Silent till Lizzie slept;  
 Then sat up in a passionate yearning,  
 And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept  
 As if her heart would break.  
 (264-8)

Laura is eventually redeemed of her sins through the sacrifices of her sister, who makes a frightening descent into the evil world of goblins, not unlike the Biblical account of Jesus' descent into hell, emerging with a gift of renewed life for her afflicted sister. The description of Lizzie's encounter with the wicked goblins of the sinful world affords Christina an opportunity to elaborate on her conception of life's earthly-evil and spiritual-good dichotomy. At first sight, the world of the goblins seems pleasantly lively as they run to meet Lizzie:

[Goblins] came towards her hobbling,  
 Flying, running, leaping,

Puffing and blowing,  
Chuckling, clapping, crowing,  
Clucking and gobbling,  
Mopping and mowing,  
Full of airs and graces,  
(331-7)

The goblins kindly offer Lizzie their food and a place at their table, but when Lizzie refuses their offer and they realize that Lizzie's heart is not devoted to their sort of sensual indulgences, the goblins' manner changes. They begin to show the truly evil nature that is hidden beneath pleasant earthly façade:

Their tones waxed loud,  
Their looks were evil.  
Lashing their tails  
They trod and hustled her,  
Elbowed and jostled her,  
(396-400)

The goblins attack Lizzie in an attempt to force her to partake of the sinful earthly sensuality that has poisoned their souls, so that she will become subservient to their evil wills. But Lizzie stands before them with indomitable determination, Christina's idealized representation of how spiritual purity should stand inviolate amidst the attractions of the material world:

White and golden Lizzie stood,  
Like a lily in a flood,—  
Like a rock of blue-veined stone  
Lashed by tides obstreperously,—  
Like a beacon left alone  
In a hoary roaring sea  
.....

Sore beset by wasp and bee,—  
 Like a royal virgin town  
 Topped with gilded dome and spire  
 Close beleaguered by a fleet  
 Mad to tug her standard down,  
 (408-413, 417-421)

Lizzie's resistance to attack destroys the goblin hoard and changes the deceptive sweetness of their produce into a definite sourness that can never seduce a sister again: "That juice was wormwood to her tongue, / She loathed the feast" (494-5). The fact that the world's hidden wretchedness is unmasked through discerning spiritual purity is reiterated in the last stanza of the poem, when the writer shows a succinct distinction between the appearance of earthly beauty and the evil nature that lurks just beneath attractive surfaces. "Their fruits [are] like honey to the throat / But poison in the blood" (554-5) the speaker advises as Christina emphasizes how the Christian doctrine that orders her perspectives encourages those strong in spirit to provide guidance for those tempted by earthly attractions.

In "L. E. L." (15 February 1859) Christina focuses once again on how a person may be affected by the material and spiritual dichotomy of life. This poem examines the feeling of isolation and tension experienced by the spiritually minded person who is bound to life in the material world. The speaker feels the conflict between her desire to enjoy physical life and her desire to enjoy spiritual life as she senses the exuberant joy and love that spring brings to the world. She is conscious of the exhilarating and vibrant new life surrounding her: the birds nest, flowers bloom, golden rivulets flow, but she remains unloved, unhappy, and alone:

I feel no spring, while spring is wellnigh blown,  
 I find no nests, while nests are in the grove;  
 Woe's me for mine own heart that dwells alone,  
 ....  
 All love, are loved, save only I.  
 (8-10, 15)

The speaker is uncomfortable because she is different from everybody else and she even assumes airs of frivolity in order to disguise her inner feelings. However, she cannot delude herself; she knows she is hurting inside:

Downstairs I laugh, I sport and jest with all:  
 But in my solitary room above  
 I turn my face in silence to the wall;  
 My heart is breaking for a little love.  
 (1-4)

The conclusion of "L. E. L." show the speaker falling back on religious beliefs in an effort to convince herself that the wish for love is really a petty human weakness. The speaker imagines that saints and angels understand her human frailty and encourage her to strengthen her detachment from earth's transient sensuality so that she can later enjoy the fulfillment of "true life [that] is born of death" (381)

"L. E. L." underscores Christina's rationalization of life's sensual and spiritual dichotomy as the writer suggests that the pure in spirit must experience some pain in life because of their anti-materialistic stance, but those righteous people receive great rewards for earthly sacrifices when God's Heavenly Kingdom is established. The idea that spiritual exposure to a trying material life is necessary for the human pursuit of lasting benefits is more simply stated in "Up-hill."

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
 Yes, to the very end.  
 Will the day's journey take the whole day long?  
 From morn to night my friend.  
 ....  
 Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
 Of labour you will find the sum.  
 Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
 Yea, beds for all who come.  
 (1-4, 13-6)

29 June 1858

“The World” (27 June 1858) amplifies ideas expressed in “L. E. L.” as a character assumes a disguise in order to cause human uneasiness and distress: “By day she stands a lie: by night she stands / In all the naked horror of the truth” (9-10). However, in contrast to the quiet, unhappy introspection documented in “L. E. L.,” “The World” presents a fiery condemnation of the material part of life as things of the world are described as being nothing more than clever fabrications of Satan, created expressly to deceive people and to lure them into everlasting ruin. The woeful revelations of this poem encourage the belief that human life plays out on a battle ground on which the forces of evil, disguised as attractive physical beauties, are perpetually tempting the unwary to forsake life’s counterbalancing spiritual powers. Christina pictures the world as a wicked, crafty lover who disguises her life in earthly beauty in a bid to deprive human suitors of their spiritual qualities:

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair:  
 But all night as the moon so changeth she;  
 Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy  
 . . . .  
 Is this a friend indeed; that I should sell  
 My soul to her, give her my life and youth,  
 Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell?  
 (1-3, 12-4)

The strong language used in this poem suggests that a violent reaction against material things is proper and necessary in order to prevent holy spirituality from being utterly overwhelmed by unholy materialism. By emphasizing the hideousness of the material world, the writer attempts to create a strong, lasting impression of evil that will be readily recalled when the time comes to bear arms against the foe, against the wickedness that disguises itself as sensual delight.

For Christina Rossetti, Jesus Christ became the ultimate example of spiritual conquest of the sinful physical world and she took him for her leader in her battle against the worldly attractions that affected her. There is ample indication of the tremendous influence Christ exerted upon Christina in much her poetry through many direct and indirect references to him and his spiritual powers.



"The Three Enemies" (15 June 1851) describes a situation similar to the Biblical account of Satan's temptation of Christ in which the material world submits tempting proposals to a Christian. The Christian is able to reject these temptations because her spirit is supported by her love of Jesus. In this poem, Christina divides the evil forces of the material world into three parts: Flesh, World, and Devil, and she shows how each of them uses various arguments to achieve their common purpose, human damnation. Flesh tries to convince the speaker that the spiritual path is too long and difficult, but the speaker counters "[Christ's] love of me sufficed / For Strength, Salvation, Eucharist" (11-2). World encourages the speaker to believe that physical life can be prosperous and beautiful, but she responds by saying that she owns only "Daily bread: / All else is his" (26-7). Devil offers earthly honors and glory but he is shunned with the words: "Lord Jesus, cover up mine eyes / Lest they should look on vanities" (39-40). Running throughout this poem is the assertion that faith in Jesus is the most valuable weapon in the battle between life's sensual and spiritual forces.

In "A Better Resurrection" (30 June 1857), Christina contemplates the grief and desolation felt by an individual when the hardship of physical existence burdens the spirit. The speaker in this poem feels that her life is an empty failure and that there is little sign of promise because Heaven's spiritual fulfillment is far away, out of sight: "No everlasting hills I see" (6). Fortunately, the speaker can pray to Christ for help in orienting her life because he can soothe sorrow and restore vibrancy to living. This poem emphasizes that idea that Jesus is the greatest of spiritual healers, a guardian who can maintain and reconstitute human life so that humans can better cope with the evil attractions of the material world.

In "Dost Thou Not Care" (24 December 1864), Christina Rossetti presents an imaginary conversation with Jesus as a speaker voices uncertainties that plague her. This poem is designed to show how spiritual doubts caused by the trials inherent in corporeal life can be resolved through strong faith in Jesus' love. The speaker laments her choice of a spiritual path in her life because of the physical discomfort that path entails. She tells of the happiness she once knew, before she became "worn with pain / Now, out of sight and out of heart" (12-3); she speaks of the difficulty of being satisfied with her righteous love for an absent lover in a world where the physical consummation of love is of paramount importance: "gone apart / Into thy shrine, which is above, / Dost thou love me[?]" (3-5); she wonders about her future,

whether or not she will be rewarded for her self-inflicted sadness: “What of tomorrow, lord? / Shall there be rest from toil, be truce from sorrow” (18-9). This poem reiterates Christina’s concept that physical existence is designed to be a testing ground for human beings to demonstrate worthiness for the Heavenly home created for them by their loving God. In the way Christina describes Jesus’ responses to the speaker’s painful uncertainty, she leaves no room for doubt that self-sacrifice is the way to find Heaven. However, this poem also indicates the writer’s own difficulty in dominating her sensual desires by faith alone.

The second sonnet of “A Portrait” (24 February 1847) describes the scene at the death bed of a young woman who has given up the sensual beauties of life and who is about to receive the reward for her holy self-sacrifice. Christina describes the woman as she leaves all the tears of the world behind and journeys to Heaven, where her spiritual mentor is waiting to marry her:

‘Heaven opens! I leave these and go away;  
The Bridegroom calls,— shall the Bride seek to stay?’  
Then low upon her breast she bowed her head

....

To raise it with the saints in Paradise.

(6-8, 28)

There seems little doubt that the heavenly marriage described in the second sonnet of “A Portrait” represents Christina Rossetti’s own desire for a spiritual consummation of her love for Jesus Christ. Thus, this short poem may be viewed as being a concise exposition of Christina’s philosophy of life, showing her belief that Christian spirituality in the material world is like “a fruitful vine amid a land of dearth” (11) that crushes all earthly wickedness, showing her belief that a person who renounces vain mundane loves will, in time, be rewarded by a marriage to the blessings of a Heavenly everlasting life.

Unfortunately for Christina Rossetti, “A Portrait” is little more than an idealized, fantastic version of her life and philosophy. For as her poetry frequently shows, Christina could not easily renounce her natural human desire for worldly pleasures. Often, she was forced to fall back heavily on blind faith when she was confronted by

difficulties in her approach to life's spiritual and material dichotomy. As R. A. Bellas notes, Christina Rossetti's greatest poetry was composed as she struggled to renounce worldly pleasures unfit for heavenly life.<sup>43</sup> Thus, readers may feel grateful that religious beliefs caused inner tension that had to be expressed. However, considering the pain and anguish that austere religious beliefs caused to someone who seems to have had a genuinely wonderful character, the price of such excellent poetry may appear to be too dear. In Ford Madox Hueffer's eloquent expression of the soul-searching life and art of Christina Rossetti, there is fitting conclusion to observations on that subject:

She put love from her with both hands, and yearned for it unceasingly; she let Life pass by and wrote of flowing tapestries, of wine and pomegranates; she was thinking always of heaths, the wide sands of the sea-shore, of south walls on which the apricots grow, and yet she lived always of her own free will in the gloom of a London square. So that if Christianity have [sic] its saints and martyrs, I am not certain that she was not one of the most distinguished of them.

For there have been ascetics, but there can have been few who could have known or could have better enjoyed a higher life of the senses. . . . [I]t has always seemed to me to be a condemnation of Christianity that it should have let such a fate harass such a woman, just as, perhaps, it is one of the greatest testimonies to the powers of discipline of Christianity, that it should have trained up such a woman to such a life of abnegation, of splendid literary expression, and of meticulous attention to duty.<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> W. M. Rossetti, "Memoir," in Christina Rossetti's Poetical Works, p. xlvii.
- <sup>2</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. xlvii.
- <sup>3</sup> Information about the development of the Oxford Movement derives from Newman's Newman, Houghton's The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870, and Chadwick's The Victorian Church.
- <sup>4</sup> Newman, p. 63.
- <sup>5</sup> Gladstone, The Evangelical Movement. Quoted in Houghton, p. 229n.
- <sup>6</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. xlvii. I am indebted particularly to Thomas' Christina Georgina Rossetti for information concerning the Rossetti family's connections with the Oxford Movement.
- <sup>7</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lv.
- <sup>8</sup> Gosse, "Christina Rossetti." In Critical Kit-Kats, p. 160.
- <sup>9</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lv.
- <sup>10</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lv.
- <sup>11</sup> Information about the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood derives from Doughty's A Victorian Romantic, Thomas' Christina Georgina Rossetti and Benson's Rossetti.
- <sup>12</sup> See The Germ. "Introduction" by W. M. Rossetti, p. 18.
- <sup>13</sup> The Germ, p. 6.
- <sup>14</sup> Benson, pp. 61-63.
- <sup>15</sup> Weintraub, Four Rossettis. pp. 29-30,
- <sup>16</sup> Gosse, p. 140.
- <sup>17</sup> Gosse, p. 147.
- <sup>18</sup> Information about Collinson's relationship with Christina derives primarily from W. M. Rossetti's "Memoir."
- <sup>19</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lii.
- <sup>20</sup> Thomas is my major source for biographical information about Christina.
- <sup>21</sup> Sharp, "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti," p. 736.
- <sup>22</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lxxviii.

- <sup>23</sup> Thomas, p.105.
- <sup>24</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. liv.
- <sup>25</sup> W. M. Rossetti, pp. liv-lv.
- <sup>26</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lxviii.
- <sup>27</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lxviii.
- <sup>28</sup> Hueffer, "The Character of Christina Rossetti," p. 424.
- <sup>29</sup> Bellas, Christina Rossetti, p. 43.
- <sup>30</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lxviii.
- <sup>31</sup> Packer, "Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market." p. 379.
- <sup>32</sup> Bellas, Christina Rossetti, p. 40
- <sup>33</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. lv.
- <sup>34</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. 82. Poems and dating of poems is provided by W. M. Rossetti.
- <sup>35</sup> Gosse, p. 140.
- <sup>36</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. 1.
- <sup>37</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. 1.
- <sup>38</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. 1.
- <sup>39</sup> W. M. Rossetti, p. 1.
- <sup>40</sup> C. G Rossetti, Maude, p. 30.
- <sup>41</sup> W. M. Rossetti, "Prefatory Note to Maude," in Maude, pp. 79-80.
- <sup>42</sup> C. G Rossetti, Maude p. 75.
- <sup>43</sup> Bellas, p. 118.
- <sup>44</sup> Hueffer, pp. 424-5.

## Bibliography

- Battiscombe, G. Christina Rossetti. London: Longmans, Green, 1965.
- Bellas, R. A. Christina Rossetti. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977.
- Benson, A. C. Rossetti. London: Macmillan, 1920.
- Chadwick, O. The Victorian Church. London: Black, 1966.
- Curran, S. "The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti." Victorian Poetry, 9 (1971), pp. 287-99.
- Doughty, O. A Victorian Romantic: Dante Gabriel Rossetti. London: OUP, 1960.
- The Germ. Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 1979.
- Gosse, Sir E. "Christina Rossetti" in Critical Kit-Kats. London: Heinemann, 1896, pp. 135-162.
- Houghton, W. The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1310-1870. Connecticut: Yale UP, 1957.
- Hueffer, F. M. "The Character of Christina Rossetti." Fortnightly Review, 95 (1911), pp. 422-29.
- Newman, J. H. Newman. Ed. G. Tillotson. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1970.
- Packer, L. W. "Symbol and Reality in Christina Rossetti's Goblin Market." PMLA, 73 (1958), pp. 375-85.
- Rossetti, C. G. Maude. Ed. R. W. Crump. Connecticut: Archon, 1976.
- - - . Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti. Ed. W. M. Rossetti. London: Macmillan, 1928.
- Rossetti, W. H. "Memoir" in Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti. Ed. W. M. Rossetti. London: Macmillan, 1928.
- Ruskin: Rossetti: PreRaphaelitism. Papers 1854-1862. Ed. W. M. Rossetti. London: George Allen 1899.
- Sharp, W. "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti." The Atlantic Monthly, 75 (1895), pp. 736-49.
- Thomas, E. W. Christina Georgina Rossetti. New York: Columbia UP, 1931.
- Watts-Dunton, T. "Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti." The Nineteenth Century, 37 (1895), pp. 355-66.
- Weintraub, S. Four Rossettis. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1977.
-