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**Centro de Educação e Humanidades**

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**Marcos David Bastos de Paula**

**“I take my heart in my hand, / O my God, O my God, / My broken heart in  
my hand”: Two Aspects of Female Broken-Heartedness in Christina  
Rossetti’s Poetry**

Rio de Janeiro

2017

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre, ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras, da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas de Língua Inglesa.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Peônia Viana Guedes

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## DEDICATÓRIA

*À ma Professeure de théorie de la littérature, Carlinda Fragale Pate Nuñez, comme un témoignage de profonde admiration, je dédie cette dissertation.*

## AGRADECIMENTOS

Meus agradecimentos mais urgentes vão para minha Orientadora, Prof<sup>a</sup>. Dra. Peônia Vianna Guedes que num momento difícil assumiu a tarefa de guiar-me nessa pesquisa. Sem isso, este trabalho não teria sido terminado com êxito.

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Aos meus amigos e amigas de classe, os nomes são muito numerosos para listar agora, através dos anos, desde o início em 2011, no bacharelado, e, recentemente, no curso de Mestrado, afirmo: sem o apoio e a amizade de vocês, eu não teria conseguido chegar até aqui.

Antes de finalizar, agradeço à CAPES. Graças à bolsa de estudos que recebi durante o curso, tive condições de dedicar-me à pesquisa que ora apresento.

Por fim, creio que nos une um amor intenso às Humanidades, ao estudo do ser humano em sociedade; interessa-nos a dimensão ética da vida humana, a ideia de dignidade, sem divisões ou exclusões, e, assim sendo, somos também guiados pela esperança na construção coletiva de uma sociedade verdadeiramente justa, humanitária, e que realize a paz e a concórdia entre os povos.

A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief — all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears.

*Walter Pater*

## RESUMO

PAULA, Marcos David Bastos de. *“I take my heart in my hand,/ o my god, o my god,/ my broken heart in my hand”*: two aspects of female broken-heartedness in Christina Rossetti’s poetry. 2017. 80 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) - Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2017.

Estudos críticos sobre Christina Georgina Rossetti (1830-1894) tem sofrido geralmente com a tendência de igualar sua poesia com intensa morbidez religiosa, por um lado, e, por outro, com denúncias pouco convincentes do assim-chamado amor romântico, pondo em dúvida a validade literária dos seus versos de natureza devocional, especialmente. Algumas críticas feministas têm se esforçado na tentativa de investigar a poesia de Rossetti em busca de evidências de opressão patriarcal em forma de tropos de repressão sexual feminina disfarçados de piedosas afirmações religiosas. Em minha pesquisa tentarei demonstrar, entre outras coisas, que Christina Rossetti não foi nem uma mártir nem tampouco uma rebelde. Em vez disso, ela desenvolveu por si mesma um modo poético que se transformou mais e mais estritamente seu próprio à medida que o tempo passou. Em sua fase madura, especialmente, Rossetti foi adotada por seus contemporâneos, tanto leitores quanto críticos, como uma ilustração viva do dito de John Milton, segundo o qual a vida do poeta deveria ser ela mesma um bom poema. Focalizando especial atenção sobre os versos devocionais de Rossetti, espero poder mostrar que em seus poemas religiosos, ainda mais do que em seus versos de teor secular, Rossetti se debate para encontrar alguma coesão tanto em relação às demandas da vida madura, quanto, também, as largas vistas filosóficas que se abrem quando se vê face a face com seus próprios medos e dúvidas acerca dos possíveis limites da finitude humana. Antes que uma rota de fuga, a fé que inspirava tanto a vida íntima quanto a poesia de Christina Rossetti deu a ela um ponto de referência de onde ela pôde se engajar bravamente com a vida e seu tempo.

Palavras-chave: Christina Rossetti. Poesia Vitoriana. Século XIX.



## ABSTRACT

PAULA, Marcos David Bastos de. "*I take my heart in my hand,/ O my God, O my God,/ My broken heart in my hand*": Two Aspects of Female Broken-Heartedness in Christina Rossetti's Poetry. 2017. 80 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa) - Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2017.

Critical study of Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) has long suffered from a persistent tendency to equate her poetry with a morbid religiosity, on the one hand, and facile denunciations of romantic love, on the other. Some feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, for example, have even attempted to investigate Rossetti's poetry in search of evidence of patriarchal oppression shaped as dark tropes of female sexual starvation that lie hidden behind pious religious statements. In my research, I will try to show that Rossetti was neither a martyr nor a rebel. Instead, she developed a poetic mode that became ever more her own as time passed, and, as mature age approached, Rossetti was embraced by her contemporaries as a living example of John Milton's dictum that the good poet's life should itself be a good poem. By focusing particular attention on her devotional verse, I will contend that in her religious poems, more than in her secular ones, Rossetti struggles to come to grips with both the demands of adult life and the vast philosophical vistas that open up when one grapples with one's innermost doubts and fears concerning the prospects of one's own human finitude. Rather than a route of escape, Rossetti's religious faith gave her a vantage-point from which she bravely engaged with life.

Keywords: Christina Rossetti. Victorian poetry. 19th century.

## SUMÁRIO

	<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>ROSSETTI &amp; VICTORIAN RENUNCIATION.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>ROSSETTI &amp; THE BROKEN HEART .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>WHY DOES IT ALL SOUND SO BIOGRAPHICAL?.....</b>	<b>51</b>
	<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>70</b>
	<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>77</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Woe for the young who say that life is long

*Christina Rossetti*

It is a time-honoured cliché of Rossetti criticism to describe her as a melancholy poet whose life and work were both marred by a morbid outlook on human life in both its earthly and divine prospects. Such views were as widespread in Christina Rossetti's lifetime as they are today. For instance, one of her most acerbic contemporary reviewers was a writer for the US-based magazine *The Catholic World*. In his critical analysis of Rossetti's second volume of poems published by Macmillan, *The Prince's Progress & Other Poems* (1866), the anonymous critic pointed out, as a warning to his readers, that in Rossetti's book "the amount of melancholy is simply overwhelming". As if this was not nearly enough, the hard-hitting reviewer went on to say as follows: "Unfortunately, it does not appear that Miss Rossetti is a poetess at all. That there are people who think her one, we infer from the fact that this is in some sort a third edition; why they think so, we are at a loss to see". This same adverse critic observes that Rossetti "seems busier depicting inner life than evolving new truths or beauties". Also acute is the reviewer's comment that in Rossetti's poetry "there is one subject which she has thought out thoroughly, and that subject is death".<sup>1</sup>

Such views as the one expressed in the short extract above have proved remarkably persistent over time. So, for example, a respected critic of the mid-twentieth century berates Christina Rossetti for being a poet whose work, intensely scarred as it is by religious melancholy and other such depressing attitudes, makes it evident that she "cannot accept the conflict and contradictions of man's middle state." (MAHOOD, 1950, p.37). And, as if to cap it all, in their highly influential work on nineteenth-century women authors, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe Christina Rossetti as a woman who, "banqueting on bitterness, must bury herself alive in a coffin of renunciation" (GILBERT; GUBAR, 1979, p.574).

Alongside such bitter criticism, however, Christina Rossetti did indeed manage to gather together a small but vocal band of admirers. Favourable commentary on her work ranges from the mildly approving criticism attributed to none other than the then Poet

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<sup>1</sup> In an early biography of Rossetti, this review in the *Catholic World* is attributed to F.A. Rudd. See, for instance, Mackenzie Bell's *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical & Critical Study* (1898), page 388. The 1867 review can be found at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/43032/43032-h/43032-h.htm#839>

Laureate, Lord Tennyson, who is said to have commented that “at its best, her work is almost art”<sup>2</sup>, all the way to the assertive statement by her contemporary, poet Alice Meynell who in an obituary article on Rossetti that first appeared in the March 1895 edition of the *Living Age* magazine gives as her verdict that “to the name of poet her right is so sure that proof of it is to be found everywhere in her ‘unconsidered ways’, and always irrefutably. Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), was another such passionate admirer. In his praise for Rossetti’s *New-Year Hymn* (“Passing away, saith the world, passing away”) which he once described as follows:

(...) so much the noblest of sacred poems in our language that there is none which comes near it enough to stand second; a hymn touched as with the fire and bathed as in the light of sunbeams, tuned as to chords and cadences of refulgent sea-music beyond reach of harp and organ, large echoes of the serene and sonorous tides of heaven. (SWINBURNE, 1888, p.175)

And, last but certainly not least, in what turned out to be both a fateful and last appraisal of her work in her own lifetime, the distinguished critic Edmund Gosse (1849-1928) (to whom I will return more than once in this research), a friend and correspondent of Rossetti’s, wrote of her in an article published nearly one year before Christina Rossetti’s death in *The Century*, these words that have proved almost prophetic:

In the following pages I desire to pay no more than a just tribute of respect to one of the most perfect poets of the age, not one of the most powerful, of course, nor one of the most epoch-making, but one of the most perfect, to a writer towards whom we may not unreasonably expect that students of English literature in the twenty-fourth century may look back as the critics of Alexandria did towards Sappho and Erinna.

Christina Rossetti was born in London on December 5, 1830, into a family whose artistic talents proved to surpass all expectations. The family father, Gabriele Pasquale Giuseppe Rossetti (1783-1854) was a political exile, Dante scholar and professor of Italian at King’s College, London. Her elder brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) became famous as both a painter and a poet, as well as for being the leader of the Pre-Raphaelite movement in art and literature. Christina sat as a model for his paintings several times (Figure 1); her younger brother William Michael Rossetti (1829-1908) became well-known as an art critic and later on was considered to be the official biographer of the Rossetti family. Her elder sister Maria Francesca (1827-1876) wrote an insightful study on Dante’s *Divina*

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<sup>2</sup> This comment is attributed to Tennyson by the critic Francis Turner Palgrave in an 1862 letter to Christina’s brother William Rossetti.

*Commedia* and later on in her life entered an Anglican sisterhood where she lived a secluded life to the day of her death.

Figure 1 – Christina Rossetti's portrait



Subtitle: Christina Rossetti aged 18, by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882)

Source: SURTEES, Virginia. *The Paintings and Drawings of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882): A Catalogue Raisonné*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. Volume 1, page 183 (no. 423).

As for Christina Rossetti herself, she started writing poetry at the early age of twelve. From the start, even discounting all the influences that bore some sort of stamp upon her early work, she struck out on a path of her own. In one of her early sonnets, written the day after she had turned seventeen years old, that is to say, December 6, 1847, her views on both human life and her religion seem sufficiently well-established, despite some evident touches of typically Romantic melancholy. As usual, she seems to be taking her cue from the biblical narratives she knew so well. It may seem reasonable to assume that the young Christina Rossetti had already found out about the anxieties inherent to human life, its daily burdens as well as its inevitable but uncertain end.<sup>3</sup>

“THE WHOLE HEAD IS SICK AND THE WHOLE HEART FAINT”<sup>4</sup>

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.  
 Their hearts, weary because of this world’s wrong,  
 Yearn with a thousand longings unexpressed;  
 They have a wound no mortal ever drest;  
 An ill than all earth’s remedies more strong.

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.<sup>5</sup>

Besides the fact that such a sonnet as the one above proves to be a remarkable achievement for a seventeen-year-old girl writing from a home in an impoverished London district populated by famished foreign exiles, Christina’s sheer mastery of the art of sonnet-writing at such an early age coupled with her disturbing insights into the human psyche, already show the direction which her work is going to take in her mature phase. At the time

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<sup>3</sup> As William Sharp observed: A child-woman at sixteen she already felt, with something of pain and much bitterness, the poignancy of that old world cry, “Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity!”. In: *Papers: Critical and Reminiscent*. New York: Duffield & Co., 1912.

<sup>4</sup> The title comes from Isaiah, 1: 5. BÍBLIA. A.T. Isaiah. Inglês. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s.n.], 1611. 1:5. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

<sup>5</sup> All of the Rossetti poems quoted in this dissertation come from the standard Penguin Classics edition: Christina Rossetti: *The Complete Poems*. Text by R.W. Crump; Notes and Introduction by Betty S. Flowers – London & New York: Penguin Classics, 2005.

she wrote the sonnet above, Christina, her sister Maria Francesca, and their mother Mrs. Frances Mary Lavinia Rossetti (1800-1886) had all three been regular attendants at the small place of worship called Portland Chapel, Baker Street, whose minister, the Rev. W.J.E. Bennett, was responsible for introducing into the minds of the young Rossettis the first notions of a then new religious revival which became known as the Oxford Movement, also known as Tractarian Movement on account of its chief publication, the series of treatises called *Tracts For The Times* in which a small group of Anglican scholars sought to re-establish the old and by then deeply forgotten Catholic roots of the Anglican Church. In a well known account of the rise and ultimate fall of the religious movement whose practices were later to become the central preoccupation of the mature Christina Rossetti, one of the leaders of the then rising school of thought, John Henry Newman (whose later defection to the Church of Rome caused a furore in Victorian society) in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864) famously described the Oxford Movement as

(...) not so much a movement as ‘a spirit afloat’; it was within us, rising up in hearts where it was least suspected, and working itself, though not in secret, yet so subtly and impalpably, as hardly to admit of precaution or encounter on any ordinary human rules of opposition. It is an adversary in the air, a something one and entire, a whole wherever it is, unapproachable and incapable of being grasped, as being the result of causes far deeper than political or other visible agencies, the spiritual awakening of spiritual wants. (NEWMAN, 2004, pp. 100-101)

The *awakening of spiritual wants* was certainly deeply felt by the young Christina Rossetti a little later when she started attending Christ Church under the ministry of the Rev. William Dodsworth (another Anglican clergyman who later left the established English church for Rome) whose strong brand of Millenarianism was well known at the time. Dodsworth’s brand of theology in particular exerted a most peculiar influence on the teenage Christina Rossetti. In an apologetic booklet published only a few months after he had left the Anglican church in order to join Rome, Dodsworth made his views more explicit, but even while he was still at least nominally attached to Anglicanism he had already embarked himself, along with some of his hearers, on a clearly distinctive path:

The Catholic religion on the other hand seems to be formed for heaven : braving the enmity of the world ; bearing her unceasing witness to things supernatural ; more intent on training souls for heaven than on ministering to their comfort on earth : bringing us evermore into union with our divine Lord by her daily sacrifice, giving us thereby an entrance into heaven ; by the prominence of her sacramental system surrounding us with invisible realities ; and while tenderly nourishing the weakest of her children, encouraging, in those who aim to reach it, the saintly life, the highest,

the holiest, the most enthusiastic and unearthly devotion (DODSWORTH, 1851, p. 105)

I think it is important to mention such details about Rossetti's first religious influences because many of her early poems are shot through with an intensely religious feeling. In her later years Christina Rossetti herself came to consider that most of her poetic production had in fact been predominantly of a devotional rather than a secular nature. And her own brother, William Rossetti, in his introductory memoir of his sister, which he included in his collected edition of her *Poetical Works* (1904) states clearly his opinion about Rossetti's theological inclinations. "I have often thought that Christina's proper place was in the Roman Catholic Church, yet I never traced any inclination in her to join it, nor did she ever manifest any wish to enter upon the conventual life—I think she held herself unworthy of attempting it" (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. lv).

Turning back to Rossetti's earliest religious experiences, I think it is fair to say that what those priests had in common was a belief in the need for a return to ritualism, an emphasis on mysticism and a firm focus on what became known as the sacramental system. Their ideals had a lasting effect on the young Rossetti girls, Maria and Christina. Again, it is Newman who can best describe the kind of ideas that acted as the driving force behind the movement:

These were based on the mystical or sacramental principle, and spoke of the various Economies or Dispensations of the Eternal. I understood these passages to mean that the exterior world, physical and historical, was but the manifestation to our senses of realities greater than itself. Nature was a parable: Scripture was an allegory (NEWMAN, 2004, pp. 43-44)

Throughout her life, Christina Rossetti tried to conform her daily practices to the principles espoused by the so-called Anglo-Catholic revival. Both the mystical and the sacramental views inform her devotional poems and often spill over into her secular ones. One of its basic tenets is the belief that the physical world is but a passing phase in the long and painful human ascent towards a divine final destination. Again, Newman proposed as follows:

The visible world remains without its divine interpretation; Holy Church in her sacraments and her hierarchical appointments will remain, even to the end of the world, after all but a symbol of those heavenly facts which fill eternity. Her mysteries are but the expression in human language of truths to which the human mind is unequal (NEWMAN, 2004, p. 44)

Those unfavourable critics of Rossetti, to whom I referred at the beginning of this Introduction, have traced to this period the roots of Christina's melancholy attitude towards



life and earthly love. Essentially, they have argued that religious zeal is to blame for Rossetti's apparently never-ending fit of depression, which reminds me of Charlotte Brontë's view on her sister Anne's life. In a biographical piece, Charlotte describes Anne's overall demeanour thus: "the tinge of religious melancholy communicated a sad shade to her brief, blameless life"<sup>6</sup>. Even Christina Rossetti herself seemed to agree with this sort of description of her personal character. Take, for example, the lines from a poem she wrote in her more mature phase in the early 1880s:

Here comes my youngest sister, looking dim  
And grim,  
With dismal ways.

The lines come from her *Pageant for the months*, a poem intended to be performed theatrically in which the months of the year are personifications to be played by boys and girls. The lines quoted above announce the arrival of the month of November. In his 1904 edition of his sister's poetical works, William Rossetti added the following comments:

Christina had a considerable spice of fun in her composition, as well as profound seriousness and rooted melancholy. She wrote these lines regarding November with a side-glance at herself – or at any rate quoted them sometimes as a telling self-description (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. 462).

And as if in confirmation of such biographical verdicts, there is Christina's letter to her other brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, of September 05, 1881. This letter is included in William Rossetti's edition of Christina's *Family Letters*. She writes as follows: "I have had a quiet grin over October's remark which ushers in November, as connecting it with my own brothers and myself! Pray appreciate the portrait" (ROSSETTI, 1908, p.98). Therefore, when considering the early poems, it may seem justifiable to indulge in such biographical portrayals of the nerve-wracked teenager who desperately struggled to find self-expression amid what was almost insurmountable boredom. So, in their view, quite a few critics have argued that Rossetti's religious beliefs tainted her life, with the obvious result that she never really overcame her fears and insecurities about physical relationships and close human intercourse in general. She remained a spinster aunt whose grave looks struck both fear and admiration into the hearts and minds of her young nieces and nephew (William Rossetti's daughters and son). Her contemporary critic and friend, Edmund Gosse (already quoted above) once

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<sup>6</sup> This is Charlotte Brontë's description of her sister Anne, in a biographical notice that served as a preface to the 1850 combined edition of *Agnes Grey & Wuthering Heights*.

described his impressions of being near Christina Rossetti at a social gathering. In his *Critical Kit-Kats*, he called her the *High Priestess of Pre-Raphaelitism* and went on to say as follows:

When it is added that her manner, from shyness, was of a portentous solemnity, that she had no small talk whatever, and that the common topics of the day appeared to be entirely unknown to her, it will be understood that she was considered highly formidable by the young and the flighty. I have seen her sitting alone, in the midst of a noisy drawing-room, like a pillar of a cloud, a Sibyl whom no one had the audacity to approach (GOSSE, 1903, p.158).

This is indeed the portrait of a solemn and fearsome creature. However, in his account of her, Gosse goes on to say that Christina Rossetti was not such an intimidating figure, after all. “Yet a kinder or simpler soul, or one less concentrated on self, or of a humbler sweetness, never existed. And, to an enthusiast, who broke the bar of conventional chatter, and ventured on real subjects, her heart seemed to open like an unsealed fountain” (GOSSE, idem).

As noted by Gosse, Christina Rossetti’s apparent aloofness from worldly themes and related subjects does indeed seem to indicate a high degree of disdain for earthly connections and physical interactions in the material world. Many critics have pointed out the fact that she chose to remain a spinster, coupled with her monotonous life at number 30 Torrington Square where she spent her last few years in the company of her two elderly aunts Eliza and Charlotte Polidori, both spinsters too, as being emblematic of an austere and even cruel system of beliefs which pushed self-denial to the very limit of human endurance. In many of her poems, Rossetti makes veiled references to the uneventful life course she chose for herself. In some of them, the reader can almost physically feel the awfulness involved in the grim choice she made. For example, in the following sonnet, originally published as part of her sonnet sequence entitled *Later Life*, in her book “*A Pageant & Other Poems*” (1881) at a time when Christina Rossetti was just entering her fifties.

-17-

Something this foggy day, a something which  
Is neither of this fog nor of to-day,  
Has set me dreaming of the winds that play  
Past certain cliffs, along one certain beach,  
And turn the topmost edge of waves to spray :  
Ah pleasant pebbly strand so far away,  
So out of reach while quite within my reach.  
As out of reach as India or Cathay !  
I am sick of where I am and where I am not,  
I am sick of foresight and of memory,  
I am sick of all I have and all I see,  
I am sick of self, and there is nothing new;  
Oh weary impatient patience of my lot!  
Thus with myself: how fares it, Friends, with you?

As is usual with a Rossetti poem, the sonnet opens with an almost too simple description of a foggy day around what is probably her dreary London square, then the scene shifts to a distant beach, which, if one assumes that Rossetti is the poem's speaker, probably refers to the place near Hastings where her doctor had ordered her to go for health reasons. After that, the inward storm suddenly breaks loose and a feeling of almost hopeless despair comes through in her lines, only to finish the sonnet with a nearly too familiar expression, as if she meant nothing more serious than a commonplace exchange of perfectly meaningless chatter with friends from whom she has not heard in a long time. Is it merely coincidental that the very sequence in which this sonnet appears should be entitled *Later Life*?

Elsewhere in her works, Christina Rossetti made further and slightly more pointed references to the nerve-racking boredom that characterised female domestic life in Victorian society. One of the most notable among such references comes in her book of religious prose, *Called To Be Saints*, a book of personal meditations and poems for Saints' days, in which she makes the following remarks:

When it seems (as sometimes through revulsion of feeling and urgency of Satan it may seem) that our yoke is uneasy and our burden unbearable, because our life is pared down and subdued and repressed to an intolerable level and so in one moment every instinct of our whole self revolts against our lot, and we loathe this day of quietness and of sitting still, and writhe under a sudden sense of all we have irrecoverably foregone, of the right hand, or foot, or eye cast from us, of the haltingness and maimedness of our entrance (if enter we do at last) into life,—then the Seraphim of Isaiah's vision making music in our memory revive hope in our heart (ROSSETTI, 1881, p.435).

Again, as is usual with Rossetti, her language is firmly couched in biblical allusion and gospel allegory. The passage quoted above makes specific reference to Jesus' most famous speech, the Sermon on the Mount, described in detail in the Gospel of St. Mark, chapter 9 verses 43-47. For Rossetti, every personal experience, hers as well as other people's, would find its ultimate significance in reference to some passage in the scriptures. Rossetti does make frequent use of Christian analogy in her poetry. As Catherine Musello Cantalupo pointed out in her seminal essay on Rossetti's devotional poetry:

[...] the analogical method of seeing one's spiritual life in terms of biblical paradigms does predominate in two forms: first, scriptural quotations and allusions to biblical metaphors are abundant and often conflated in one poem. Second, the Psalms provide a general model for several poems (KENT, 1987, p.276).

However, it is not just in her religious poetry that both critics and admirers have found abundant material to pore over in the thrill of the deepest delight or in the throes of the utmost disdain, as the case may be. Rossetti's love poems have never failed to draw peculiar attention from her readers to the twin themes of love and renunciation, and this both in her own lifetime and in the many, many years that have passed since her lonely and painful death from cancer in the early morning of a freezing cold Saturday, December 29, 1894. Among those who accompanied the cortege to Highgate cemetery was Rossetti's friend, poet and critic, Theodore Watts-Dunton (1832–1914), better known today as the *minder* of poet Algernon Charles Swinburne whom he rescued from the brink of acute alcoholism. A few days after the burial, Watts-Dunton published a pair of sonnets descriptive of the scene beside the grave, which he entitled *Christina Rossetti: The Two Christmas Tides*. I reproduce the first of them below.

On Winter's woof, which scarcely seems of snow,  
 But hangs translucent, like a virgin's veil,  
 O'er headstone, monument and guard-rail,  
 The New Year's sun shines golden – seems to throw  
 Upon her coffin-flowers a greeting glow  
 From lands she loved to think on – seems to trail  
 Love's holy radiance from the very Grail  
 O'er those white flowers before they sink below.  
 Is that a spirit or bird whose sudden song  
 From yonder sun-lit tree beside the grave  
 Recalls a robin's warble, sweet yet strong,  
 Upon a lawn beloved of wind and wave –  
 Recalls her 'Christmas Robin', ruddy, brave,  
 Winning the crumbs she throws where blackbirds throng?<sup>7</sup>

Rossetti's love poems have become almost synonymous with the aesthetics of renunciation<sup>8</sup> which goes back a very long time in the history of Christian poetry. In my view, there is a long chain of associations behind, and giving shape to, every one of Rossetti's love poems. Into them, she brings all the strength of her passionate nature and from them generations of readers have derived a source of consolation that seems to speak to them in a strangely familiar voice, as the witness accounts mentioned above seem to show. I will attempt to substantiate this claim by looking into Rossetti's complex relationship with the Tractarian Movement, and, more especially, with the Tractarian doctrine of Reserve, and how

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<sup>7</sup> Originally in the *Athenaeum*, January 12, 1895. The poem also appears in Mackenzie Bell's *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical & Critical Study*. London: Thomas Burleigh (1898), p. 182.

<sup>8</sup> As Gilbert and Gubar seem so keen to argue.

poetry can be “a solace for human ills” (KEBLE, 1912, p.62), as a prominent Tractarian scholar, John Keble (1792-1866), described it in his Oxford *Lectures On Poetry*.

Also strangely, both Rossetti’s love and religious poems seem to work together in ways that can be described as almost uncanny. Frequently, a love poem will stand as a mirror to a devotional one, showing clearly the subtle but at the same time sharp contrast between the agonies and inevitable disappointments of earthly love relationships and the tantalising prospect of entering into an ever-lasting, fully satisfactory and all-absorbing union with God, which union is made possible only at the high price of one’s absolute renunciation.

One of the most perceptive critics of nineteenth-century poetry, and a personal friend of Christina Rossetti’s, Arthur Symons (1865-1945), in his much-neglected book *Studies In Two Literatures* (1897), made one of the most astute observations concerning Rossetti’s poetic performance:

Alike in the love poems and in the religious poems, there is a certain asceticism, passion itself speaking a chastened language, the language, generally, of sorrowful but absolute renunciation. This motive, passion remembered and repressed, condemned to eternal memory and eternal sorrow, is the motive of much of her finest work (SYMONS, 1897, p. 138).

It is the twin themes of personal renunciation, as it is often expressed in the form of an intense yearning for some kind of fulfilment in the hereafter, and, on the other hand, the view of earthly love as a vain pursuit that is inherently doomed to end in disappointment, in the poetry of Christina Rossetti, especially when it is portrayed in the light of an irreconcilable conflict between human love versus spiritual yearning, that I shall attempt to address in the following two chapters.

## 1 ROSSETTI & VICTORIAN RENUNCIATION

I choose the stairs that mount above

*Christina Rossetti*

From its very inception, the Christian religion has made a point of stating unequivocally the need for a clear and unswerving dedication to one's spirit, or inner life, in sharp contrast to the worldly call for the urges of the flesh. The founder of the new faith, stated clearly, so the record claims, when he addressed the crowds, the necessary requirements for those who wished to become his followers:

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. -Matthew, 16:24<sup>9</sup>

Then, as now, many prospective disciples were put off by such stringent demands as the one quoted above. And there were other strictures that seemed even harder to accept.

This is a hard doctrine; who can bear it? -John, 6:60<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, however, such exacting duties proved to be just the kind of enticement some people needed in order to make the final decision to join the faith and embark on the walk down the painful but ultimately rewarding road towards redemption. Through self-denial, hiddenness and a perfect disregard for worldly things, those primitive Christians managed to keep the new religion going even in the teeth of the most brutal persecution as that experienced by the faithful under Roman rule. Centuries later, and even well after the faith had been turned into the official religion of the empire, self-denial and contempt for the world and its passing affairs remained the chief characteristics of those many men and women who chose to withdraw from secular society in order to live the experience of an inward life fully devoted to the spirit.

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<sup>9</sup> BÍBLIA. N.T. Matthew. Inglês. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s. n.], 1611. 16:24. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

<sup>10</sup> BÍBLIA. N.T. John. Inglês. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s. n.], 1611. 6:60. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

In a letter dated August 17, 1891, and addressed to a recipient who has remained unidentified, Christina Rossetti makes a brief reference to a few classic literary works by Metastasio (1698-1782) and Torquato Tasso (1544-95) which helped shape her artistic style. As is usual with Rossetti, she starts by making a brief comment on her lack of purpose when she was a young girl. “*In the midst of my literary family I was idle and unstudious*”, she says of herself. In the very next line she adds what can be considered a very important piece of information for anyone interested in the close analysis of her life and work. She writes thus: “and in spiritual reading I was about 18 when circumstances put into my hands the inexhaustible “Imitation” popularly ascribed to Thomas à Kempis” (HARRISON, 2004, p.245).

The book she mentions in her letter is of course the famous manual of Christian devotion *The Imitation of Christ* written in the Middle Ages by a humble German monk known as Thomas, from the town of Kempen, hence his Latinized surname, *à Kempis*. His little book initially written as nothing more than a simple manual for the novices, turned out to become over the following centuries one of the most important works in the history of Christian literature and theology.

The rise of the Oxford Movement with its emphasis on the need for a return to the ancient roots of the Christian church sparked off a new wave of interest in Mediaeval devotional works such as the one by Kempis. However, such growing interest was not confined to that one manual alone. Throughout the mid nineteenth century, the British public became the recipient of a truly massive wave of new editions and translations of ancient manuals of Christian devotion; books such as the *Confessions*, by St. Augustine of Hippo, and even such staunchly Catholic works as, for example, *The Book of the Foundations* written by the reformer of the Carmelite order St. Theresa of Avila, enjoyed substantial popular demand for quite a long time among the Victorian public.

The fascination triggered by the ideal of a retired life hidden from a cruel world and fully dedicated to prayer and love for God exerted tremendous power over countless numbers of young girls. The influence of the *Imitatio Christi* can be felt even in the works of such strongly anti-clerical women authors as, for example, George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), herself a daughter raised in a staunchly Anglican family whose low-church tendencies would not under usual circumstances lead her to read a devotional manual so obviously associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Most notably, however, in Eliot’s famous novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the young heroine Maggie Tulliver feels herself almost irresistibly drawn to the

austere but saintly life of renunciation and contempt for the world exemplified in Thomas's little book.

(..) but Thomas à Kempis? –the name had come across her in her reading, and she felt the satisfaction, which everyone knows, of getting some ideas to attach to a name that strays solitary in the memory. She took up the little, old, clumsy book with some curiosity; it had the corners turned down in many places, and some hand, now forever quiet, had made at certain passages strong pen-and-ink marks, long since browned by time. Maggie turned from leaf to leaf, and read where the quiet hand pointed: "Know that the love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world.... If thou seekest this or that, and wouldst be here or there to enjoy thy own will and pleasure, thou shalt never be quiet nor free from care; for in everything somewhat will be wanting, and in every place there will be some that will cross thee.... Both above and below, which way soever thou dost turn thee, everywhere thou shalt find the Cross; and everywhere of necessity thou must have patience, if thou wilt have inward peace, and enjoy an everlasting crown.... If thou desirest to mount unto this height, thou must set out courageously, and lay the axe to the root, that thou mayest pluck up and destroy that hidden inordinate inclination to thyself, and unto all private and earthly good. On this sin, that a man inordinately loveth himself, almost all dependeth, whatsoever is thoroughly to be overcome; which evil being once overcome and subdued, there will presently ensue great peace and tranquillity.... It is but little thou sufferest in comparison of them that have suffered so much, were so strongly tempted, so grievously afflicted, so many ways tried and exercised. Thou oughtest therefore to call to mind the more heavy sufferings of others, that thou mayest the easier bear thy little adversities. And if they seem not little unto thee, beware lest thy impatience be the cause thereof.... Blessed are those ears that receive the whispers of the divine voice, and listen not to the whisperings of the world. Blessed are those ears which hearken not unto the voice which soundeth outwardly, but unto the Truth, which teacheth inwardly (ELIOT, (1860) 1999, p. 259-260).

The emphasis on self-sacrifice and abandonment of the world in humble submission to a divine power so strenuously advocated in the religious works listed above had the predictable result of driving many believers into a new and unexpected direction as far as the increasingly industrial and materialistically-minded Victorian society was concerned. Among the new developments, for instance, was the appearance of the Anglican sisterhoods, where women led an essentially conventual life which differed only minimally from that of their counterparts in Roman Catholic institutions. Other sorts of charitable institutions also sprang up, religious homes into which many Victorian young women chose, or were driven by unfortunate circumstances, to seek refuge from a self-seeking bourgeois world apparently bent on self-destruction through its urgency to make money with a view to the accumulation of wealth, both widely advertised as the two sole human emotions worth pursuing. As Noam Chomsky commented when he mentioned similarities between the repression of the labor movement, back then, as now, the new urbanised middle-class society seemed to epitomise what was seen as "the new spirit of the age: gain wealth, forgetting all but self" (CHOMSKY, 2000, p. 202).



In an interesting account of a visit to one such religious home published in the *English Woman's Journal* of March 1858, social affairs writer Bessie Rayner Parkes thus describes her impressions:

A few days ago, I visited the London Diocesan Penitentiary, situated at Highgate; a penitentiary for the most unfortunate of women.

This institution is principally supported by voluntary contributions, and is calculated to receive about eighty penitents. An ornamental cross over the entrance gate has, I believe, unfortunately created a prejudice in some minds against this Penitentiary as being Roman Catholic, whereas it is Protestant, a clergyman of the Church of England, who resides with his wife and family near to the institution, being at its head as Warden.

The impression left upon my mind by my visit is so agreeable, that I would willingly make others acquainted with this benevolent asylum for the despised and unhappy.<sup>11</sup>

The institution Parkes describes was of course designed to receive those females to whom polite Victorian society used to refer as “fallen women”.

Christina Rossetti herself was for a short time associated with the Highgate institution between 1858 and 1861. William Michael Rossetti gives a few details about Christina's involvement with the Diocesan Penitentiary in his edition of Rossetti's *family letters* as follows: “(...) an institution (...) for the reclamation and protection of women leading a vicious life: Christina stayed there from time to time, but not for lengthy periods together, taking part in the work” (ROSSETTI, 1912, p. 26)

Christina's work on Highgate Hill became even more intense towards 1860, when she would spend more time there, sometimes a whole fortnight. She even started to wear the institution's uniform, as a contemporary witness wrote at the time: “Christina (thus wrote Mrs. William Bell Scott in 1860) is now an associate, and wore the dress – which is very simple, elegant even; black with hanging sleeves, a muslin cap with lace edging, quite becoming to her with the veil” (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. 485).

The Penitentiary as it was called at the time was run by Sisters of Mercy, usually educated middle-class women who had chosen the hidden life of prayer and charitable work that was inspired by the devotional books and practices of the Oxford Movement. Christina Rossetti's sister Maria Francesca became an Anglican nun at the East Grinstead All Saints' Sisterhood, an institution associated with the Anglo-Catholic reformer John Mason Neale (1818-1886) whose strict practices aroused strong suspicions among the Protestant middle class and led to charges of him being an agent in the pay of the Vatican out on a mission to destroy Anglicanism from within. The religious controversies between the two main Anglican

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<sup>11</sup> This piece appeared as *A House of Mercy*, in the *English Woman's Journal*, March 1, 1858, pp. 13-15.

campes, Anglo-Catholics, or High-Church people on one side, and, the more traditional Protestant, or Low-Church followers on the other, became so intense that Neale himself was physically attacked and almost beaten to death by an angry Protestant mob while he was attending the funeral of one of the East Grinstead Sisters in November 1857, an incident that became known as the Lewes Riot. Neale and several of the Sisters managed to escape only after the police intervened to guarantee their safety. Neale himself gave a dramatic account of the day's events in a letter to *The Times* in which he wrote as follows:

But the strangest part of all was that men, certainly in the garb of gentlemen, could stand by and see ladies dashed this way and that, their veils dragged off, and their dresses torn, and, far from rendering the least assistance, could actually excite the dregs of the rabble to further violence. I was myself knocked down, and for a moment, while under the feet of the mob, gave myself up for lost. We were borne along into the street...<sup>12</sup>

Such violent instances apart, it was clear for many Victorians that their society, which they had once thought so harmonious and as stable as the Monarchy itself, was in fact in danger of being torn asunder by a growing divide that set neighbour against neighbour, and even entire families seemed to be about to break apart. In such a climate, it was perhaps not all that surprising that the prevalent melancholy mood should drive many young girls to the very edge of nervous exhaustion with reports of suicide attempts and suicide cases both going up sharply in those tumultuous years. The effect of a strong dose of Romantic pessimism coupled with wringing religious doubts spilled over into many literary works of the time, Rossetti's poems included, even though many of them were to remain unpublished until she was in her early thirties when her *Goblin Market* appeared by Macmillan in 1862.<sup>13</sup>

The dilemma faced by many young people at the time was perhaps best defined by the great master of Realist fiction himself, Balzac, when he wrote: "In a word, to kill the emotions, and so live on to old age; or to accept the martyrdom of our passions, and die young, is our fate".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Mason Neale in his letter to *The Times*, London, November 23, 1857, page 10. Available at [anglicanhistory.org/neale/lewes.html](http://anglicanhistory.org/neale/lewes.html)

<sup>13</sup> The exception was a small volume of poems by the 16-year-old Christina edited and printed privately by her maternal grandfather Gaetano Polidori in 1847, "Poems, Dedicated To Her Mother".

<sup>14</sup> En un mot, tuer les sentiments pour vivre vieux, ou mourir jeune en acceptant le martyre de passions, voilà notre arrêt. Honoré de Balzac : *La Peau de Chagrin* (1831).

In some of her poems written around this time, however, Rossetti's anxieties do come through, even if deliberately mixed with a certain amount of Romantic exaggeration to which she was exposed just as much as any other young people were at the time.

Even today, her lines still sound painfully realistic, desperate and full of helpless sorrow. An early poem such as *Hope In Grief*, written only a couple of days before the young Christina Rossetti turned fifteen years old (i.e. December 3, 1845), and still under the effects of what some biographers have described as her first nervous breakdown, never fails to make a powerful impression on its readers. The first stanza is given below:

*HOPE IN GRIEF*

Tell me not that death of grief  
Is the only sure relief.  
Tell me not that hope when dead  
Leaves a void that naught can fill,  
Gnawings that may not be fed.

The urge to fling oneself free from this life's anxieties and embrace a quiet existence under the strong rule of faith is at the root of many literary works within the Christian tradition. Starting with Thomas à Kempis's 14<sup>th</sup>-century devotional manual *Imitation of Christ* which so appealed to the young Rossetti of the early 1840s, in lines such as these:

Blessed is the man who for Your sake, Lord, bids farewell to every creature, and, forcibly overcoming his natural inclinations, crucifies the desires of the flesh by the very fervour of his spirit, in order that he may offer You pure prayer with a quiet conscience. Having excluded all worldly things from his heart and life, he will be worthy to take his place in the choir of Angels (KEMPIS, 1973, pp.158-159)

In poems such as "*The Novice*" written when Rossetti was only 16, she gives vent to the dilemmas faced by young girls such as herself, torn between the first experiences of earthly love and the appeal exerted by the quiet life of the spirit safely kept within the walls of a convent.

*THE NOVICE*

I love one and he loveth me :  
Who sayeth this ? Who deemeth this?  
And is this thought a cause of bliss,  
Or source of misery ?

The loved may die, or he may change :  
And if he die thou art bereft;  
Or if he alter nought is left  
Save life that seemeth strange.

A weary life, a hopeless life.  
Full of all ill and fear-oppressed ;

A weary life that looks for rest  
Alone after death's strife.

The poem's speaker expresses the view that, basically, for a woman, it is safer to love Jesus rather than waste her innermost feelings on a flesh-and-blood man who may prove to be an unworthy recipient of such a tender prize as a woman's affections. The speaker then goes on to say:

And love's joy hath no quiet even ;  
It evermore is variable.  
Its gladness is like war in hell  
More than repose in heaven.

The speaker then makes the decision to leave the harsh world behind in favour of the peaceful, if uneventful, cloistered life of a nun.

Then bring me to a solitude  
Where love may neither come nor go;  
Where very peaceful waters flow,  
And roots are found for food ;

Where the wild honey-bee booms by.  
And trees and bushes freely give  
Ripe fruit and nuts : there I would live.  
And there I fain would die.

And again the signs of what critics came to identify as religious melancholy are strewn all over her early poetic production. Even such an apparently heart-warming event such as the celebration of the birth of Jesus, which, for believers, means the prefiguring of *the great second coming*, that is to say, a season of renewed hope, comes laced with strong undertones of a lingering melancholy feeling, which, however, can become quite overt in lines such as "Lie on earth and take your ease;/ Death is better far than birth:/You shall turn again to earth."

FOR ADVENT  
(March 12, 1849)

Sweet sweet sound of distant waters, falling  
On a parched and thirsty plain;  
Sweet sweet song of soaring skylark, calling  
On the sun to shine again;  
Perfume of the rose, only the fresher  
For past fertilizing rain;  
Pearls amid the sea, a hidden treasure  
For some daring hand to gain; –  
Better, dearer than all these  
Is the earth beneath the trees:  
Of a much more priceless worth

Is the old, brown, common earth.

Little snow-white lamb, piteously bleating  
 For thy mother far away;  
 Saddest sweetest nightingale, retreating  
 With thy sorrow from the day;  
 Weary fawn whom night has overtaken,  
 From the herd gone quite astray;  
 Dove whose nest was rifled and forsaken  
 In the budding month of May; –  
 Roost upon the leafy trees;  
 Lie on earth and take your ease;  
 Death is better far than birth:  
 You shall turn again to earth.

Listen to the never-pausing murmur  
 Of the waves that fret the shore:  
 See the ancient pine that stands the firmer  
 For the storm-shock that it bore;  
 And the moon her silver chalice filling  
 With light from the great sun's store;  
 And the stars which deck our temple's ceiling  
 As the flowers deck its floor;  
 Look and hearken while you may,  
 For these things shall pass away:  
 All these things shall fail and cease;  
 Let us wait the end in peace.

Let us wait the end in peace, for truly  
 That shall cease which was before:  
 Let us see our lamps are lighted, duly  
 Fed with oil nor wanting more:  
 Let us pray while yet the Lord will hear us,  
 For the time is almost o'er;  
 Yea, the end of all is very near us;  
 Yea, the Judge is at the door.  
 Let us pray now, while we may;  
 It will be too late to pray  
 When the quick and dead shall all  
 Rise at the last trumpet-call.

Also significant is the influence of the Gothic novels the young Christina was in the habit of reading in those days. The works of Charles Maturin (1782-1824) were especially admired, and there is evidence of the kind of influence his novels came to exert on some of Rossetti's early poems, such as *Isidora* and *Zara*, both written in 1847, the latter's opening stanza is given below:

Now the pain beginneth and the word is spoken; -  
 Hark unto the tolling of the church-yard chime!  
 Once my heart was gladsome, now my heart is broken,  
 Once my love was noble, now it is a crime.

It is then no wonder that, around that time, many young people took heed and decided to leave the secular world behind in favour of a cloistered existence within the walls of a religious house. For others not so fortunate, however, the choice was of an even starker nature than this, and involved a more basic problem, namely, to choose between a miserable life or a quick death at one's own hands.<sup>15</sup>

Following the notorious case of twenty-three-year-old Margaret Moyes, who killed herself spectacularly by jumping off London's Monument on the morning of September 11, 1838, a string of similar other cases came to the attention of both the authorities and the general public alike. Later on, after the authorities started to keep a closer watch on such places as tower-shaped public monuments, many women chose to jump into the waters of the Thames instead. It is from around this time that the terrible placards reading *Found Drowned* were plastered up in such great numbers on the walls of nearby buildings on the dark deserted streets that led down to the river's edge that they even entered popular culture, and prompted the strangest kinds of requests made to Parliament as part of an attempt to design legislation aimed at curbing suicide, some of them directed almost specifically at women, as death by drowning had by then become the most frequent method chosen by desperate females. As the example below illustrates: "All persons contemplating suicide, are earnestly requested not to drown themselves, as bodies lying too long in the Thames cause the water to become very unwholesome".<sup>16</sup>

Literary works of the time reflect the prevalent atmosphere among certain social groups, most notably, poor single women whose prospects seemed bleak at best. In an economic environment that had little to offer them in the way of making a decent living, such poor young women could either choose the slow death of factory work with its long hours without even the most basic labour rights, or they could be reduced to prostitution as a desperate means of making ends meet. Either way, life looked as if it held nothing but sorrow for them. Across the water, in the rapidly industrialising United States, young women were faced with similar troubles, as the Lowell Factory Girls, as they came to be known, made clear in their protest songs which they took out into the streets during their frequent strikes over pay and conditions.

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<sup>15</sup> In making the following remarks I am indebted to the sensitive and well-researched book *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories*, by Barbara T. Gates (Princeton University Press, 1988), some of the Dickens quotations also appear there.

<sup>16</sup> Clause 19 of the New Intended Reform Bill published by Henry Dinsley, Printer, 57 High Street, St. Giles, and printed in *Curiosities of Street Literature*, London, 1871.

Oh! isn't it a pity, such a pretty girl as I  
Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die?  
Oh! I cannot be a slave, I will not be a slave,  
For I'm so fond of liberty,  
That I cannot be a slave.<sup>17</sup>

In novels by Charles Dickens, too, the atmosphere of the times also makes itself felt. Through the character Nancy in his novel *Oliver Twist* Dickens very much gives the Victorian reading public a powerfully lifelike portrayal of the plight of a poor lonely girl reduced to petty crime and prostitution as her only means of survival in the then world's largest city. Like so many of her street sisters, Nancy is also driven to the very edge of despair and she too comes to the point where she feels inclined to contemplate a way of putting an end to her miserable hopeless life.

'What!' repeated the girl. 'Look before you, lady. Look at that dark water. How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide, and leave no living thing, to care for, or bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last.'<sup>18</sup>

Poor Nancy meets with an even harsher end in the novel as she is beaten to death by her former lover, the gruesome Sikes.

In yet another of his novels, *David Copperfield*, Dickens created one more female character who vocalises the agony felt by many a young girl at the time. Poor Martha Endell is orphaned into a cruel reality, succumbs to *bad habits* and ends up disgraced in the eyes of prim Victorian society. Like Nancy, she, too, realises life has little left to offer her in the way of hope, and she feels the irresistible attraction that draws her to the river's edge, an action that she sees as being emblematic of a passage into a better world, where she will rest unpolluted and free from all the nastiness that surrounds her.

'Oh, the river!' she cried passionately. 'Oh, the river!'

'Hush, hush!' said I. 'Calm yourself.'

But she still repeated the same words, continually exclaiming, 'Oh, the river!' over and over again.

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<sup>17</sup> 1836 song lyrics sung by protesting workers at the Lowell textile mills.

<sup>18</sup> *Oliver Twist*, chapter 46

'I know it's like me!' she exclaimed. 'I know that I belong to it. I know that it's the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it—and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable—and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled—and I feel that I must go with it!'

I have never known what despair was, except in the tone of those words.

'I can't keep away from it. I can't forget it. It haunts me day and night. It's the only thing in all the world that I am fit for, or that's fit for me. Oh, the dreadful river!'<sup>19</sup>

In some of Rossetti's poems of around this period, too, the dead woman as speaker features prominently. One notable example of such a dead woman whose voice comes all the way from the hereafter appears in her sonnet entitled *After Death*.

The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept  
 And strewn with rushes, rosemary and may  
 Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay,  
 Where thro' the lattice ivy-shadows crept.  
 He leaned above me, thinking that I slept  
 And could not hear him; but I heard him say:  
 "Poor child, poor child": and as he turned away  
 Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.  
 He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold  
 That hid my face, or take my hand in his,  
 Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:  
 He did not love me living but once dead  
 He pitied me; and very sweet it is  
 To know he still is warm tho' I am cold.

Typically for a Rossetti poem, *After Death* deals with the dilemmas involved in all human relationships such as uncertainty as to the loved one's real feelings, fear of failure, and, most dreadful of all, a sense of some inevitable disappointment just looming around the corner to which the speaker feels irrevocably chained. After death comes, however, it is as if the speaker finally manages to wrench some degree of certainty from the hands of a miserly Time who works incessantly against the lovers by denying them even the least bit of happiness. Once the threshold of death is past, however, the woman speaker feels assured of her beloved's affections. The only drawback, obviously, is that now she is dead and cold and therefore unable to enjoy the raptures of fully reciprocated love.

Such a reading may also help understand why Rossetti often conflated images of the garden of pleasure with the image of woman as symbolic of romantic love in the tradition that sees women as ripening buds, or full-blown flowers to be enjoyed as sources of love and pleasure. Rossetti's nature poetry is thus in radical contradiction to that of the Romantics in

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<sup>19</sup> *David Copperfield*, chapter 47.



that for Rossetti's speakers nature is not portrayed as always a benign power that oversees the harmonious coming together of men and women in a sort of new-found Edenic garden, but with more sensuality in it than the biblical one. In a poem such as her *Passing & Glassing* Rossetti lays out a grim view of the illusions of merely earthly love and beauty, and she seems to emphatically reject the connection between women as enjoyment to be had, physical success and true inner happiness.

**Passing and Glassing (1881)**

All things that pass  
 Are woman's looking-glass;  
 They show her how her bloom must fade,  
 And she herself be laid  
 With withered roses in the shade;  
 With withered roses and the fallen peach,  
 Unlovely, out of reach  
 Of summer joy that was.  
 All things that pass  
 Are woman's tiring-glass;  
 The faded lavender is sweet,  
 Sweet the dead violet  
 Culled and laid by and cared for yet;  
 The dried-up violets and dried lavender  
 Still sweet, may comfort her,  
 Nor need she cry Alas!  
 All things that pass  
 Are wisdom's looking-glass;  
 Being full of hope and fear, and still  
 Brimful of good or ill,  
 According to our work and will;  
 For there is nothing new beneath the sun;  
 Our doings have been done,  
 And that which shall be was.

Once again, as is her wont, Rossetti conflates Romantic language with biblical imagery and the rejection of the worldly consensus on love is more emphasized in the poem's last stanza by the direct appeal to the sombre wisdom culled from the *Ecclesiastes* with its gloomy outlook on the vanity of human endeavours.

The thing that hath been, it *is that* which shall be;  
 and that which is done *is that* which shall be done:  
 and *there is* no new *thing* under the sun. [*Ecclesiastes* 1:9]<sup>20</sup>

I want to stress the point that for a very considerable group of poets in which Rossetti is included, the rejection of Romanticism was based on considerations other than mere aesthetic practice. The divergence was one that went to very roots of everything, namely,

<sup>20</sup> BÍBLIA. A.T. Ecclesiastes. Inglês. The Holy Bible: King James' Version [S.l.: s.n.], 1611. 1:9. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

religion. Even as late as the 1840s and early 1850s, at a time when some of the Romantic poets were emerging from decades of neglect into relative fame, a living poet such as Alfred Tennyson could not get away with ignoring deep-seated religious sensibilities among the larger public. It was clearly the effect of such sensibilities that led a reviewer for the Church-friendly *English Review*<sup>21</sup> to give warning to Tennyson in very stark language: “We remain undecided as to Mr. Tennyson’s faith, though we opine that, strictly speaking, he has none, whether negative or affirmative, and advise him, for his soul’s good, to try to get one!”

The review in question refers to Tennyson’s long poem *In Memoriam*, which went on to become one of the most important poems of the Victorian Age, winning enthusiastic admirers up and down the Victorian social ladder, not least the queen herself. For the reviewer, nonetheless, Tennyson’s tinkering with theology was an alarming sign of a general breakdown of traditional standards. The then soon-to-be laureate poet seems to express an unbounded faith in the evolution (let me emphasize that word) of worldly knowledge and thereby shows scant regard for the Christian experience that then worked as the very foundation of most people’s way of life. A few quotations from the poem will, I think, illustrate what the reviewer identified as so grave a threat to the orthodoxy of the day.

Move upward, working out the beast,  
And let the ape and tiger die. [from section 118]

And all is well, tho' faith and form  
Be sunder'd in the night of fear;  
Well roars the storm to those that hear  
A deeper voice across the storm,

Proclaiming social truth shall spread,  
And justice, ev'n tho' thrice again  
The red fool-fury of the Seine  
Should pile her barricades with dead. [from section 127]

This kind of evolutionary program struck the believers as the utmost nonsense. As the *English Review* pointed out, Tennyson’s poem is predicated on a general view

(...) in which it is most falsely, and, we may add, offensively assumed, that the unbeliever in Christianity can possess a faith of his own, quite as real and as stable as that of the believer! (...) Now, we repeat, that such language as this is infinitely mischievous. Such things are caught up as the catchwords of unbelievers, and go very far towards justifying them in their own esteem in their vanity and folly. No doubt, there may be honest doubters, and there are hypocritical believers; but the

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<sup>21</sup> The quotation from the *English Review* of September 1850 can be found at Google Books, available at: <https://books.google.com.br/books?id=sSQRAAAIAAJ&lpg=PA1&dq=the%20english%20review%201850&pg=PA1#v=onepage&q&f=false> Last accessed August 26, 2017.

assumption here seems to be that doubt is almost of necessity a more honest thing than faith! (...) This is simply and purely blasphemy!<sup>22</sup>

Rossetti's views as expressed in her poems seem to go in the same direction as the reviewer's. For her, the world was more of a self-destructive structure than a source of hope and contentment. It is true, also, that Rossetti's stance represented a point of view that was fast losing ground to the rising world of modern science and commerce that emerged out of that same historical period. I want to argue, however, that her views carried considerable weight among an important section of the population, those who continued to read her poetry even as it strenuously denounced the trivialization of spiritual matters in an increasingly secular world. In fact, as if to further illustrate her position beyond question, an entire section of Christina Rossetti's last volume of poems, one that she chose to call simply *Verses*, of 1893, her most popular volume in terms of sales, has an entire section of poems under the heading: *The world: self-destruction*. And it opens with these lines:

The world, - what a world, ah me!  
Mouldy, worm-eaten, grey:  
Vain as a leaf from a tree,  
As a fading day,  
As veriest vanity,  
As the froth and the spray,  
Of the hollow-billowed sea,  
As what was and shall not be,  
As what is and passes away.

This is not the utterance of one who believes, like Tennyson seems to do, that "social truth shall spread, and justice" as a result of some political arrangement brought about by a socially evolved body politic. For Rossetti, the hope lies beyond, and she is unwavering in her commitment. I shall return to this point in the following chapters.

The combined theme of disappointment in love and the hope of a fuller relationship with one's beloved through the everlasting love of God in the hereafter is a thread that runs through many of Rossetti's most heart-wrenching poems. In the next chapter, I propose to discuss such views by attempting to show how the theme of doomed love is featured in her early poems. After that, I will take a closer look at her poem entitled *Twice*.

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<sup>22</sup> Anonymous review of Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in *The English Review*, volume XIV: July-December 1850.

## 2 ROSSETTI & THE BROKEN HEART

While I ? I sat alone and watched;  
 My lot in life, to live alone  
 In mine own world of interests,  
 Much felt but little shown.

*Christina Rossetti*

That love is the central tenet of the Christian faith can be confirmed by even a random look at the most famous passages of the Gospels. If, however, the discussion should turn on what exactly is being meant by love, then the talk becomes far more serious and complex. The new commandment given by Jesus to his followers to love one another is, after all, described as just as important as the first, which is to love God above all else. For the young, though, there may be a temptation to read certain biblical passages as expressive of more than just simply a selfless or disembodied love of one human being for another. The impulse to look for the utmost happiness within the context of a human relationship, which can be very much physical as well as spiritual, presents some pretty irresistible attractions. Even in such a well-loved manual of devotion such as the *Imitation of Christ*, certain lines could be read in more than just a purely spiritual sense.

Love knows no limits, but ardently transcends all bounds. Love feels no burden, takes no account of toil, attempts things beyond its strength; love sees nothing as impossible, for it feels able to achieve all things; it is strange and effective; while he who lacks love faints and fails (KEMPIS, 1973, p. 98).

Would it be so wrong if a sixteen-year-old girl should read such a passage as the one quoted above as indicative of something more than just spiritual bliss? In one of her earliest poems about love, the teenage Rossetti clearly sees love as more than just a metaphysical phenomenon.

PRAISE OF LOVE  
 And shall love cease? Ask thine own heart, O woman,  
 Thy heart that beats restlessly on for ever!

In lines such as these, the young Rossetti gives vent to her hope that love will not only bring happy moments for the immediate present but will also outlast mere physical realities to enter into a region of bliss that lies necessarily beyond the world as we know it. In this early

poem recorded on her notebook as having been written on February 24, 1847, Rossetti says further:

Oh! It is Love makes the world habitable,  
Love is a foretaste of our promised Heaven;  
Though sometimes robed in white, sometimes in sable,  
It still is Love, and still some joy is given,  
Although the heart be riven.

Again typically, however, the young Rossetti finds out, as is her wont, that something that might be a cause for happiness will almost certainly end up in a dismal failure. Even so, the poem's overall tone is not one of utter pessimism as some readers better acquainted with some of Rossetti's mature poetry might be led to believe. Although it might come "robed in white, sometimes in sable", and despite the fact that the heart could get "riven", love could still offer the happiness a lover seeks.

Interestingly enough, although the lines quoted above come from a poem written by the sixteen-year-old Christina Rossetti, it was never published in its original form during her lifetime. The poem's last stanza, however, appeared in Rossetti's *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885), a book of personal meditations, poems and prayers organised in the form of entries for each day of the year. By the time the book first came out, Rossetti was well into her fifties. Perhaps, it was only natural that she should have omitted the poem's first three stanzas as being too naïvely sentimental for a mature lady to give to the public. At any event, the stanza she did include in her 1885 volume may offer some clues as to if, and by how much, Rossetti's views on love had changed over the course of several decades. The lines that do appear at the end of her entry for February 17 read like this:

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.

This shortened version of the poem she wrote in her teens, and it never appeared in print until she was in her fifties. It sounds terse, perhaps, but, nonetheless, it is still more revealing. The point Rossetti seems to be making is that love can really come to be experienced in many different ways. The first line appears to make some reference to earthly or physical love. The second seems to address love as that within a family as between parents and their offspring as time passes. Then, in the third line, there comes the biblical echo of

Jesus' new commandment to his followers to love one another as the most important part of the divine law. The last two lines may perhaps refer both to the fact that love is somehow part of all human history, and, as a result, love has always been the only story told by every work of literature, and will still continue to be so, as long as there are humans around.<sup>23</sup>

Rossetti's early poems will sometimes show instances of wide-ranging mood swings as the speaker in each poem will sometimes move from the heights of bliss to the very depths of the darkest hopelessness. An obvious instance of the latter comes from her poem entitled *Looking Forward*, composed on June 8, 1849 (Rossetti was then 18 years old).

As her brother William Rossetti pointed out in his note to this poem in his 1904 collected edition of Christina's *Poetical Works*, the handwriting is not Christina's but her mother's, which fact, coupled with the overall tone of the poem, led him to believe that "it was written in expectation of seemingly imminent death" (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. 478). The poem's desperate lines do indeed sound like the utterance of one who is looking forward to nothing but death. The first two stanzas are given below.

Sleep, let me sleep, for I am sick of care;  
 Sleep, let me sleep, for my pain wearies me.  
 Shut out the light; thicken the heavy air  
 With drowsy incense; let a distant stream  
 Of music lull me, languid as a dream,  
 Soft as the whisper of a Summer sea.

Pluck me no rose that groweth on a thorn,  
 Nor myrtle white and cold as snow in June,  
 Fit for a virgin on her marriage morn:  
 But bring me poppies brimmed with sleepy death,  
 And ivy choking what it garlandeth,  
 And primroses that open to the moon.  
 (*Looking Forward*)

Again, there is the voice that comes from the very brink of the grave. In such poems as the one quoted above, Rossetti's speakers can be generally identified as either the dead woman who speaks from beyond the grave, or the woman who is going through the last hours of her weary death-in-life existence.

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<sup>23</sup> Antony H. Harrison suggests many interesting possibilities about this poem in his book *Christina Rossetti In Context* (University of North Carolina, 1988) see especially chapter 4. I have here mentioned only the ones that seem most appropriate to the case I am trying to make.

Another instance of a woman's voice that sounds from the regions that lie beyond the physical world is Rossetti's poem *At Home*<sup>24</sup>. In it, the dead woman revisits the old home from which she is now permanently exiled in a last attempt at keeping some kind of connection with the living whose gross insensitivity further increases the departed woman's sorrows. Take, for example, the following lines from the poem's first stanza:

When I was dead, my spirit turned  
To seek the much-frequented house:  
I passed the door, and saw my friends  
Feasting beneath green orange boughs;  
From hand to hand they pushed the wine,  
They sucked the pulp of plum and peach;  
They sang, they jested, and they laughed,  
For each was loved of each.

(*At Home*, lines 1-8)

The lonely woman's ghost floats around the old haunts where she used to meet her friends and finds that they have moved on past their grief, if grief they had ever felt over her passing, and now she listens to their talk, the drift of which clearly indicates they have no intention of spending precious time on useless reminiscence, as the poem's third stanza shows:

'To-morrow,' said they, strong with hope,  
And dwelt upon the pleasant way:  
'To-morrow,' cried they one and all,  
While no one spoke of yesterday.  
Their life stood full at blessed noon;  
I, only I, had passed away:  
'To-morrow and to-day,' they cried;  
I was of yesterday.

(*At Home*, lines 17-24)

One wonders why it is that the woman's lonely spirit has returned to the old home she once knew. It seems reasonable to venture that the answer is love: the theme that is so ubiquitous in so much of Rossetti's early poetry. As the frail ghost departs from the familiar scenes she sounds as though she were fully resigned to her new fate, i.e., oblivion.

I passed from the familiar room,  
I who from love had passed away,  
Like the remembrance of a guest  
That tarrieth but a day.

(*At Home*, lines 29-32)

Frustration and ultimate disappointment in love are both well-established themes for poetry, and Rossetti was obviously not immune to the literary trends that were most in vogue

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<sup>24</sup> Composed June 28, 1858 and published in her book *Goblin Market & Other Poems* (1862).

during her teens and early twenties. So, for instance, the poems of Laetitia Elizabeth Landon (1802-1838), better known as *L.E.L.*, enjoyed widespread acceptance among young people growing up at the time when Rossetti was making her first efforts at poetic composition. An illustrative example of the kind of love poetry that was favoured by a large part of the public can be seen in *L.E.L.*'s verses that were published as *Lines Written Under The Picture Of A Girl Burning A Love-Letter*<sup>25</sup>.

I felt so sad to see it die,  
So bright at first, so dark at last,  
I fear'd it was love's history.

The pains of unrequited love remained an important topic of Rossetti's poems even after she was well into her thirties as a poem entitled *A Smile And A Sigh* shows very eloquently. In it Rossetti contrasts the sharply different fate of those lucky few who enjoy the bliss of happy love relationships and, on the other hand, the wretchedness endured by those who are doomed to a lovelorn existence.

A SMILE AND A SIGH  
A smile because the nights are short!  
And every morning brings such pleasure  
Of sweet love-making, harmless sport:  
Love that makes and finds its treasure;  
Love, treasure without measure.

A sigh because the days are long!  
Long, long these days that pass in sighing,  
A burden saddens every song:  
While time lags which should be flying,  
We live who would be dying.

What is perhaps even more interesting about this poem is the fact that in Rossetti's notebook it appears as having been composed on February 14 (Valentine's Day), a date whose significance scarcely needs further explanation. The poem's publication history, however, does not seem to confirm its melancholy inception. It appeared first in *Macmillan's Magazine* for May 1868. Later on, it was included in Rossetti's first collected edition, also by Macmillan, in her book entitled simply *POEMS* (1875) which brings together her *Goblin Market* and *Prince's Progress* volumes of 1862 and 1866 respectively with the addition of several poems which had never before appeared in print.

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<sup>25</sup> The Poetical Works of Laetitia Elizabeth Landon. London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans (1850), p. 294.



One who knew Christina Rossetti around that time, critic and man of letters Theodore Watts-Dunton gave a particularly interesting description of Rossetti as part of his tribute to her memory published a few years after she had died. In his piece, Watts-Dunton (1832-1914) portrays a Rossetti well acquainted with sorrow and pain.

A certain irritability of temper, which was, perhaps, natural to her, had, when I first became acquainted with her family (about 1872), been overcome, or at least greatly chastened, by religion (which with her was a passion) and by a large acquaintance with grief, resulting in a long meditation over the mystery of pain (WATTS-DUNTON, 1916, p. 179).

More importantly, however, in that same piece Watts-Dunton makes an observation which proves his view of her work to be perceptive beyond mere biographical details. He mentions the very significant contrast between Rossetti's use of Symbolism and that of other poets of the day. He writes: "She loved the beauty of this world, but not entirely for itself; she loved it on account of its symbols of another world beyond." (WATTS-DUNTON, 1916, p. 183).

In the use Rossetti makes of symbolism, certain characteristics of her peculiar style set her apart from what critics have usually identified as the more acceptable definitions of the term. The frequent use of allegory and analogy, the ever present echo of some of the most melancholy biblical passages as well as the seemingly never-ending lament for lost happiness whose ultimate fulfilment must wait for a time when timelessness itself will have begun, all these make Rossetti's a very different brand of symbolist poetry.

In his study of the symbolist movement, Arthur Symons lists some of the patterns he sees as the ground-breaking characteristics of the then rising style of poetry. Although Symons is referring specifically to the French symbolist poets of the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is tempting to see in his analysis some points that could also be applied to Rossetti, particularly what he calls the revolt "against the materialistic tradition", a point I have mentioned earlier while describing the rise of the Victorian consumer society. Symons writes as follows:

[...] in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul, of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech (SYMONS, 1899, pp. 8-9).

The poetic speech enacted in Rossetti's poems about love is certainly authentic in the sense that it speaks of a deeper reality that may come dressed up in ordinary language but

whose ultimate significance is hidden under a thin veil of religious melancholy which leads the speaker to look for fulfilment in the region beyond time and change, the region of the “large echoes of the serene and sonorous tides of heaven”, as Swinburne described Rossetti’s poetry once.

As part of a tradition that goes back a long stretch of time, the theme of the *broken heart* figures prominently in English poetry, too, particularly among the Metaphysical poets; more specifically, those poets who wrote devotional verse, such as Richard Crashaw (1613-1649), and Henry Vaughan (1621-1695). Most notably, George Herbert (1593-1633), poet and Anglican priest, stands as a highly significant figure to whom several later critics would compare Christina Rossetti herself, and favourably. In fact, the connection between Herbert and Rossetti was spotted right from the start. For example, when Rossetti’s first volume came out in 1862, the anonymous reviewer for the *Eclectic Magazine* was quick to point out what he saw as some of the visible characteristics of Rossetti’s verse.

We do not know that Miss Rossetti has been treated with any measure of critical unfairness. Certainly, there is the manifestation of very deep powers in her little volume; it is of quite a singular type (...). No doubt, the influence of Tennyson on the mind of the author may be suspected; but of positive discipleship and imitation, there is no trace. (...) Shall we say this is in the manner of Herbert? <sup>26</sup>

And, to repeat, the comparisons with George Herbert went on being made right to the end of Rossetti’s poetic performance, such as, for example, the obituary piece that appeared in *The Dial* in January 1895. The anonymous critic observes:

If in most of the provinces of the lyric realm Miss Rossetti’s verse challenges comparison with that of our greater singers, it is in the religious province that the challenge is most imperative and her mastery most manifest. Not in Keble, or Newman, not in Herbert, or Vaughan, do we find a clearer or more beautiful expression of the religious sentiment than is dominant in Miss Rossetti’s three books. In this respect, at least, she is unsurpassed, and perhaps unequalled, by any of her contemporaries. <sup>27</sup>

Because a detailed study of both the similarities and the contrasts between the poetry of Rossetti and that of her devotional predecessors (Vaughan and Herbert, to keep to just two

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<sup>26</sup> Anonymous review of Rossetti’s *Goblin Market & Other Poems*, in the *Eclectic Review* (London), and reproduced in *The Living Age* (USA), July 1862. The quotation from the *Eclectic Review* is to be found at Google Books. *The Eclectic Review*, New Series, volume XXIV, 1825. Page 354. Available at: <<https://books.google.com.br/books?id=edwEAAAAQAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=the+eclectic+review+volume+1825#v=onepage&q&f=false>> Last accessed August 26, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Anonymous obituary piece in *The Dial*, January 16, 1895: *Christina Georgina Rossetti*, p. 37.

names) would exceed the scope of this dissertation, I include hereunder only the smallest sample of quotations from the works of those two poets whose vocabulary bears striking resemblance to Rossetti's own.

From Henry Vaughan's *Dedication*, which opens his volume of verse *Silex Scintillans*, Part I, 1650:

I nothing have to give to Thee,  
But this Thy own gift, given to me.  
Refuse it not; for now Thy token  
Can tell Thee where a heart is broken.

From Richard Crashaw's *Delights Of The Muses* (1648):

UPON FORD'S TWO TRAGEDIES  
*Love's Sacrifice, and the Broken Heart*  
Thou cheat'st us, Ford, mak'st one seem two by art;  
What is love's sacrifice but the broken heart?

From among all the poems by George Herbert, I have chosen to focus on his *Deniall* (1633) as being the one in the structure of which I find the most useful similarity to the treatment Rossetti herself employs in her poems that deal with the broken-heartedness of her speakers. Here it is:

When my devotions could not pierce  
Thy silent ears;  
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse:  
My breast was full of fears  
And disorder: 5

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,  
Did fly asunder:  
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,  
Some to the wars and thunder  
Of alarms. 10

As good go anywhere, they say,  
As to benumb  
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,  
Come, come my God, O come,  
But no hearing. 15

O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue  
To cry to thee,  
And then not hear it crying! All day long  
My heart was in my knee,  
But no hearing. 20

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,  
Untuned, unstrung;  
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,  
Like a nipped blossom, hung  
Discontented. 25

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,  
 Defer no time;  
 That so thy favours granting my request,  
 They and my mind may chime,  
 And mend my rhyme. 30

Notice Herbert's use of alliteration, as in line 6, for example, with its broken sounds as if in illustration of what he says in line 3, and, what is even more telling, his intentionally imperfect rhyming scheme, *a-b-a-b-x*. This is apparently so designed in order to show the speaker's powerlessness as he desperately tries to gain access to God's mercy, as illustrated in lines 14-15. Moreover, the entire poem is afflicted with a glaringly obvious metric irregularity as iambs and trochees, tetrameters, pentameters and trimeters, all just seem to stumble helplessly on, one after the other in haphazard fashion. It is only in the last stanza that a recognizable verse pattern emerges, as the rhyming scheme becomes harmonized, that is, *a-b-a-b-b*. In this sense, the poem depicts the poet's *state of soul* as he feels himself forsaken and utterly devoid of God's grace. The poem indeed seems to echo the famous opening verses of Psalm 22, King David's agonising cry, *My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?* There is the picture of an individual who is in the grip of utter restlessness as he tries to get God to hear his grievances and confessions. In the poem, Herbert also describes how his thoughts went astray (line 6), seeking human comfort amid earthly pursuits, but all to no avail. This is indeed one of the most frequent commonplaces of devotional poetry and prose.

The broken heart, as symbolic of the human predicament, features prominently in Rossetti's poems, both early and late ones, for the obvious reason that she saw in it an apt metaphor for describing change from hope in things visible to hope in the unseen world that is yet to come. This use of symbolism is given further impact if one considers the biblical echo that usually accompanies such references to the patience that is required of believers until the moment when their hopes may finally be realised, or not, as the case may be; all of it hinges on the quality of one's faith in the ultimate reality. This seems to be the message contained in St. Paul's words to the Romans in the King James version:

For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. (Romans, 8:24-25)<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> BÍBLIA. N.T. Romans. Inglês. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s.n.], 1611. 8:24-25. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

It should be noted, however, that, in keeping with the religious medieval influences that marked the return to a more primitive Christian mysticism, Rossetti's speakers will often be shown as torn by love between two rival claims, one coming from a human lover, and the other stemming from the Christological experience. Taking its cue from the old medieval songs of Provençal poetry, among other sources, the new medievalism shifts the focus from a sensual experience to an unearthly object, a divine lover personified in the Christ of the medieval religion. The language and the tropes, however, remain intensely sensual. It is a love that chooses to be without earthly hope, but the hope it keeps alive within oneself is one that strives towards the unseen, unearthly lover, the Bridegroom of biblical narrative, the lover who arrives late, but whose arrival cannot be doubted, however hopeless the scenario may be. This, of course, does not mean that one's ultimate rescue from the pains of earthly life and love is absolutely assured by dint of a superficial commitment to the faith in Christ. The final outcome will finally depend on God's judgement of one's *heart*, a crucial stage the prospect of which sends shivers down the spine of many of Rossetti's speakers in the love poems. Can frail human beings, the female ones among them, to be more precise, endure such an ominous prospect? What does it take to finally pass that ultimate test of all? Some of Rossetti's poems seem to offer us some clues, but even when the situation looks pretty straightforward, there seems to be something lurking behind the carefully designed language of hope and faith. Take, for example, the lines from her poem *An 'Immurata' Sister* (1881) in which Rossetti seems to address precisely the marked difference between men and women when it comes to love and hope in the hereafter.

Life flows down to death; we cannot bind  
 That current that it should not flee:  
 Life flows down to death, as rivers find  
 The inevitable sea.  
 Men work and think, but women feel;  
 And so (for I'm a woman, I)  
 And so I should be glad to die,  
 And cease from impotence of zeal,  
 And cease from hope, and cease from dread,  
 And cease from yearnings without gain.  
 And cease from all this world of pain,  
 And be at peace among the dead.  
 Hearts that die, by death renew their youth,  
 Lightened of this life that doubts and dies;  
 Silent and contented, while the Truth  
 Unveiled makes them wise.

Why should I seek and never find  
 That something which I have not had?  
 Fair and unutterably sad  
 The world hath sought time out of mind;

The world hath sought and I have sought, -  
 Ah, empty world and empty I!  
 For we have spent our strength for nought,  
 And soon it will be time to die.

Sparks fly upward toward their fount of fire,  
 Kindling, flashing, hovering: -  
 Kindle, flash, my soul; mount higher and higher,  
 Thou whole burnt-offering!

It should be noticed that the nun in the poem does not say that she wants to leave this world in order to join the choir of angels or anything of the sort. She simply wants to escape from what she calls her “*impotence of zeal*”; she dreads the routine of hope and yearning, and longs to lie among the peaceful dead. In the sleep of the dead, so it seems, the speaker hopes to find some *rest*, not ultimate bliss or anything of the sort. As is her wont, Rossetti brings into her poem more than just lyrical beauty, she concentrates on theology by evoking the doctrine of *soul sleep*, that is, the middle state in which the soul finds itself between death and the Day of Judgement when each will receive according to his or her deserts. The speaker seems to be too tired of life in the world, but at the same time, she does not seem to be all that eager to find herself face to face with her maker in the hereafter, therefore she prefers to wait quietly among the dead.

The pattern that seems to emerge then can be said to follow three basic stages of development, namely, naïve happiness whose innocence is dashed by the shock of disappointment which leads to increasing bitterness of self which in turn draws the broken-hearted woman closer towards her inner soul in an attempt to bridge over the gulf between present unhappiness and the joys of full acceptance in the new kingdom beyond time as we know it. The difficulty the speaker experiences is basically one of trusting God far enough to make her give up her heart into his hands despite the natural temptation which takes the form of a union with an earthly lover. In one’s early youth, such dilemma can be felt particularly acutely, as Rossetti shows in her poem *Worship God* (1893).

But now Thou hast said, 'Worship Me, and give  
 Thy heart to Me, My child'; now therefore we  
 Think twice before we stoop to worship Thee:  
 We proffer half a heart while life is strong  
 And strung with hope; so sweet it is to live!  
 Wilt Thou not wait? Yea, Thou hast waited long.

(Worship God, lines 9-14)

The image of the sorrowful speaker as she hands her broken heart over to God in the ultimate hope that he will accept it, take it, and mend it for her, so she can fully enjoy the

glories of eternal life in a blissful worship is one that informs Rossetti's later love poems, replete as they are with an emphasis on heavenly as opposed to earthly love, and a strong longing for a speedy resolution of the speaker's present grief. Such is also the atmosphere found in her poem *Twice*. In it a lovelorn speaker begins by uttering a complaint that the heart she offered to her earthly lover was most unceremoniously rejected as being still *unripe* which leads her to question the wisdom of her choice of, so to speak, taking the initiative in the affair, or so we are led to believe if we trust the line where she said that it is the man's job to do the talking. For a woman, such a step would represent a serious breach of decorum.

I took my heart in my hand,  
(O my love, O my love),  
I said : Let me fall or stand,  
Let me live or die.  
But this once hear me speak—  
(O my love, O my love)—  
Yet a woman's words are weak  
You should speak, not I.

(*Twice*, lines 1-8)

The action of offering one's heart is always fraught with anxiety, and the poem's speaker soon learns to her chagrin that her offer has been rejected with the kind of light-headed lack of seriousness that is most likely to cause grievous pain to the one who has been naïve enough to be willing to risk everything by making the fateful gesture.

You took my heart in your hand  
With a friendly smile,  
With a critical eye you scanned,  
Then set it down.  
And said : It is still unripe,  
Better wait awhile ;  
Wait while the skylarks pipe,  
Till the corn grows brown.

As you set it down it broke—  
Broke, but I did not wince ;  
I smiled at the speech you spoke.  
At your judgment that I heard :  
But I have not often smiled  
Since then, nor questioned since,  
Nor cared for corn-flowers wild.  
Nor sung with the singing bird.

(*Twice*, lines 9-24)

The utter shock of rejection sends the speaker reeling. After such a painful moment, she is not willing to question the lover as to why he has rejected her; she tries to keep her cool, she does not wince, she even tries to put a brave face on it by smiling at the lover's

discourse as he takes her heart in his hand, looks at it and then sets it down like a piece of merchandise which has miserably failed to attract his interest. The moments that follow this rejection pass almost unnoticed by the speaker as she is now in no condition to go back to the previous state in which she had plenty of time to care for the wild corn flowers and sing with the singing birds, that is to say, the time she once spent living in a dream world of her own full of happiness and hope of a glorious future in the arms of her beloved. As is often the case following such disasters, a frustrated lover may yet turn to religion as a refuge from the wretchedness that is threatening to engulf her whole existence. And Rossetti's speaker, not by any accident, seems to take her cue from the gospels.

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.  
(Matthew, 11:28)<sup>29</sup>

Although the action of turning to God as one's last and desperate resort may look like the natural thing to do for one in such a plight as the speaker's, this gesture is also fraught with danger. One would assume, quite naturally, that, from a Christian perspective such as Rossetti's, a believer, if she is sincere, will certainly feel that she is not worthy, can never be worthy, of God's love right away, but must pass the test of faith first. Passing the test, as biblical allusions show, is something altogether different from begging God's mercy in the hour of sorrow. God will remember the hesitation to come to him in the moments when the speaker enjoyed earthly happiness and when there seemed to be no need of God's intervention to rescue one's soul from the abyss of bitterness. This is the riskiest moment of all, when the suppliant feels lonelier than ever, not knowing whether her plea will fall on deaf ears or, what is even worse, whether she will be faced with yet another and even more painful rejection, one whose finality does not admit of appeal.

I take my heart in my hand,  
O my God, O my God,  
My broken heart in my hand :  
Thou hast seen, judge Thou.  
My hope was written on sand,  
my God, O my God :  
Now let Thy judgment stand—  
Yea, judge me now.

(Twice, lines 25-32)

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<sup>29</sup> BÍBLIA. N.T. Matthew. Inglêss. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s.n.], 1611. 11:8. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.



As she states her plight before her maker and stands ready to receive her judgement, the speaker makes her case, first of all by acknowledging the vanity of all merely human endeavours such as the illusion that earthly love could save her from any trouble on earth. Faced with the bitter reality, the speaker is forced to admit that her hope was written on sand, as she says. She then takes a bold step by asking God to pronounce his judgement right now, not wait till some future date which may be long in coming. But, it should be stressed, the main emphasis here is the judgement over the speaker's heart. This is the pivotal element in the poem. Heart as a metonymy for the fate of the speaker's whole being, in both its temporal and heavenly meanings. Perhaps that is why the speaker refers to her own broken, soiled heart by a simple demonstrative pronoun (this). She is evidently too ashamed to call it by its name and can only hope that God in his infinite mercy will accept such a poor offer as the one she is making there and then. The figure of the sorrowing heart, of course, resonates with innumerable biblical meanings whose importance can hardly be exaggerated.

This contemned of a man,  
 This marred one heedless day,  
 This heart take Thou to scan  
 Both within and without:  
 Refine with fire its gold,  
 Purge Thou its dross away  
 Yea hold it in Thy hold.  
 Whence none can pluck it out.

(Twice, lines 33-40)

The speaker in Rossetti's poem offers her broken heart in the hope that God will finally mend it and refine it, after having scanned it both within and without, to turn it into a brightly shining heart, pure and whole, worthy of making its entrance into the regions of bliss in the heavenly paradise. The speaker obviously still hopes to achieve some kind of salvation by proving she trusts God's mercy to accept her offer, a biblical commonplace whose importance is well-established.

But I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation.  
 Psalm 13, 5.<sup>30</sup>

The LORD is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart;  
 and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit.  
 Psalm 34,18.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> BÍBLIA. A.T. Psalms. Inglês. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s.n.], 1611. 13,5. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

Strengthened by her trust in God's ultimate forgiveness, the speaker is still able to find the energy to go on living, the change that has come upon her does not necessarily have to lead to her death in life, nor does it mean life has lost all of its attractions. The speaker feels more chastened, certainly more subdued, but she will still sing the praises of Him who accepted her heart and made it whole again through an overflowing love whose power extends far above and beyond all human understanding.

And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God. (Ephesians, 3:19)<sup>32</sup>

It is this faith which enables the speaker to finally make the decision to offer her whole heart, this time around without any reservations, her spirit now reinvigorated by a freshly born determination to face out whatever it is God may bring her way.

I take my heart in my hand—  
I shall not die, but live—  
Before Thy face I stand;  
I, for Thou callest such:  
All that I have I bring,  
All that I am I give;  
Smile Thou and I shall sing,  
But shall not question much.

(Twice, lines 41-48)

By the time the poem comes to its close, the speaker is apparently resigned to her fate as someone whose life holds little prospect of ever coming to the same sort of fruition experienced by the more worldly-minded among us. The speaker promises to sing again, as she used to do before her bitter experience; she also says she will not question much, perhaps as an admission that she has learned humility in the wake of her devastating experience. Does this mean the speaker must give up all hope of fulfilment in this life and must therefore wait for the dawn of eternity in order to have access to the sort of active taste of love's little joys? The answer to this question seems to lie beyond the realm of poetry itself and must be sought out in that region which, for Rossetti, condensed the very meaning of everything that was most important for her, namely, religion. The age-old conflict between *eros* and *agape* plays a

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<sup>31</sup> BÍBLIA. A.T. Psalms. Inglês. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s.n.], 1611. 34,18. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

<sup>32</sup> BÍBLIA. N.T. Ephesians. Inglês. *The Holy Bible: King James' Version* [S.l.: s.n.], 1611. 3:19. Retrieved from: <<https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>> Accessed on 15 jan. 2017.

part, I believe, in the analysis of Rossetti's love poems, especially in the case of a poem like the one under scrutiny in the last few paragraphs above.

As is the case with so much of her poetry, Rossetti's speaker in *Twice* may sound as if she has forgone all hope of earthly happiness in the thought that such bliss as that given by romantic love is but a passing state that is bound to change from gladness to gloom as time goes on. In yet another of her poems about frustrated love Rossetti seems to confirm the view that it is best not to trust earthly love too far, however tempting it may be to do the opposite.

Where love is, there comes sorrow  
To-day or else to-morrow :  
Endure the mood,  
Love only means our good.

Where love is, there comes pleasure  
With or withouten measure.  
Early or late  
Cheering the sorriest state.

Where love is, all perfection  
Is stored for heart's delection ;  
For where love is  
Dwells every sort of bliss.

Who would not choose a sorrow  
Love's self will cheer to-morrow ?  
One day of sorrow,  
Then such a long to-morrow!

Rossetti's predicament may have been peculiar to her own specific situation, but it was by no means unknown among many women during the Victorian age. Take, for instance, the case of Mary Anne Evans (George Eliot) whose lifelong struggle to assert a woman's right to look for happiness in life exacted a heavy price and resulted in her being ostracised by polite society for many years. In her novels, and through a variety of characters, Eliot portrayed the stress inflicted on women whose lives were torn asunder between the tough choices they had to face. "The pressing problem for Romola just then was not to settle questions of controversy, but to keep alive that flame of unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a life of active love". (ELIOT, 1863)

Perhaps, the same old criticism that is so often voiced in relation to nineteenth-century novels in general, roughly, that they end badly and do not live up to the expectations they raise, that their optimism has not been earned, or that their pessimism mars the contents of what might otherwise have been a good story, as in the case of some of Dickens's novels, for example, or George Eliot's, too, may equally be said to apply to Christina Rossetti's poems

about the divide between earthly love and heavenly transfiguration into another, fuller kind of love that, different from its earthly counterpart, promises to, and does indeed, last eternally, for the believers at least. This apparently unresolvable conflict may well have been aptly summarised by Eliot in the final fate of her most famous heroine, *Dorothea Brooke*, the heroine of *Middlemarch* (1872), whose disastrous love experiences and misdirected efforts at self-expression resulted in her ending up ostracised and far distant from her youthful ideals. Perhaps, the same reading may apply to the speakers of Rossetti's love poems, too, if not to herself as well.

But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs (ELIOT, 1872)

### 3 WHY DOES IT ALL SOUND SO BIOGRAPHICAL?

Twelve years after Christina Rossetti's death, her brother William Michael Rossetti, then approaching 80, published his long-awaited personal memoirs in two bulky volumes that he chose to call *Some Reminiscences*. The Victorian style of biographical writing weighs heavily on the text prepared by this last surviving member of the Rossetti family. Meticulous to a fault, circumspect by design, as was his wont, in the preface to the original edition, William Rossetti cautions against any inordinate expectations on the part of those of his readers who might happen to be less aware of what it was exactly that the aging critic had had on his mind in bringing forward before the general public a collection of personal memories at a time when the new century had brought with it a vogue for the truthful *warts-and-all* kind of biography that was by then so visibly on the rise:

Some readers may opine that, although I speak of several important personages from my own knowledge of them, I say little about them that is of much moment; neither should I dissent from this allegation. But it does not follow that I know nothing beyond that which I write. In some cases, I do know a good deal more; but to cast a slur here or violate a confidence there, would make me contemptible to myself. (ROSSETTI, 1906, p.xi).

In the chapter devoted to his sister Christina, William Rossetti keeps himself firmly within the Victorian biographical tradition, but he still manages to tread on venturesome ground when he mentions what he terms his sister's second *affair of the heart*. In this chapter, then, the Rossetti biographer describes Christina Rossetti's warm regard for Charles Bagot Cayley, an obscure Dante scholar and translator. After running through some of the sad details of this failed relationship, William Rossetti remarks that "it may truly be said that, although she would not be his, no woman ever loved a man more deeply or more constantly" (ROSSETTI, 1906, p. 315). In the concluding paragraph of the same chapter, William Rossetti gives his summary of what he perceived as his sister's life-choices and personal style. In what has become by now a *locus classicus* of Christina Rossetti scholarship, the official family biographer proclaims as follows: "Christina Rossetti has passed away; personally known to few, understood by even fewer, silent to almost all" (ROSSETTI, 1906, p. 315).

As was stated in the Introduction, Christina Rossetti started writing poetry at the early age of twelve. From the start, even discounting all the influences that bore some sort of stamp upon her very early work, it did not take long before she struck out on a path of her own. In

some of her early poems, Rossetti's speakers already display the inclination to self-renunciation and solitude that will also appear prominently in her mature phase decades later. One such early example, comes in her poem *The time of waiting*, written in November, 1846, by the then fifteen-year-old Christina.

Life is fleeting, joy is fleeting,  
Coldness follows love and greeting,  
Parting still succeeds to meeting.

If I say, "Rejoice today",  
Sorrow meets me in the way:  
I cannot my will obey.

If I say, "My grief shall cease,  
Now then I will live in peace",  
My cares instantly increase.

When I look up to the sky,  
Thinking to see light on high,  
Clouds my searching glance defy.

When I look upon the earth  
For the flowers that should have birth,  
I find dreariness and dearth.

And the winds sigh on for ever,  
Murmurs still the flowing river,  
On the graves the sunbeams quiver.

And destruction waxeth bold,  
And the earth is growing old,  
And I tremble in the cold.

And my weariness increases  
To an ache that never ceases  
And a pain that ne'er decreases.

Christina Rossetti did not leave behind any personal notes that could offer a detailed and chronological insight into her daytime thoughts and reflections. She wrote no diary, as far as is known. By all accounts, as her biographer brother observes in the collected edition of the *Poetical Works*:

In company she was quiet, and reserved rather than otherwise, but made every now and then some remark which arrested attention. She was as a fact extremely shy. Most people probably perceived as much; but she preserved a calm and collected demeanour, which may perhaps have imposed upon some of the unwary, and induced them to fancy her distant rather than backward (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. lvi)

Several contemporary writers and critics paid much the same compliment, if one chooses to see it so, to the poetess Rossetti. Critic William Sharp (1855-1905) wrote of her as "one of the saintliest of women", and added that "her life was a song of praise" (SHARP,

1912, p.66). For Arthur Christopher Benson (1862-1925) Rossetti stood as “the great singer of death (BENSON, 1896, p. 268). And it fell to one such contemporary critic, Edmund Gosse (1849-1928) who met more than once *the high-priestess of Pre-Raphaelitism* to give one of the most perceptive accounts of what it was like to have an encounter with the poetess. Once again allow me to quote from Gosse what can perhaps be termed one of the most vivid portrayals of Christina Rossetti within the context of an actual social setting to have reached us in the words of an eyewitness.

When it is added that her manner, from shyness, was of a portentous solemnity, that she had no small talk whatever, and that the common topics of the day appeared to be entirely unknown to her, it will be understood that she was considered highly formidable by the young and the flighty. I have seen her sitting alone, in the midst of a noisy drawing-room, like a pillar of a cloud, a Sibyl whom no one had the audacity to approach (GOSSE, 1903, p. 158).

Sincere, touching, and even poetical in themselves as such accounts of Rossetti’s life may be, that is, what her life looked like in the sight of others, what is missing, most obviously, is an account given by Christina Rossetti herself about what it is she sees as her own path through life. As I remarked above, although there are no diaries left behind, in my research I will argue that Rossetti’s later writings, such as, for example, her letters to a few of her long-time friends, some of her later poems, and, in particular, her volume of devotional prose and personal meditations *Time Flies: a reading diary* (1885) together can offer a significant insight into Rossetti’s views on the kinds of life-choices she made during her time. I will contend that such material makes it possible for us to observe what were the patterns that stood the test of time, the ones that had to undergo one sort of transition or another, and what sum total Rossetti thought she could see emerging at the end as she had to come to grips with the idea of an untimely death consequent upon her diagnosis of cancer at the age of 61 at a time when medical technology could offer patients very little in the way of relief and the prognostics were grim at best.

In acute contrast to the somber tone of the narratives penned by men critics such as the ones from whose works I have quoted above, a woman journalist, Katherine Tynan Hinkson (1861-1931) gave a somewhat differing account of Christina Rossetti’s mood at around the same time those male critics had begun to collect their impressions of Rossetti’s personal situation in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

In September 1893, after having the temerity to ask for an interview for the newspaper she worked for, Tynan received a tersely worded reply by Rossetti that said, “Do come and

see me, only please do not “interview” me. I own I feel this modern fashion highly distasteful, and am tenacious of my obscurity” (HARRISON, 2004, p.340). Once the proper arrangements had been suitably concluded, Tynan Hinkson did visit Christina Rossetti in her home in the dreary neighborhood where the poetess lived. Even more interesting still is Tynan’s description of her first meeting with the saintly woman who had by then acquired not just a literary, but also a public reputation for leading a cloistral existence.

I was a little startled by Christina, who affected when I first saw her such a getup as might have been appropriate for a robust country lady walking through miry lanes. The hard, gray, tailor-made and thick boots did not at all consort with Santa Christina’s spiritual face, with the heavy-lidded eyes, bleached by long dwelling in Torrington Square. Probably, she did it on purpose as a mortification of her own flesh, for it was at the end of the aesthetic movement and all the world was still wearing trailing garments in beautiful, subdued colors. I ventured to tell her afterwards that she had been a shock to me, and she was much amused. “*Having been a very melancholy girl*”, she said, “*I am determined to be a very cheerful old lady.*”<sup>33</sup>

One can easily attest that the contrast could hardly be more telling. Although several reports by eye-witnesses seem to confirm the usual portrayal of Christina Rossetti as uncommunicative, nun-like in her habits, and retired in her disposition, a picture begins to emerge which seems to contradict the long-prevailing view of Rossetti as the sickly, invalid spinster aunt who struck terror into the minds of her young nieces and nephew (William Rossetti’s daughters and son) with her portentous manners and deeply spiritual pronouncements.

Although it may be very easy to yield to the temptation of issuing a posthumous diagnosis of bipolar disorder, given Rossetti’s mood swings, one should be cautious in advancing such wildly speculative points of view. If, on the one hand, it would be within reason to assume that Rossetti’s mental state can be inferred from some of her letters, one must never forget the effect her religious faith had on her daily life. So, for instance, if one chooses to quote from a letter of May 1887 from Rossetti to her friend Amelia Heimann, with whom Rossetti struck a long-running friendship that first began when the two women were in their early teens, the diagnosis of depression may seem inescapable, once it is Rossetti herself who openly concedes that “When I say I am harassed do not fancy I have aught to grumble at. I myself am depressed and far too readily depressible.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Literary People I Have Known*, by Katharine Tynan Hinkson, in *The New York Times*. December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1912.

<sup>34</sup> This admission by Rossetti appears in a post-scriptum to the letter, dated by the envelope, of May 23, 1887, to Amelia Barnard Heimann.



As is sadly common when dealing with her poetry, Rossetti has persistently suffered from the tendency to apply the biographical mode of analysis to everything she has written, and it is never easy to drive away the urge to jump to the same predictable conclusions that point to female depression and sexual starvation as the principal sources of such low levels of self-confidence and apparent absence of a more optimistic outlook on life in general, and on her own life in particular.

It is useful, however, to remind oneself of the possibility of an alternative reading of these same passages, so that even when Rossetti's verse veers in the direction of a more somber terrain in which one is made to breathe in an atmosphere that is characterized by bleakness, there will often be also present a faint echo of a biblical line or another whose distant but persistent shine will come to the rescue of the bewildered traveler by offering a sign of hope and will help to steady one's faith in the appeal to an ultimate reality that lies just beyond the physical or psychological despair that the poem's speaker may by chance be experiencing at that same given moment.

Just such a similar reading could be applied to Rossetti's poem *The Lowest Room* (composed in 1856, when Rossetti was 25), in which the contrasting fate in life experienced by two sisters seems to lead one of them, the unmarried one, to draw a grim lesson from the less than bright prospects that, she believes, lie ahead of her after several more years of continued spinsterhood.

*While I? I sat alone and watched;  
My lot in life, to live alone  
In mine own world of interests,  
Much felt but little shown.*

*Not to be first: how hard to learn  
That lifelong lesson of the past;  
Line graven on line and stroke on stroke;  
But, thank God, learned at last.*

*So now in patience I possess  
My soul year after tedious year,  
Content to take the lowest place,  
The place assigned me here.*

(lines 261-272)

This intensity of bleakness almost invites the pessimistic view and seems to be an apt illustration of everything that has already been said down the years by those critics who tend to see Rossetti as the poetic voice of depression *par excellence*. The apparent advocacy of an outright act of total surrender seems designed to confirm the worst prejudices of some of the feminist critics who view such poetry as the embodiment of female submissiveness. One can

almost hear the stern admonishment: “Either marry whoever is chosen for you and settle down to your routine of domestic duties, or face the prospect of a long and lonely existence deprived of any purpose”. This seems to be a nice way to summarize the situation in which the poem’s speaker finds herself. The choice faced by a woman seems to be that of becoming the personification of the *angel in the house*, or, should the worst come to the worst, she will have to content herself with the dread of anticipated boredom that will thenceforth characterize her pointless existence.

Rossetti’s deep-seated analogical method, however, ensures that behind the apparent hopelessness that looms in the foreground, a faint but positive glimmer of hope stands firmly rooted in the near distance, so that the speaker is shown to us as not being left in utter misery. The analogical method, as the name suggest, consists in finding out the possible analogies between certain given moments in the believer’s life and certain biblical verses or religious teachings derived from ancient patristic texts. As will be seen below, the analogy will often involve the very quotation of a verse from scripture so that the echo, or even the finely intricate texture, of a biblical passage that is illustrated by the means of what at times amounts to complexly constructed allusions will finally lead to a moment of timeless and limitless self-fulfillment. Allow me to illustrate my point. Here are the closing lines of the same poem quoted above:

Yet sometimes, when I feel my strength  
Most weak, and life most burdensome,  
I lift mine eyes up to the hills  
From whence my help shall come:

Yea, sometimes still I lift my heart  
To the Archangelic trumpet-burst,  
When all deep secrets shall be shown,  
And many last be first.

(lines 273-280)

As one of her frequent poetic devices, Rossetti will conflate passages from different books of scripture, often times making use of direct quotations now and again. The last two lines from the first stanza shown above allude to psalm 121 in King James Version [I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help]. The next then stanza continues the allusion and conflates it with other passages that have to do with the day of judgment, as described in the apocalypse, with the angel’s trumpet blast that will wake up the dead to resurrection. Even then, allusion is not finished. The mention of *deep secrets* being shown refers to the passage in the gospel of Luke 8:17 which says that in that day *nothing is secret, that shall not be made manifest; neither any thing hid, that shall not be known and come*

*abroad*. Finally, the reference to the last ones who will be first is easily identifiable with the passage in Matthew which says: *But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first*.

This seems to further illustrate the point made by Rossetti scholar Mary S. Flowers who asserts that Rossetti's "art is iconic rather than psychological"<sup>35</sup>. Thus, the complexity of a Rossetti poem escapes easy definitions and invite a more sensitive and careful approach to the problems posed by the richness of technique that brings to bear on almost every line so many forms of analogy, allusion, and symbolism even if such patterns come clothed in an otherwise apparently simple model of stanzaic design.

If, as the poem's speaker complains, however mildly, when she voices the first part of her conclusion, *my lot in life to live alone* (line 262), the action of complaining leads her to the realization that her life does not have to end in grief, one should also be aware that the complaint is not something that affects just the poem's speaker alone. The link between the act of complaining and a yearning for some instant and meaningful solution to the dilemma was an experience that was well known to many women at around that same time. One such was Florence Nightingale. Well before she found her way out of the trap of female restlessness, Nightingale penned one of the most blistering attacks on the Victorian statutes of female behavior. *Cassandra* reads to me as though it had been written in the depths of a certain kind of despair that is well known to many of Rossetti's speakers in several of her poems. It is so all the way, and right from the very first line, which could itself almost have come from a Rossetti poem with its intensity of anguish: *One often comes to be thus wandering alone in the bitterness of life without*. Further on, however, the mood grows even more intense when the subject emerges of what it was that women could possibly do in order to ameliorate their gruesome plight. Turning to religion, however, at least to Nightingale, did not offer the same kind of confident, if subdued, cheerfulness that it seemed to provide Rossetti's speakers with. In an impactful, celebrated paragraph, Nightingale lets fly at Victorian smugness.

Was Christ called a complainer against the world?  
Christ, if He had been a woman, might have been nothing but a great complainer ...  
The next Christ will perhaps be a female Christ. But do we see one woman who looks like a female Christ? Or even like "the messenger before" her "face", to go before her and prepare the hearts and minds for her?<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*. Penguin Books (2005), p. xl.

<sup>36</sup> CASSANDRA (originally published in 1860 in volume two of Florence Nightingale's *Suggestions for Thought to Searchers after Truth among the Artizans of England*).

Christina Rossetti would certainly have balked at what she might perceive as such an apparent insouciance with regard to the holy name, but she would probably have felt somewhat in sympathy with those who investigated the ultimate cause that gave rise to such soul-searching complaints. If Lynda Palazzo is right in her view, Rossetti was devout, but by no means a passive conformist.

(...) by the end of her life, Rossetti was engaged in the critique of theological practice, was not the passive religious figure so often presented and was particularly concerned with the problems women encountered in their relationship with Christianity. She appeared to be moving towards a position that is similar to that of modern feminist theology in its attempt to identify the ways in which women are able to relate to a fundamentally male religion (PALAZZO, 2002, p. 2).

I will argue, however, that it would be misleading in the extreme to compound what Palazzo calls Rossetti's feminist theology and the ubiquitous politics of identity that plagues literary debate these days. In the following paragraphs I intend to show that Rossetti firmly rejected the Romantic vision, but I also happen to think that there is evidence to show that she rejected a sectarian feminism just as firmly. Allow me to illustrate my point by quoting from the influential document that has become known as *The Combahee Statement*, which was put together by "a collective of Black feminists" [sic]. In it, the activists unequivocally state what they see as their main goal in politics when they write:

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression.<sup>37</sup>

For someone like Rossetti, whose belief system was informed by a Tractarian mode of thinking, and with a strong allusion to the Pauline transcendent concept<sup>38</sup>, such a view as the one above would have been anathema. I will attempt to further illustrate my point in this same chapter when I mention Rossetti's views on her religious practices.

I will now proceed to the third mode of life-writing that Rossetti made use of, namely, her personal reflections and meditations such as they appear in her book of devotional prose

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<sup>37</sup> The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977). Retrieved from: <<http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>> Accessed on 27 Aug. 2017.

<sup>38</sup> As Paul writes, "For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ." (1 Cor. 2:16)

*Time Flies: a reading diary*. This book was part of a series of devotional volumes Rossetti sent for publication to the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, popularly known by its acronym as the SPCK. In all six books were published. *Annus Domini* (1874), *Seek & Find* (1879), *Called To Be Saints* (1881), *Letter & Spirit: notes on the Commandments* (1883), *Time Flies: a reading diary* (1885), and *The Face Of The Deep: a study of the Apocalypse* (1892) together these volumes represent a gigantic effort on Rossetti's part to establish some sort of theological statement that would stand as a benchmark of a clearly female theological enterprise. Although Rossetti was careful not to be seen as usurping the dominating male line, she nevertheless does not recoil from what she must have felt as her religious duty to open up to women a new way of looking at a religious tradition that had hitherto been the exclusive province of the male power to instruct the faithful. She is careful, but not afraid.

In the entry for January 3, Rossetti gives a beautifully illustrative example of her objective in putting together a series of personal notes and meditations. The passage I have chosen to quote is rather long, but the goal I here have in mind to pursue will justify it, I hope. As is typical of her, she opens her meditation with a certain demurely attitude. Then she moves to conclude in her familiar fashion of invoking the help of a higher guidance and expressing a hope of being useful to others.

Scrupulous persons, a much tried and much trying sort of people, looked up to and looked down upon by their fellows. (...)  
 Their aim is to be accurate; a worthy aim: but do they achieve accuracy? Such handling as blunts the pointed and flattens the lofty cannot boast of accuracy.  
 These remarks have, I avow, a direct bearing on my own case. I am desirous to quote here or there an illustrative story or a personal reminiscence: am I competent so to do? I may have misunderstood, I may never have understood, I may have forgotten, in some instances I cannot recall every detail.  
 Yet my story would point and clench my little essay.  
 So here once for all I beg my readers to accept such illustrations as no more than I give them for; true or false, accurate or inaccurate, as the case may be. One perhaps embellished if I have the wit to embellish it, another marred by my clumsiness.  
 All alike written down in the humble wish to help others by such means as I myself have found helpful (ROSSETTI, 1885, p. 4)

These, therefore, have been the prime sources of the material I set out to work with in my attempt to establish the visible connections that bind together Rossetti's different but, in my view, powerfully cogent arguments in favor of a distinctively feminine approach to subjects hitherto closed to most women's inquiries. I have here attempted to portray Rossetti as neither martyr nor zealot, neither paragon nor otherworldly, but as a perceptive, sensitive human being who engaged with life in hopes of seeing through the mists of mere conformity

towards the higher uplands of a more humane kind of inner life, as well as a more humanely informed society. Rossetti's attitude towards the rising social movement that sought to give women the right to vote will be also be discussed at some length further on.

Before I conclude this chapter, I ask to be allowed to quote from Rossetti's letter to her dear friend of more than 25 years, Caroline Maria Gemmer. In it, a 60-year-old Christina Rossetti reflects upon her life story, and, contrary to traditional views of her, does not at all end up on a depressive note.

“Surviving” is the lot of old age, and old friends are irreplaceable. No, I don't exactly take the tantalizing and delusion view of past years. They all have led me up to what I am, and the whole series is leading me to my final self. I trust all I have vainly wished for here will be more than made up for to me in the hereafter if, -an all momentous if! – I endure to the end. After all, life is short, and I should not immerse myself too deeply in its interests. Please note that I say “I should not”- I dare not pretend “I do not”. (HARRISON, 2004, pp. 227-228).

Yet another main aspect that ought to be considered when reading Christina Rossetti's poetry and prose is what has been perceived as her utter rejection of Romantic principles in favor of a distinctly religious bend that completely informed her views of the world. Such a religious attitude as Rossetti's often tends to be trivialized, by both early and more modern commentators. For instance, Virginia Woolf famously, or rather, awkwardly, thought she could understand the entire extent of the importance religion had in Rossetti's life by having it all summarized in a few brief sentences on a postcard. In a letter to her dear friend Violet Dickinson, of December 1906, Woolf wrote thus: “I want to write about Christina Rossetti; so if you can find out what she thought of Christianity and what effect religion had upon her poetry, and will write it on a post card, you will do more for me than if you looked out a train, and bought a new hat” (NICOLSON, 1977, p. 258).

In the same vein, late-20<sup>th</sup>-century feminist criticism of Christina Rossetti tends to be dismissive of the importance of religion, viewing it instead as it does as a weapon the patriarchy uses in order to tame women into a submissive position, hence Gilbert and Gubar's ferocious anathematization of what they saw as Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation, as I tried to show with the quotation from a seminal study of 19<sup>th</sup> century women's writing (see page 4). Rossetti's quiet acceptance of an apparently intolerable life-style steeped in religiosity is evoked as the obstacle that stopped her from embarking on a more outward-looking poetic performance, thus bringing to an untimely end what could so obviously have been a rich succession of poems as powerfully interesting as *Goblin Market*, Rossetti's most widely quoted work in feminist studies. D.M.R. Bentley aptly summarizes the varying, and sometimes even contradictory approaches that have been taken over the decades:

*Goblin Market* is an enchanting and problematical poem. Its fantastic elements, its religious resonances, and its sexual undertones have led to a wide variety of critical interpretations, as has the relationship between the poem's two sisters, who have been depicted variously as Freudian children, figural types, practicing lesbians and, most recently, as "sisters" in the feminist sense (KENT, 1987, p. 57).

In his introductory biography of his sister, William Michael Rossetti makes very clear what he saw as Rossetti's chief concerns in life:

Her life had two motive powers, — religion and affection: hardly a third. And even the religion was far more a thing of the heart than of the mind. (...) Faith with her was faith pure and absolute: an entire acceptance of a thing revealed — not a quest for any confirmation or demonstrative proof. (...) To learn that something in the Christian faith was credible because it was reasonable or because it rested upon some historic evidence of fact, went against her. Her attitude of mind was: 'I believe because I am told to believe, and I know that the authority which tells me to believe is the only real authority extant, God.' To press her — 'How do you know that it is God?' would have been no use; the ultimate response could only have come to this — 'My faith is faith; it is not evolved out of argumentation, nor does it seek the aid of that.' (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. liv)

In addition, Christina Rossetti is the author of several poems that describe the inner struggles experienced by religious women speakers between the outward pull of the sensory perceptions, on the one hand, and the exactions of the spirit, on the other. Some of these poems are in fact many times built upon the premise that it is a nun who is giving vent to her interior turmoil, which is made visible through the use of some pretty graphic descriptions of female desire. One such poem is *Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde, 1674*, a poem based on the actual life of a French noblewoman, the Duchesse de la Vallière, a mistress of King Louis XIV who retired to a Carmelite convent in 1674 and took the veil in 1675 under the name of Sister Louise.

Soeur Louise De La Misericorde, 1674

I have desired, and I have been desired;  
 But now the days are over of desire,  
 Now dust and dying embers mock my fire;  
 Where is the hire for which my life was hired?  
 Oh vanity of vanities, desire! 5

Longing and love, pangs of a perished pleasure,  
 Longing and love, a disenkindled fire,  
 And memory a bottomless gulf of mire,  
 And love a fount of tears outrunning measure;  
 Oh vanity of vanities, desire! 10

Now from my heart, love's deathbed, trickles, trickles,  
 Drop by drop slowly, drop by drop of fire,  
 The dross of life, of love, of spent desire;  
 Alas, my rose of life gone all to prickles,—  
 Oh vanity of vanities, desire! 15

Oh vanity of vanities, desire;  
 Stunting my hope which might have strained up higher,  
 Turning my garden plot to barren mire;  
 Oh death-struck love, oh disenkindled fire,  
 Oh vanity of vanities, desire!                    20

Though the overall impression may be one of despair, and even depression, it would be well to remember the theological basis upon which Rossetti was always careful to build up her poetic vision. In the poem, the speaker is a newly admitted novice, barely strong enough yet to cope with the internal conflicts that such a drastic shift has brought into her life. Sister Louise apparently sees no good in picking up a struggle, she sees herself as too weak, and longs for rest somewhere away from this world. She realizes the world and the world's pursuits have left her empty-handed: *Where is the hire for which my life was hired?* (line 4). Her heart is described as a deathbed (line 11) filled with the dross of life, of love, of spent desire (line 13). Her conclusion makes up the poem's beating refrain which says that all desire is vanity. Once again, Rossetti conflates biblical passages into a unified poetic vision that may look bleak at first sight, but the underlying sense of faith in an afterworld is there to offer some foretaste of hope. The poem's thrust seems to converge around the verse from Ecclesiastes 1:2, with its grim admonition: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity." At the same time, however, as the speaker complains about the vain deception of desire, that very word itself is at the heart of another passage in the book of Proverbs that offers a radically different perspective: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but *when* the desire cometh, *it is* a tree of life." (Proverbs, 13:12). Contrast this poem's speaker's attitude with that of the speaker in *An "immurata" Sister* (see page 44). Apparently, Rossetti is merely asserting the continuing predominance of orthodox religious dogmas and practices through which women's lives become associated with the vanity of sensorial life, its basic sinfulness, and the consequent injunction that women will be better off if they embrace renunciation and endurance. I would suggest, however, that, if, on the one hand, some of Rossetti's poems, such as *Soeur Louise* and *An "immurata" Sister*, for example, may be read as couched in the language of both religious orthodoxy, and, to a certain extent, also of typically *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic decadence that was much in vogue at the time, her poetry is also a visible emblem of her theological inclination in favor of the teachings of the Tractarian Movement, as I have had the opportunity to mention in the Introduction. There is, however, one fundamentally distinctive contrast between Rossetti's view and that of the priests and theologians whose teachings informed most of Christina Rossetti's take on Christian



experience: for the more traditionally-minded male apologists, the main focus tended to concentrate on the rigid precepts of the doctrine; Rossetti turns her focus firmly on those aspects that relate to the self. It is interesting, then, to remark how Rossetti's nun poems may be seen to stand as illustrations of her theological attitude. In fact, the focus on speakers who happen to be nuns may have something to do with what William Michael Rossetti observed as a personal characteristic of his sister Christina, as he writes in his biographical memoir of 1904: "I have often thought that Christina's proper place was in the Roman Catholic Church, yet I never traced any inclination in her to join it, nor did she ever manifest any wish to enter upon the conventual life — I think she held herself unworthy of attempting it" (ROSSETTI, 1904, lv).

The focus on the self, not on precept alone, constitutes Rossetti's distinctive approach to religion in an age totally dominated by men theologians whose monopoly on interpretation and analysis excluded all possibility of a female viewpoint on matters related to the spiritual life. This kind of discrepancy is a mark that sets Rossetti apart, as Lynda Palazzo points out: "the tension between [Rossetti's] need for a meaningful response [to Scripture] and her fear of overstepping the limit" (PALAZZO, 2002, p. 112). Taking her cue from the Old Testament passage about the reluctant prophet of Nineveh with a specific focus on the episode of Jonah and the gourd that grew up overnight and died in the morning (see Jonah 4: 5-11), in one of her books of devotional prose, Christina Rossetti writes thus:

The gourd born in a night perished in a night, and became as though it had never been. Even so, and yet, not so, we: born and cut off in time, we must nonetheless fulfill our eternity; once loaded with the responsibility of life we can never shift it off, never repudiate our identity, never force our way back into the nothingness whence we emerged. This present temporal stage of our existence is a stage of possibilities, alternatives, hope, fear: that word, "never", belongs to our next eternal stage, and ringing the knell of fear rings impartially the knell of hope likewise (ROSSETTI, 1879, p. 102).

One way to discuss what Palazzo terms Rossetti's fear of overstepping the limit is to try and look into a theological attitude that in more ways than one characterized the Oxford, or Tractarian, movement, namely, the doctrine of reserve, and, following on from that, a concomitant appeal to a Christian mysticism.

Isaac Williams (1802-1865) was one of the prominent figures of the Tractarian movement, and he is the author of a study on the topic of religious reserve that in many respects came to be identified as the chief document on the issue. He defines it thus:

The object of the present inquiry is to ascertain, whether there is not in GOD'S dealings with mankind, a very remarkable holding back of sacred and important truths, as if the knowledge of them were injurious to persons unworthy of them. And if this be the case, it will lead to some important practical reflections.

It is not intended to speak of it as a mark of judicial punishment, nor as denoting the anger of the Almighty, nor as connected in any way with intellectual acuteness: but, if I may so speak with reverence, I would say, that there appears in GOD'S manifestations of Himself to mankind, in conjunction with an exceeding desire to communicate that knowledge, a tendency to conceal, and throw a veil over it, as if it were injurious to us, unless we were of a certain disposition to receive it.<sup>39</sup>

Christina Rossetti's theological attitude was informed by the Tractarian movement from very early on (see Introduction), and biographical sources tell us that Rossetti was familiar with Williams's work. Rossetti's first biographer in fact informs us that "she had a great regard for Isaac Williams who was in some sense a poet of the Tractarian movement" (BELL, 2005, p. 184). Another indication that Rossetti had good knowledge of Williams's theological views comes from the prefatory note in her book of devotional prose, *Seek & Find* (quoted above), in which Rossetti acknowledges that she consulted a study by Williams. Therefore, the connection between poetry and theology can once again be seen as a characteristic of Rossetti's take on life, and, more specifically, the view that reserve and poetic language are closely connected, for the Christian poet, but not exclusively, as it could be the mark of a truly great poetic attitude, as Williams, "the poet of the Tractarian movement" observes when he writes:

(...) there is another circumstance, which would tend to produce the same effect, viz. that reserve, or retiring delicacy, which exists naturally in a good man, unless injured by external motives, and which is of course the teaching of GOD through him. Something of this kind always accompanies all strong and deep feeling, so much so that indications of it have been considered the characteristic of genuine poetry, as distinguishing it from that which is only fictitious of poetic feeling.<sup>40</sup>

Christina Rossetti herself came forward with a definition of this concept of religious reserve in her book of devotional prose and personal meditations, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* (1885). In the entry for February 28, she illustrates the doctrine of reserve with the help of analogy and allusion. Her language is both poetic and reverent, as always.

The difference between heaven and human attempts at describing heaven may, I think, be illustrated by the difference between pure color and pigments or dyes. Such

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<sup>39</sup> *Tracts For The Times* #80. *On Reserve In Communicating Religious Doctrine* (1840).

<sup>40</sup> *Idem*.

color as is cast by a prism is absolutely pure, intangible, incapable (it would appear) of analysis. It is not so much as a film: it is, so to say, a mode, a condition. Far otherwise is it with dyes and pigments. These exhibit color, while their substance is by no means color, but is merely that field upon which light renders visible one or other of its component tints. Animal, vegetable, or mineral, the substance may be; oily, gummy, watery, simple compound; however dense or however translucent, equally an appreciable body. Now just as prismatic hues take no hold of aught on which they fall, but like the pure light which is their parent are shifting, evanescent, intangible; while dyes seize on what they come in contact with and affect it permanently: so any literal revelation of heaven would appear to be over-spiritual for us; we need something grosser, something more familiar and more within the range of our experience (ROSSETTI, 1885, p. 41-42).

This connection between genuine poetry and genuine feeling is, in my view, of the utmost importance for an understanding of Rossetti's poetry. Her religious symbolism is not merely of an aesthetic nature, but, most of all, ethical. Keeping in mind the severely limited human capacity to reach such heights as religion describes, Rossetti's speakers ask for *eyes to see*, and *ears to hear*.

Lord, grant us eyes to see and ears to hear,  
 And souls to love and minds to understand,  
 And steadfast faces toward the Holy Land,  
 And confidence of hope, and filial fear,  
 And citizenship where Thy saints appear  
 Before Thee heart in heart and hand in hand,  
 And Alleluias where their chanting band  
 As waters and as thunders fill the sphere.  
 Lord, grant us what Thou wilt, and what Thou wilt  
 Deny, and fold us in Thy peaceful fold:  
 Not as the world gives, give to us Thine own:  
 Inbuild us where Jerusalem is built  
 With walls of jasper and with streets of gold,  
 And Thou Thyself, Lord Christ, for Corner Stone.

As I pointed out earlier, the doctrine of reserve comes laced with a strong dose of mysticism. Such a view is also one of the characteristics of the religious movement with which Christina Rossetti identified herself. On the subject of mysticism, her spiritual guide was John Keble (1792-1866), a prominent theologian, poet, and professor of poetry at Oxford. As a matter of fact, Keble's volume of verse *The Christian Year* (1827) had no fewer than 95 consecutive editions in Keble's lifetime, and became "the most popular volume of verse in the nineteenth century".<sup>41</sup> And, as one commentator suggested, even before Keble's volume came out, a shift had been taking place in the popular taste, and devotional verse was vastly more popular than secular poetry. Contrary to what one might think today, Shelley, Byron, or Keats

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<sup>41</sup> This is just what Michael Wheeler points out in his *Heaven, Hell and the Victorians*. Cambridge University Press (1994), p. 60.

were not at all among the most cherished poets at that time. Commenting on the increasing popularity of religious verse, a reviewer observed:

The increasing demand for publications of this description would seem to indicate one of two things; that either the taste for poetry is spreading among religious readers, or a relish for sacred themes among the lovers of poetry. Either Poetry is growing more religious, or Religion more poetical.<sup>42</sup>

Keble also contributed to the series of *Tracts For The Times*, when he wrote Tract #89. In it he is quite clear about what he sees as the contaminating influence that dominates the age. Allow me to quote from Keble's work at some length, please.

In the next place, it touches the very string, which most certainly moves contemptuous thought, in those who have imbibed the peculiar spirit of our time.

Mysticism, implies a sort of confusion between physical and moral, visible and spiritual agency, most abhorrent to the minds of those, who pique themselves on having thoroughly clear ideas, and on their power of distinctly analyzing effects into their proper causes, whether in matter or in mind.

Again, Mysticism conveys the notion of something essentially and altogether remote from common sense and practical utility: but common sense and practical utility are the very idols of this age.

Further, that which is stigmatized as Mysticism, is almost always something which at once makes itself discerned by internal evidence. The man of the world, the practical man, the inductive experimental philosopher, commonly persuades himself that he can "perceive" by instinct, when a train of thought, or mode of speaking, is mere religious dreaming, indistinct fanciful theory; and he rejects it accordingly and is saved all trouble of research. Here, again, is no small temptation, in the eyes of a world full of hurry and business, to acquiesce over lightly in any censure of that kind.

By now I hope I have sufficiently established the link between Rossetti's poetry and a critical view of her contemporary society as something more than just a retrograde and conservative vision. Just as in Rossetti's age religion was considered too trite to merit serious attention, so today, too, a critical point of view that is perceived as emerging from religious tenets gets dismissed out of hand without further thought, a view that was summarized with customary bluntness by Christopher Hitchens when he stated that "religion poisons everything" (HITCHENS, 2007). At the time Rossetti was writing her poetry, however, men such as Walter Pater (1839-1894), John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), and John Ruskin (1819-1900) were more vocal in their criticism of what they saw as a nasty and vulgar social order, intoxicated with commerce and material advantage, and scarred by grossness. Ruskin was the one who summed up the general state of malaise when he wrote thus:

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<sup>42</sup> Anonymous review in the *Eclectic Review*, October 1825.

The work to which England is now devoting herself withdraws her eyes from beauty, as her heart from rest; nor do I conceive any revival of great art to be possible among us while the nation continues in its present temper. As long as it can bear to see misery and squalor in its streets, it can neither invent nor accept human beauty in its pictures; and so long as in passion of rivalry, or thirst of gain, it crushes the roots of happiness, and forsakes the ways of peace, the great souls whom it may chance to produce will all pass away from it helpless, in error, in wrath, or in silence. Amiable visionaries may retire into the delight of devotional abstraction, strong men of the world may yet hope to do service by their rebuke or their satire; but for the clear sight of Love there will be no horizon, for its quiet words no answer; nor any place for the art which alone is faithfully Religious, because it is Lovely and True (RUSKIN, 1900, p. 161).

It is not difficult to imagine that Rossetti would subscribe to such a verdict as Ruskin's. In her poetry, Rossetti sees the corrupting influence posed by *the three enemies*, the world, the flesh, and the devil, as prescribed in the philosophy of the early Christian movement. One of her early sonnets (1854, when Rossetti was 23) illustrates her position very clearly.

By day she woos me, soft, exceeding fair;  
 But all night as the moon so changeth she;  
 Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy  
 And subtle serpents gliding in her hair.  
 By day she woos me to the outer air,  
 Ripe fruits, sweet flowers, and full satiety:  
 But thro' the night, a beast she grins at me,  
 A very monster void of love and prayer,  
 By day she stands a lie: by night she stands  
 In all the naked horror of the truth  
 With pushing horns and clawed and clutching hands.  
 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?

This seems to me to confirm William Rossetti's observation that his sister often expressed a rejection of the emerging social order she saw around her.

This is one of Christina Rossetti's most energetic utterances and a highly characteristic one. She had in fact a great horror of 'the world', in the sense which that term bears in the New Testament; its power to blur all great traits of character, to deaden all lofty aims, to clog all the impulses of the soul aspiring to unseen Truth. I recollect her once saying to me, when my children were past their very earliest years, 'I hope they are not *worldly*' (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. 471).

A poetic attitude such as Rossetti's stands in sharp contrast to that of the Romantic poets whose aesthetics included an almost unbounded trust and ultimate reliance on a vision of nature as informed by a benevolent spirit, conceptualized under the name of immanence. This view identified nature as the source of goodness and final repository of human happiness. Chief among those who embraced such a point of view is William Wordsworth (1770-1850). In his study of Romanticism, Owen Barfield made a very acute observation

when he wrote: “It was the dejected author of the *Ancient Mariner* who grasped the theory, but it was Wordsworth who actually wrote the nature-poetry” (BARFIELD, 1988, p. 130). In illustration of this Romantic principle, here are some lines from Wordsworth’s famous *Tintern Abbey*:

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man --  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods  
And mountains, and of all that we behold  
From this green earth, of all the mighty world  
Of eye and ear (both what they half-create  
And what perceive) -- well-pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.

The view of nature as the source of one’s moral being is totally unacceptable from a Christian perspective, hence Rossetti’s rejection of Romanticism, as documented by her brother William, when he says that “among modern English poets”, Christina Rossetti would choose “certainly not Wordsworth, whom she read scantily. As to Shelley, she can have known little beyond his lyrics; most of the long poems, as being impious, remained unscanned.” (ROSSETTI, 1904, p. lxx).

For Rossetti, then, the very nature of poetic performance is located within a specific place where the need for expression, or self-expression, on the one hand, and the gift of linguistic ability, on the other, must never be confused with an attempt to idolize the self, or as a way to reach out to the divine in nature by circumventing scriptural revelation, which was her chief objection to the Romantic poets, namely, their heretic posture and impious attitude, as illustrated above by the extract I quote from Wordsworth’s poem.

In contrast, for Keble, poetry worked as release from mental anguish, not an undisciplined effusion, but a delicately-cloaked attempt at self-expression. Just as important, though, is the need for such an attempt to keep itself within the boundaries of decent reserve.

Thus, it comes about that those to whom, most of all, utterance would be the relief from a burden are altogether restrained by a sort of shame, far from discreditable, nay rather, noble and natural, from any such relief. What must they do? They are ashamed and reluctant to speak out, yet, if silent, they can scarcely keep their mental balance; some are said even to have become insane (KEBLE, 1912, p. 20).

This view of poetry as a route of escape from incipient mental anguish dates from several decades before Freud even began to publish his views on what drives the human psyche. “I say therefore that that Almighty Power, which governs and harmonizes, not heaven and earth only, but also the hearts of men, has furnished amplest comfort for sufferers of either kind in the gift of Poetry” (KEBBLE, 1912, p. 21).

Again, Rossetti’s views, as shown above, are found to be in conformity with Keble’s theory, namely, a definition of poetry that includes elements of Christian mysticism in harmony with the Tractarian doctrine of reserve.

Let us therefore deem the glorious art of Poetry a kind of medicine divinely bestowed upon man: which gives healing relief to secret mental emotion, yet without detriment to modest reserve and, while giving scope to enthusiasm, yet rules it with order and due control (KEBLE, 1912, p. 22).

The temptation to dismiss Rossetti’s devotional poems as examples of some kind of boring religious piety risks neglecting the one aspect of her life that informed all of her ethics and played the most significant role in shaping her poetic performance.

## CONCLUSION

When all the over-work of life  
Is finished once  
*Christina Rossetti*

In his *Apology For Smectymnuus* (1642) John Milton makes the claim that the poet's life should itself be a good poem.<sup>43</sup> Whatever the verdict of scholarship may be, it seems safe to affirm that Christina Rossetti's life stands as an illustration of Milton's notion. As Dolores Rosenblum observes in her book about Rossetti's life and work, hers was indeed an exemplary life.

On her terms and on ours, as readers of her poems, it was an exemplary life. Her sense of teaching a lesson, rather, of being a lesson, generates poems in which primary emotions – longing, disappointment, hope – are, as in all good poetry, both distanced and intensified (ROSENBLUM, 1986, p. 62).

Rossetti's uneventful and lonely life, and her painful and even lonelier death, combine to give the general impression of a life wasted between the hard discipline of callous religious practices and the morbid outlook on human life that inevitably resulted therefrom.

Actually, Rossetti's life, and particularly her love life, was not all that boring if biographical records prove anything. She had at least three proposals of marriage. Her first suitor was the painter James Collinson, who used to hang around with the original founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Christina Rossetti went as far as actually becoming engaged to Collinson, but his wavering attitude as regards religion – he was a Catholic, then he shifted to Anglicanism and then back again to Catholicism – resulted in Christina breaking off the engagement for good. Collinson then gave up painting for some time, and tried to join a Jesuit college, unsuccessfully as it turned out. Years later, he took up painting again and died neglected by both the critics and the general public in 1881.

There is also evidence to suggest, though no hard proof, that the marine painter John Brett may have proposed to Rossetti around 1857. It is widely assumed that her poem "*No, thank you John*" may have been written as a result of that experience.

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<sup>43</sup> "And long it was not after, when I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem; that is, a composition and pattern of the best and honourablest things." *The Prose Works of John Milton*, edited by Robert Fletcher. London: William Ball (1838), page 81.



Let us strike hands as hearty friends;  
 No more, no less: and friendship's good:  
 Only don't keep in view ulterior ends,  
 And points not understood

In open treaty. Rise above  
 Quibbles and shuffling off and on:  
 Here's friendship for you if you like; but love,  
 No, thank you, John.

(No, thank you, John, lines 25-32, composed 27 March 1860)

Then there was Charles Bagot Cayley, the reclusive Dante scholar, who first met Christina Rossetti while he was a pupil of her father's back in the days when the Rossetti family's struggles with poverty were at their worst. Years later, the acquaintance was renewed and this time around things looked as if Christina's hopes rested on a firmer footing than in the days of her engagement to Collinson. However, Mr. Cayley, as it soon turned out, was too much of a free-thinker and, though not an avowed atheist, he had at best a very unorthodox approach to the religious matters which to Rossetti were the very mainspring of her life. Legend has it that Cayley once translated the Gospels into the Iroquois language (see Virginia Woolf's essay *I am Christina Rossetti*). So, though marriage became impossible, Cayley and Rossetti remained friends for the rest of their lives. William Michael Rossetti in his *Reminiscences* remarks: "It may truly be said that, although she would not be his, no woman ever loved a man more deeply or more constantly" (ROSSETTI, 1906, p. 315). And he added: "Christina Rossetti has passed away; personally known to few, understood by still fewer, silent to almost all" (ROSSETTI, idem).

After the prospects of marriage were dashed, though, Christina and Cayley still saw each other frequently and they would even exchange little presents from time to time. This was how Rossetti came into possession of a specimen of a sea-mouse preserved in spirits, which little present gave rise to her poem "*My Mouse*", written on New Year's Day 1877, but published only after her death.

#### MY MOUSE

A Venus seems my Mouse  
 Come safe ashore from foaming seas.  
 Which in a small way and at ease  
 Keeps house.

An Iris seems my Mouse,  
 Bright bow of that exhausted shower  
 Which made a world of sweet herbs flower  
 And boughs.

A darling Mouse it is:  
 Part hope not likely to take wing,  
 Part memory, part anything  
 You please.

Venus-cum-Iris Mouse,  
 From shifting tides set safe apart,  
 In no mere bottle, in my heart  
 Keep house.

According to her brother William, “the sea-mouse was with her to the end”.

Although Cayley did manage to achieve some reputation as a Dante scholar (he translated the *Commedia* and Petrarch), he never enjoyed the kind of success needed in order for him to earn much of a livelihood from his literary efforts. By all accounts, he led a hand-to-mouth existence amid great poverty and died on December 5, 1883, Christina Rossetti’s fifty-third birthday. William Rossetti wrote about the tragedy as follows: “I shall not easily forget the look of her face, and the strain of self-command in her voice; she did not break down.” (ROSSETTI, 1906, p. 314).

A few months earlier, Rossetti had agreed to become Cayley’s executor. At his death, Cayley left to her his best writing-desk along with all of her letters to him which Rossetti quickly destroyed.

William Michael Rossetti suggests, as do many critics and scholars, that Rossetti’s *Monna Innominata* sonnet sequence is in fact a veiled description of Rossetti and Cayley’s relationship. “It is indisputable that the real veritable speaker in these sonnets is Christina herself, giving expression to her love for Charles Cayley” (ROSSETTI, 1908, p. 97). Actually, Cayley once referred to Rossetti as *dolce monna* (sweet lady) in a letter to her dated November 6, 1881. Below, sonnet 5 from Rossetti’s sonnet sequence.

O my heart's heart, and you who are to me  
 More than myself myself, God be with you,  
 Keep you in strong obedience leal and true  
 To Him whose noble service setteth free,  
 Give you all good we see or can foresee,  
 Make your joys many and your sorrows few,  
 Bless you in what you bear and what you do,  
 Yea, perfect you as He would have you be.  
 So much for you; but what for me, dear friend?  
 To love you without stint and all I can  
 Today, tomorrow, world without an end;  
 To love you much and yet to love you more,  
 As Jordan at his flood sweeps either shore;  
 Since woman is the helpmeet made for man.

The quick foray into biography I have written above is just part of an effort to avoid the sadly frequent commonplace which consists in reading all of Rossetti's poetry as strictly auto-biographical. Over the very many decades since her death, attempts to go through her verse in search of tropes for sexual starvation and depression have at times come to results that stretch the boundaries of commonsense to its outermost limits.<sup>44</sup> Obviously, no author can be completely dissociated from his or her work, but the temptation to see the writer's personal life in every line of his or her writing should be resisted so far as it is compatible with the evidence available together with one's best knowledge of literary theory. In the case of Rossetti this task presents formidable difficulties in that many standard interpretations of her poems have already entered the realm of culture and as such they have proved to be particularly impervious to many modern advances in Rossetti scholarship. One should perhaps keep in one's mind the brief observation made by Marcel Proust in his piece *Against Sainte-Beuve* in which he remarks that "A book is the product of a different self from the one we manifest in our habits, in society, in our vices. If we mean to try to understand this self it is only in our inmost depths, by endeavouring to reconstruct it there, that the quest can be achieved" (PROUST, 1988, p. 12).

Finally, two of the most frequent themes in Rossetti's poetry, the broken heart and the burning wish to leave the world behind in order to unite oneself to God both present the reader with specific challenges which can be particularly tricky to answer. Is Rossetti in fact describing earthly love as something futile and unworthy? Does she preach a form of absolute renunciation from the world in order for one to taste the wonders of the heavenly life in the Christian paradise? These questions call for very careful answers.

Although Rossetti was described as a woman who led a nun-like existence<sup>45</sup>, the details about her personal life written above seem to me to be sufficient evidence that she did not in fact lead such an ascetic life as some of her early biographers would have us believe. On the other hand, hers was a life whose daily rhythm was essentially a function of her religious beliefs. She made her faith paramount in her life and by all accounts the price exacted was indeed a heavy one. And these are the two aspects of broken-heartedness that surface in her poems. On one side, the yearning for a fully-fledged love relationship but, at the same time, a sense of impending doom; the ever-present realisation that as much as one can

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<sup>44</sup> Such as, for example, the attempts to read *Goblin Market* as a homoerotic fantasy, for example. As for auto-biographical readings which emphasize the most negative aspects of Rossetti's poetry, I have earlier mentioned the cases of authors such as Mahood and Gilbert & Gubar.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Ford Madox Ford, in *Impressions & Memories: A Study In Atmospheres*. London & New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers (1911), p. 75.

love one's partner, in the end, time will inevitably wreak havoc with one's good intentions. In this sense, as her cousin Ford Madox (Ford) Hueffer remarked, Christina Rossetti was in fact a modern figure in Victorian literature.

It always appears to me that, whereas D.G. Rossetti belongs to a comparatively early period of nineteenth-century literature, Christina Rossetti was a much more modern figure. (...) And there we have one more symptom of the gulf that separated Christina Rossetti, as a Modernist, from Ruskin and the old Pre-Raphaelite circle (HUEFFER, 1911, p. 61).

Rossetti's asceticism is not the result of a weak heart that shies away from physical contact, but the outcome of a lifelong conflict within herself. In her poems, she seems to warn us, much as the preacher does in one of her favourite books in the Bible, the Ecclesiastes, that *all is vanity and vexation of spirit*. As much as we try, all human endeavour is ultimately subject to a kind of entropy. According to the Oxford Dictionary, entropy is defined as "a thermodynamic quantity representing the unavailability of a system's thermal energy for conversion into mechanical work, often interpreted as the degree of disorder or randomness in the system"<sup>46</sup> On this assumption, it is not that Christina Rossetti sees human love as hopeless. Rather, she seems to argue that it is not enough; earthly love is doomed, not because it is physical, but because it has a glaringly obvious vulnerability to time<sup>47</sup> which tends to render it unworkable, a sort of worm within the fruit, eating away at the very heart of human feelings, the canker she mentions in one of her most celebrated poems.<sup>48</sup> As the speaker says in her poem *Three Nuns* (1849):

I will not look upon a rose  
Though it is fair to see :  
The flowers planted in Paradise  
Are budding now for me.

Rossetti does not advocate that one should lead a life full of sorrow now so that one may win a reward at the end, but she sees some amount of sorrow as an ever-present characteristic of human life, and when it comes to love, the choice is really bleak: if love is true, then sorrow is all but inescapable. As Proust observes:

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<sup>46</sup> Oxford Dictionary of English. OUP, 2009. Entropy is also defined as *lack of order or predictability; gradual decline into disorder*. The first mention of a link between entropy and the poetry of Rossetti appears in Dolores Rosenblum's essay, "Christina Rossetti & Poetic Sequence", in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, p. 150.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, the essay by Betty S. Flowers in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, p. 169.

<sup>48</sup> "A canker is in thy bud, thy leaf must decay" (*Passing Away*, line 13), part 3 of her *Old & New Year Ditties*, composed in December, 1860.

We were resigned to suffering, thinking that we loved outside ourselves, and we perceive that our love is a function of our sorrow, that our love perhaps is our sorrow, and that its object is only to a very small extent the girl with the raven hair. But, when all is said, it is such people more than any others who inspire love (PROUST, 1999, p. 98)

At least one other poet who seems to have felt some sort of anguish that could, at a stretch, be described as similar to Rossetti's was Charles Baudelaire. Admittedly, the contrast between these two poets is enormous, but one might perhaps envisage a few instances in which the comparison would not look so absurd as it may sound at first. The agony experienced by the sinner at the prospect of having to come face to face with the Creator to present his full account can be a daunting one indeed, as Baudelaire makes clear in his "*Voyage à Cythère*"

— *Ah! Seigneur! donnez-moi la force et le courage  
De contempler mon coeur et mon corps sans dégoût!*<sup>49</sup>

The remedy, then, is not to forsake love as pointless, but to see it as a sort of prelude to the true love that the soul will experience in the ultimate world that is yet to come if, and there lies the rub, if the lover keeps the faith alive and does not allow it to fade by succumbing to the temptation to indulge in a quick taste of the sensory pleasures of the world around us.

As Dorothy Margaret Stuart observed in her book *Christina Rossetti*, there are no specifically identifiable phases or styles in Rossetti's poetic production. As time went by, Rossetti became more and more distant from passing influences and gave her public (a small but faithful number of enthusiasts) poems that can only be described as unquestionably her own.

It cannot be said that the character of her work changes as it draws near the end of her poetical span. She had no earlier and later style, though for a time she had two distinct manners, nor can her poems be divided into well marked periods as the poems of Tennyson and Swinburne and Browning can. Rather does her art become more intensely her own as the extraneous influences which for a time touched it with borrowed tints are withdrawn one by one (STUART, 1930, p. 158).

The broken heart<sup>50</sup> then, so hard to bear within oneself, so heavy to carry through one's life, becomes bearable because the broken-hearted woman (or man, too, why not?) can ultimately rely on Christ's inexhaustible funds of mercy to accept the heart that was offered when whole to a creature first, and then, only after it was broken and soiled, was it handed

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<sup>49</sup> O! Lord! give me the strength and the courage  
To contemplate my body and soul without loathing! — translated from the French by William Aggeler, *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954)

<sup>50</sup> As Wilde points out in *De Profundis*, "hearts are made to be broken".

over to God as a last attempt at happiness and peace for one's soul. For the believers, the mystery seems to be unsolvable: does one have to suffer unspeakable agonies in the present life in order to be deemed worthy of a life of bliss in the Other World? Perhaps the frail human mind is unable to rise to such heights without the help of faith, and, indeed, this view is not confined to religious poets, neither is it a new insight into the regions that stretch themselves beyond the realm of formal reason, as Descartes himself remarked in his *regulae*:

If in a series of things to be investigated, something should occur to us which our intellect is unable to intuit well enough, then we must stop there, and we are not to examine the other things which follow, but rather are we to abstain from superfluous labour (DESCARTES, 1998, p. 113).

In this sense, then, as a firm believer in a Christian doctrine informed by a potent strain of Tractarian theology, Rossetti does apparently seem to advocate renunciation for its own sake, but simply as a way to safeguard such a noble feeling as love from the ravages of time. It is not that one should give up the attempt to love, but one should be made aware that such relationships await their true fruition in the life to come, where, in the believer's mind's eye there will be nothing to mar the beauty of the souls of lovers whose love has passed the trials of time and pain to find ultimate fulfilment in the presence of God at last. In one of her most revealing sonnets, one which remained unpublished in her lifetime, it becomes possible to get a glimpse of what Rossetti herself saw as the final beatific vision.

I love you and you know it—this at least,  
 This comfort is mine own in all my pain :  
 You know it, and can never doubt again,  
 And love's mere self is a continual feast:  
 Not oath of mine nor blessing-word of priest  
 Could make my love more certain or more plain.  
 Life as a rolling moon doth wax and wane—  
 O weary moon, still rounding, still decreased !  
 Life wanes : and when Love folds his wings above  
 Tired joy, and less we feel his conscious pulse,  
 Let us go fall asleep, dear Friend, in peace ;  
 A little while, and age and sorrow cease ;  
 A little while, and love reborn annuls  
 Loss and decay and death—and all is love.  
 (towards October 1870)

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