The Religious Poetry Of Christina Rossetti: A Study Of Quality.

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THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: A STUDY OF QUALITY

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THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: A STUDY OF QUALITY

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THE RELIGIOUS POETRY OF

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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Christina Rossetti's reputation in her lifetime and until World War I was undeservedly high. After a period of reaction she now ranks as one of the distinguished Victorian minor poets and as one of the important English devotional poets. Only Hopkins wrote better religious verse in her time, and Christina Rossetti places among Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Marvell, as an author of great devotional poems.

The religious poems, approximately five hundred of her one thousand poems, fall here into three groups for purposes of study: the "dramatic," approximately fifty poems; the "didactic," approximately three hundred poems; and the "meditative," approximately one hundred and fifty poems. Although Christina Rossetti throughout her career

wrote all three types of religious poems, after 1860 the meditative poems supplanted the dramatic in her canon.

The categories consist of extensions of meaning for the words dramatic, didactic and meditative. The dramatic poems consist of situations and speakers, ranging from one (monologue), or two (dialogue), to more (multiple characters, chorus, or narrator). The didactic poems, too, have a public character and speak with a congregational voice that uses the second person plural or the first and third persons plural to reflect on the Christian life or to comment on Christian beliefs. The meditative poems, essentially private religious lyrics of great emotional intensity, employ the personal pronoun almost exclusively. The profoundly spiritual nature of these poems, occurring in greatest numbers after a decade of personal misfortune for Christina Rossetti, makes them of permanent interest and high quality. In them the poet exercises not only her mastery of craft but her maturity of sensibility. They compose the culmination of her art as a devotional poet, and they strongly contrast with the large body of flat didactic verse in her canon.

I. INTRODUCTION

1

Christina Rossetti's literary fortunes have waxed and waned, but in recent times a just estimate of her poetry has become possible. Jerome M. McGann in the latest Victorian Studies remarks: "In the last fifteen years, we have seen a remarkable scholarly effort to recover our contacts with the lost generations of Victorian poets." He also adds that, "The last good book about Christina Rossetti was published in 1931 by Eleanor Thomas, and although recent scholars have produced some fine work, criticism continues to lag."[1]

During Christina Rossetti's lifetime she received honor and recognition for her poetry, beginning with the publication of Goblin Market and Other Poems (1862), and "the adulation bestowed upon genius was to become more evident with the publication of Goblin Market that March,"[2] says her biographer. Ruskin himself read the title poem,

[1]Jerome M. McGann, "Christina Rossetti's Poems: A New Edition and a Revaluation," Victorian Studies, I (Winter, 1980), p. 237.

[2]Lona Mosk Packer, Christina Rossetti (Berkeley, CA, 1963), p. 160.

sent to him by her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti. He found its metrics to be irregular, but praised its "'observation and passion.'"[3] Gosse called the volume "'brilliant, fantastic, and profoundly original,'"[4] as he later recalled its publication's effects.

The volumes of verse which followed Goblin Market and Other Poems over a period of thirty years enhanced her critical reputation, especially as a devotional poet. When she died in 1894 a flood of praise in obituaries, memorials, and reminiscences demonstrated her high standing among her contemporaries. After the turn of the century her literary significance declined along with that of most other Victorian writers.

Upon the centenary of her birth in 1930 interest revived in Christina Rossetti. A spate of articles and books appeared, generally sentimentally religious in approach, the important ones by women eager to claim her as a woman-poet, although the fashion for poetess was ending. By the end of the decade the flurry had subsided.

In the Sixties several selected editions of Christina Rossetti's work appeared in print, and Lona Mosk Packer produced a significant biography of the poet. Anthologies

[3]Packer, p. 157.

[4]Packer, p. 160.

of the Victorian period and of the Pre-Raphaelite movement generally published a narrow selection from her canon: a little children's verse from Sing-Song, a few of the famous lyrics, such as "A Birthday," "Song (When I am dead, my dearest)," "Song (Oh roses for the flush of youth)," or "Sleeping at Last," and the scintillating "Goblin Market." More recently compiled anthologies have offered a broader range as representative of Christina Rossetti's achievement, including more devotional poems than earlier works. In general, the critical revaluation of the Victorians has raised Christina Rossetti to the status of one of the distinguished minor poets of the age.

From 1842 to 1894 Christina Rossetti composed more than one thousand poems. At least half of them are devotional. Their sheer number demands serious critical evaluation of them, yet, for the most part, scholars consider them only in a general way on the basis of a few fine poems within the group. As a devotional poet in the tradition of Donne, Marvell, Herbert, Hopkins, et al., she merits a fair trial of her gift. With Elizabeth Barrett Browning, she is the most important woman writing verse of any sort - including devotional verse - in England in the last century. Only the unorthodox poems of Emily Dickinson (also born in 1830) in America exceed hers in mastery of craft. Only

Emily Brontë in England competes with her in the distillation of emotion, among women poets, although the passion in the typical Christina Rossetti poem is conventionally religious in orientation.

Ralph A. Bellas in his Christina Rossetti helps place her, as a devotional poet, in perspective:

> Christina was the most widely read writer of religious verse in her day, and she must be regarded as one of the major religious poets in English. Along with a notable array of nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholic and Catholic poets such as John Keble, John Henry Newman, Coventry Patmore, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote under the stimulus of the Oxford Movement, she helped to revitalize the tradition of Orthodox religious verse and to advance it into the post-Victorian period. Modern readers, it is true, are more attracted to the dynamic quality and verbal virtuousity of Hopkins than to the more conventional Christina, but for many of her contemporary readers her devotional poetry served as a means of reaffirming Church doctrines and Christian values and of nourishing hope in an age of weakening faith.[5]

Even before publication, Christina Rossetti received recognition as a devotional poet from within her own talented and unusual family. She was one of four children. The two elder were the famous Pre-Raphaelite painter and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Dante scholar and

[5]Ralph A. Bellas, Christina Rossetti (Boston, MA, 1977), p. 76.

Anglican nun Maria Rossetti. Her younger brother William Michael Rossetti edited and published the poetry and correspondence of the family's two poets, and wrote criticism and journalism. Her father and grandfather, émigrés from Italy after a failed revolution, both taught Italian literature at Cambridge, and wrote on Dante. Her grandfather operated a private press on which he printed her first volume of verse in 1847.

About half the juvenile poems are on religious subjects, such as "Hymn,"[6] "Love and Hope,"[7] "Charity,"[8] "The Martyr,"[9] "Mary Magdalene,"[10] "Burial Anthem,"[11] "Resurrection Eve,"[12] "I have fought a Good Fight,"[13] and "The Dying Man to his Betrothed."[14]

[6]The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London, 1904) - hereafter cited as Poetical Works, p. 83.

[7]Poetical Works, p. 83.

[8]Poetical Works, p. 84.

[9]Poetical Works, pp. 91-92.

[10]Poetical Works, p. 89.

[11]Poetical Works, pp. 84-85.

[12]Poetical Works, pp. 98-99.

[13]Poetical Works, pp. 103-104.

[14]Poetical Works, pp. 92-93.

These early poems, largely derivative and imitative, her family read and encouraged. Christina Rossetti enlarged her natural facility by practice in technique over years of writing verse, until her poet-brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti would say that "Wrestling,"[15] from Annus Domini (1874) was "'most excellent, like all Christina's religious poetry.'"[16] Before this time Dante Gabriel Rossetti had encouraged his fellow poet and sister more concretely:

> When Goblin Market and Other Poems went into a second edition in 1865, her brother Gabriel became convinced that she was really a significant poet, and he took over full responsibility in arranging her second volume; he not only provided illustrations and negotiated with the publishers (by both of which activities he seriously delayed its ultimate issue) but also advised Christina as to the selection of pieces and the detailed revision of those to be included.[17]

They corresponded and collaborated on a number of her later volumes until Dante Gabriel Rossetti's death in 1881.

Another poet contemporary of them both admired

[15] Poetical Works, pp. 247-248.

[16] Packer, p. 306.

[17] Lionel Stevenson, "Christina Rossetti," The Pre-Raphaelite Poets (Chapel Hill, NC, 1972), p. 113.

Christina Rossetti's poetry, with special notice to her religious poetry. Charles Algernon Swinburne called "Passing Away," written shortly after her thirtieth birthday, "'one of the finest things ever written!'"[18] adding that he regarded the poem as "'the very summit and mountaintop of Christina's work.'"[19]

Passing away, saith the World, passing
  away:
Chances, beauty, and youth, sapped day
  by day:
Thy life never continueth in one stay.
Is the eye waxen dim, is the dark hair
  changing to grey
That hath won neither laurel nor bay?
I shall clothe myself in Spring and bud
  in May:
Thou, root-stricken, shalt not rebuild
  thy decay
On my bosom for aye.
Then I answered: Yea.

Passing away, saith my Soul, passing away:
With its burden of fear and hope, of
  labour and play,
Hearken what the past doth witness and
  say:
Rust in thy gold, a moth is in thine
  array,
A canker is in thy bud, thy leaf must
  decay.
At midnight, at cockcrow, at morning,
  one certain day
Lo the Bridegroom shall come and shall
  not delay;
Watch thou and pray.
Then I answered: Yea.

[18]Quoted in Bellas, p. 79.

[19]Quoted in Bellas, p. 78.

> Passing away, saith my God, passing away:
> Winter passeth after the long delay:
> New grapes on the vine, new figs on the tender spray,
> Turtle calleth turtle in Heaven's May.
> Though I tarry, wait for Me, trust Me, watch and pray:
> Arise, come away, night is past and lo it is day,
> My love, My sister, My spouse, thou shalt hear Me say.
> Then I answered: Yea.

After Christina Rossetti's death Swinburne wrote verses in her honor. Only the youngest child of the Rossetti family, William Michael, still lived. On June 10, 1895, Swinburne wrote to him of a plan to include her in a project:

> Years ago I began an article on 'Sacred English Poetry' designed to lead up from the anonymous medieval writers of some of the sweetest hymns in the world, and on through Herbert and Vaughan (who was a <u>great</u> poet by fits and starts, and essentially more akin to her, I think, than anyone else) to the crowning close in Christina at her highest. The fragment long mislaid I have now recovered: and as I might have ventured to hope that the tribute might possibly give her pleasure I should be more bitterly vexed and self-reproachful than I am if I did not remember that I never lost a chance of paying tribute to her 'in prose or rime.' I was amused and edified to read in a religious magazine that this was my one redeeming point--the man (wretch as he might otherwise be) who was so devoted to such a cause could not (in <u>this</u> world) be regarded as utterly lost.[20]

[20]Quoted in Packer, pp. 409-410.

Swinburne also mentions the verses he wrote on New Year's Eve in tribute to Christina Rossetti, who had died the previous day.

A New Year's Eve

Christina Rossetti Died December 29, 1894

The stars are strong in the deeps of the lustrous night,
Cold and splendid as death if his dawn be bright;
  Cold as the cast-off garb that is cold as clay,
Splendid and strong as a spirit intense as light.

A soul more sweet than the morning of new-born May
Has passed with the year that has passed from the world away.
  A song more sweet than the morning's first-born song
Again will hymn not among us a new year's day.

Not here, not here shall the carol of joy grown strong
Ring rapture now, and uplift us, a spell-struck throng,
  From dream to vision of life that the soul may see
By death's grace only, if death do its trust no wrong.

Scarce yet the days and the starry nights are three
Since here among us a spirit abode as we,
  Girt round with life that is fettered in bonds of time,
And clasped with darkness about as is earth with sea.

Who knows? We know not. Afar, if the dead be far,
Alive, if the dead be alive as the soul's works are,
  The soul whose breath was among us a heavenward song
Sings, loves, and shines as it shines for us here a star.[21]

Arthur Symons and Lionel Johnson also comment on Christina Rossetti's gifts as a devotional poet in two

[21]Charles Algernon Swinburne, Swinburne's Poems, ed. Edmund W. Gosse (London, 1904), VI, 241.

famous passages: Symons (Studies in Two Literatures, p. 139) writes of the "'exaltation of the poems of devotion'" and of "'the special excellence of the poems of passion and meditation.'"[22]

Lionel Johnson (Academy, July 25, 1896, 50:59) comments even more fully on the qualities of the sacred poetry:

> Miss Rossetti, in her sacred poems, brings together all the elements of art's excellence and of a Christian faith. Their chief note, their unique interest and delight, is a tenderness in them, a tremulous and wistful beauty of adoration, rising and passing at times, into something like a very joyous adoration of friend by friend.... And with this sense of attaining and perceptive faith comes a further sense, of absolute reality.... The Paradisal imageries, crowns, palms, flames, all the "furniture of heaven," becomes to us in her poetry as real, visible, tangible as altars upon earth; the golden trumpets and harps, the multitudinous music of the Saints and Angels, ring through the triumphing chaunts of her later verse.[23]

Christina Rossetti's devotional poems found eager readers in America as well as England, among them no less

[22]Quoted in Poetry of the Victorian Period, 3rd ed., eds. Jerome Hamilton Buckley and George Benjamin Woods (Chicago, IL, 1965), p. 993.

[23]Poetry of the Victorian Period, p. 993.

a critic than Ralph Waldo Emerson. Packer reports:

> By now English and American critics had become aware that there were two geniuses in the Rossetti family, and comparisons between them began to appear increasingly in the literary journals. In America Christina was preferred to Gabriel. The Atlantic Monthly considered her 'a more original bard' than her brother; and Emerson told [William Bell] Scott that Americans did not care for Rossetti's [Dante Gabriel's] poetry - it was too exotic - 'but we like Christina's religious pieces.'[24]

When George Saintsbury wrote his Edwardian milestone work A History of English Prosody he discussed Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning together in a chapter called "Mid-Century Minors." There he named her "a greater poetess and almost a great poet," in comparison to Mrs. Browning, "once called 'a great poetess and almost a great poet.'"[25]

Saintsbury also compared the brother and sister poets in the "Reasoned List of Poets" from his Historical Manual of English Prosody as "A brother and sister who rank high in our flock." He claims, "They produced the greatest

[24]Packer, p. 333.

[25]George Saintsbury, A History of English Prosody (London, 1910), III, 241.

English sonnets on the commoner Italian model, and displayed almost infinite capacity in other metres. Miss Rossetti had the greater tendency to metrical experiment, and perhaps the more strictly lyrical gift of the song kind." [26]

Twenty years of critical silence followed World War I until the first of a number of centenary appreciations began to appear in the Thirties. Birkhead, Sandars, Shove, Stuart, Thomas and Winwar produced monographs which comment on the devotional poetry. Generally sentimental in tone, these studies often attempt to read life through art, attaching one love poem to the broken engagement to Collinson the painter, and another to Cayley the scholar.

Two studies appear after the 1930 centenary volumes, the "Christina Rossetti" chapter of The Romantic Imagination (1949) by C. M. Bowra and Christina Rossetti: Her Life and Religion (1955) by Margaret Sawtell. Bowra emphasizes the dual personality of Christina Rossetti in her poetry, and Sawtell intends her work to correct the impression of Christina Rossetti as a "morbid" poet.

Lona Mosk Packer's biography spurred some critical attention after its publication in 1963. Packer comments

[26]George Saintsbury, Historical Manual of English Prosody (London, 1910), p. 311.

on many of the devotional poems, and she praises highly a poem from the volume Divers Worlds. Time and Eternity., entitled "Escape to the Mountain:"

> I peered within and saw a world of sin;
> Upward, and saw a world of righteousness;
> Downward, and saw darkness and flame begin
> Which no man can express.
>
> I girt me up, I gat me up to flee
> From face of darkness and devouring flame:
> And fled I had, but guilt is loading me
> With dust of death and shame.
>
> Yet still the light of righteousness beams pure,
> Beams to me from the world of far-off day: --
> Lord, Who hast called them happy that endure,
> Lord, make me such as they.

PW

Before 1893.

Packer says:

> In this and others of her devotional poems echoes are rung from George Herbert, from Crashaw, from the later Donne. Like the great seventeenth-century religious poets, she too lived a submerged life, fathoms below the surface, a life intense and violent, but one which seldom penetrates into the annals of day-to-day living.[27]

[27]Packer, p. 314.

Packer's full-length biography apparently stimulated more interest in Christina Rossetti and her devotional poetry. Stuart Curran wrote on her poetic powers, in 1971, and concluded that she is an uneven poet, but nonetheless, "A gifted minor one with a remarkable ease of spontaneous melody and occasional moments of compressed energy suggestive of powers never fully developed."[28] He concluded that "As a whole, the devotional poems do not achieve the success of her secular efforts, but occasionally they strike fire." He noted that "A large number of the poems in the initial volume [Goblin Market and Other Poems (1862)] are religious. Indeed, the largest single section of Christina Rossetti's Poetical Works is devotional, a reflection of the intense religious focus of her life."[29]

Curran chooses this devotional sonnet set as an example of Christina Rossetti's "emotional sincerity, as well as a freedom from clichéd pieties which places it far above the normal course of the poet's religious verse."[30] This trinity of sonnets, he claims, portrays her technique "at

[28]Stuart Curran, "The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti," Victorian Poetry 9 (Autumn, 1971), 287.

[29]Curran, p. 289.

[30]Curran, p. 295.

its soundest and most sustained level:"[31]

"'If thou sayest, Behold we knew it not.'" --

Proverbs xxiv. 11, 12.

1

I have done I know not what, --
what have I done?
My brother's blood, my brother's
soul, doth cry:
And I find no defence, find no
reply,
No courage more to run this race I run,
Not knowing what I have done, have
left undone;
Ah me, these awful unknown hours
that fly,
Fruitless it may be, fleeting fruit-
less by,
Rank with death-savour underneath
the sun!
For what avails it that I did not
know
The deed I did? what profits me
the plea
That had I known I had not wronged
him so?
Lord Jesus Christ, my God,
him pity Thou:
Lord, if it may be, pity also me:
In judgment pity, and in death,
and now.

2

Thou Who hast borne all burdens,
bear our load,
Bear Thou our load whatever load
it be;
Our guilt, our shame, our helpless
misery,
Bear Thou Who only canst, O God
my God.
Seek us and find us, for we cannot
Thee

[31]Curran, p. 295

Or seek or find or hold or cleave
unto:
We cannot do or undo: Lord,
undo
Our self-undoing, for Thine is the
key
Of all we are not though we might
have been.
Dear Lord, if ever mercy moved
Thy mind,
If so be love of us can move
Thee yet,
If still the nail-prints in Thy Hands
are seen,
Remember us, -- yea how
shouldst Thou forget?
Remember us for good, and seek,
and find.

3

Each soul I might have succoured,
may have slain,
All souls shall face me at the last
Appeal,
That great last moment poised for
woe or weal,
That final moment for man's bliss or
bane.
Vanity of vanities, yea all is vain
Which then will not avail or
help or heal:
Disfeatured faces, worn-out knees
that kneel,
Will more avail than strength or
beauty then.
Lord, by Thy Passion, -- when Thy
Face was marred
In sight of earth and hell tumult-
uous,
And Thy heart failed in Thee
like melting wax,
And Thy Blood dropped more
precious than the nard, --
Lord, for Thy sake, not ours,
supply our lacks,
For Thine own sake, not ours,
Christ, pity us.

Before 1882. (PW, pp. 261-262)

Curran asserts that this sonnet sequence is "one of the small number of Christina Rossetti's poems which bear comparison with masterpieces."[32] He tempers his praise in these words: "If this sonnet never quite achieves the high passion of the best of Hopkins' religious sonnets, it must stand - with its indisputable power and carefully molded structure - as one of the monumental expositions of the form in Victorian poetry."[33] Curran's comments raise the question of the uneven quality of the large Christina Rossetti devotional canon, but some more recent comment on her critical position is necessary as a frame for discussion.

After Curran's article in 1971, Lionel Stevenson's The Pre-Raphaelite Poets appeared in 1972. He assigned Christina Rossetti a lengthy chapter within his volume,[34] an honor he granted only to her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and Charles Algernon Swinburne. In that chapter Stevenson began his study by considering Christina Rossetti in the company of Emily Brontë, who lacks her range and quantity of work, Emily Dickinson, who exceeds

[32]Curran, p. 295.

[33]Curran, p. 296.

[34]Stevenson, pp. 78-122.

her in brilliance and daring of technique and range of thought, and Mrs. Browning, whose accomplishment she overshadows. Christina Rossetti wrote of Emily Dickinson's death, in 1886 (both were born in 1830, although Christina Rossetti lived until 1894), to her younger brother William Michael Rossetti of Emily Dickinson's "wonderfully Blakean gift," but deplored Dickinson's "startling recklessness of poetic ways and means."[35] How ironic that Christina Rossetti echoes Ruskin on her own "Goblin Market" in 1861, but her remark confirms her own technical conservatism, despite the daring of her own brilliantly eccentric early poem.

Stevenson sees a common factor in the lives of all four women poets: Christina Rossetti, Emily Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Emily Dickinson. Not only did all four come from close-knit and intellectual Victorian families, but all were "recluses, either from choice or by the compulsion of ill health."[36] They share "this common ground-note of feminine abnegation,"[37] and also the rank of "the principal women poets of the nineteenth century."[38]

[35]Letter of 6 December 1890, quoted in The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London, 1908), pp. 176-177.

[36]Stevenson, p. 78.

[37]Stevenson, p. 79.

[38]Stevenson, p. 78.

In Christina Rossetti's devotional poems this abnegation wells into passionate spiritual expression. Stevenson notes: "In the religious poems the fervor of her worship and the agony of her supplications for divine mercy have seldom been rivaled by an English poet, and certainly never by a woman. They merit comparison with those of Donne, Crashaw, and Herbert."[39]

Ralph A. Bellas, in Christina Rossetti (1977) for the Twayne's English Authors Series, agrees with Packer and Stevenson on the importance of Christina Rossetti as a devotional poet. He writes: "By general agreement, Christina Rossetti must be ranked among great religious poets in English such as John Donne, George Herbert and Henry Vaughan of the seventeenth century and John Keble, John Henry Newman, Coventry Patmore, and Gerard Manley Hopkins of the nineteenth."[40]

In addition to monographs by single scholars, anthologists of recent years too show a greater appreciation of Christina Rossetti as a devotional poet. Both the Buckley and Woods[41] and the Houghton and Stange[42] period antholo-

[39]Stevenson, pp. 118-119.

[40]Bellas, p. 76.

[41]Poetry of the Victorian Period, pp. 562-576.

[42]Victorian Poetry and Poetics, 2nd ed., eds. Walter E. Houghton and G. Robert Stange (Boston, MA, 1968), p. 601-610.

gies print a critically-sensitive selection of Christina Rossetti's poems, which includes a number of fine religious compositions as representative of her writing. Houghton and Stange print more poems of a broader range. Their introduction to their selection of her poems shows a special interest in her as a devotional poet, although both volumes offer an essay, some bibliography, and critical comment.[43, 44]

Houghton and Stange also praise the devotional poems of Christina Rossetti in their introductory essay to the poems they choose. In the essay they compare her with Hopkins, in a comment on style, by remarking that her "bare simplicity has the force of concrete experience, and distinguishes the form of her poetry of suffering from that of the only other Victorian poet who recorded pang after pang, Gerard Manley Hopkins."[45]

[43] Poetry of the Victorian Period, pp. 992-993.

[44] Victorian Poetry and Poetics, pp. 599-600.

[45] Victorian Poetry and Poetics, p. 601.

In her lifetime, the evaluation of Christina Rossetti, basically uncritical and adulatory, was often confused with respect for the sacred nature of her subject and her upholding of Christian values. The iconoclastic critical reaction to her poetry after World War I often scorned her devotional poems and slighted her talent in general, if it did not ignore her entirely. The centenary of her birth in 1930 brought some quickening of interest in her poetry, but this critical response was a pale reflection of the sentimental regard of the public for her during her lifetime and up to World War I. The publication of Packer's full-length biography, flawed as it is with her controversial theory of Christina Rossetti's passion for a married man, the poet William Bell Scott, aroused scholarly interest in Christina Rossetti again and provided a useful bibliography with a full list of manuscript holdings for further work. Anthologies of more recent years have included a more just representation from her canon, especially from the devotional poems. Selected editions of her poems have also appeared in the last two decades because of revived interest. The growth of women's studies in colleges and universities too has increased attention for Christina Rossetti, although the treatment of her poetry is often incomplete, unscholarly, and biographical.

2

The extent of critical commentary on Christina Rossetti's religious poems naturally suggests unanswered questions in regard to them. Curran remarks on the uneven quality of the poems in the range of her total output, "the devotional poems, in general ponderous, given to wholesome and rather worn platitudes, easy in their piety, into which on occasion is injected a personal religious emotion and a questioning mind."[46] The variation in the quality of the poems introduces questions about her religious attitudes and her religious experience, as well as her poetic standards and judgment, her intended audience, her working methods, and her usual themes. The shifting quality of her work is not the result of unclear aims as a poet. That she judged her own poems by well-defined standards becomes obvious in the review of her correspondence, particularly in letters between her and her poet-brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as well as between her and her editor-brother

[46]Curran, p. 297.

William Michael Rossetti. They shared a household for most of their lives, even in adulthood, where they discussed their work. When absences came, they wrote often and regularly of it, helped each other to prepare their compositions for publication, and solicited opinions from others in the Pre-Raphaelite group and prominent critics. Dante Gabriel Rossetti first sent Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (1859) to John Ruskin to ask him "to submit it to the newly established Cornhill Magazine, but Ruskin was outraged by the irregular versification."[47] "Gabriel sent the letter to William with the brief remark, 'Most senseless, I think,' an opinion posterity has endorsed."[48] The exchange shows the family interest, but Christina Rossetti, although seeking advice, made her own decisions about changes in her work as her correspondence demonstrates.

When composing "Three Nuns" Christina Rossetti was visiting Collinson's family at Peaseley Hill in 1849, during her engagement to James Collinson. From Collinson's home, she wrote to William Michael Rossetti in London, saying, "My dreary poem is not completed, but a few appropriate stanzas have been added since my leaving town. You

[47]Stevenson, p. 107.

[48]Packer, p. 157.

will easily believe that, whatever other merit it lacks, it possesses unity of purpose in a high degree."[49]

Christina Rossetti's high regard for "unity of purpose" emerges from this passage. As a standard, she always meets it. Even some quite mediocre poems show her careful overall design, and the architectonics of her best poems demonstrate her aesthetic standard for their planning in a classic simplicity.

Another letter to William Michael Rossetti illustrates Christina Rossetti's concern with le mot juste, natural and essential for a poet. She refers to the family games of bout-rimés. Her brother had sent her a set of rhymes at Peaseley Hill to amuse her, for she found life with Collinson's conventional family dull: "To your rhymes I have written a rather intense sonnet, which cannot miss your approbation. The notion of life turning to must is not hackneyed. On the back are some rhymes for you to fill up; they belong to one of my old things."[50] Christina Rossetti refers to the following sonnet, not printed in The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti (1904). A remarkable set-rhyme exercise, it too shows the young

[49] Family Letters, 25 August 1849, p. 6.

[50] Family Letters, 31 August 1849, p. 7.

poet's standards for diction, unity, and image, despite the strictures of the timed and set-rhymed conditions under which she wrote the sonnet.

> So I began my walk of life; no stop
> Was possible; or else my will was frail;
> Or is it that the first stumblings entail
> Weakness no after strength has power to prop?
> The heart puts forth her boughs; and these we lop
> For very wantonness; until the gale
> Is rank with blood; then our life-portions fail
> And we are fain to share another's sop.
> At first my heart was true and my soul true,
> And then the outside world believed me false.
> Therefore my sweets grew bitter, and I thrust
> Life back, till it stood still and turned to must.
> Yet sometimes through the great stagnation calls
> Of spirits reach me: is it so with you?[51]

Christina Rossetti shows her interest in fresh and original expression in this reference to "hackneyed" metaphor. In his "Memoir"[52] William Michael Rossetti also praises her taste and judgment, while admitting its narrowness. "In poetry she was (need I say it?) capable of appreciating whatever is really good; and yet her affections, if not her perceptions, in poetry were severely restricted."[53]

To unity of purpose, effectiveness of language, and freshness of metaphor as standards for her art, Christina Rossetti adds her concern with meaning, at the heart of the

[51] Family Letters, 31 August 1849, p. 8

[52] Poetical Works, pp. xlv-lxxi.

[53] Poetical Works, p. lxix.

great devotional poems. To her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti she writes about a poem by Dr. Thomas Gordon Hake. "But in all [of his poems] , unless we except Old Souls, I have a habit of missing the thread, if indeed the thread is always there to miss. Even in Madeline I recognize beauty - but how about meaning?"[54]

Meaning, beauty, unity, diction, all standards of Christina Rossetti from her comments to her brothers, yet her "lyric cry," which assures her strong position among English devotional poets, becomes her ultimate requirement. In a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, she stresses this standard she evolved for her poetry. "You shall see one or two pieces more; but the one I sent you is a favourite of my own, and I doubt if you will unearth one to eclipse it: moreover, if I remember the mood in which I wrote it, it is something of a genuine "lyric cry" and such I will back against all skilled labour. I will either hand you my infinitesimal budget of pieces to-morrow, or I will send it you afterwards: but please respect my thin skin and do not start the subject in public...."[55]

Meaning and feeling take prominence over technical

[54] Family Letters, "[1871-? End of February.] ," p. 33.

[55] Family Letters, 1 January 1877, p. 65.

skill or "skilled labour" by Christina Rossetti's standards, yet only skill can communicate both to a reader from a poet. Christina Rossetti could write slightingly of technique only because she possessed so fluent and supple a mastery of form herself. Curran writes of her "sound knowledge of technique"[56] in his article on her lyric voice, and he includes her in a group compliment as he remarks on "the care that is a hallmark of all the Pre-Raphaelites."[57] Again he cites her as "a poet of great gifts,"[58] marked by "a willingness to grapple with form, an endeavor in which she achieves generally distinguished results. Like all of the Pre-Raphaelites she was adept at difficult stanzaic patterns. Her most consistently remarkable poetic attribute is her facility in rhyming and fitting thought into form without a trace of awkwardness."[59] He attests to her facility as, "Ease, of course, she never lacked: it is her single most prominent poetic attribute,"[60] and agrees with her own judgment of her best gift, "That

[56]Curran, p. 288.

[57]Curran, p. 288.

[58]Curran, p. 292.

[59]Curran, p. 293.

[60]Curran, p. 298.

Christina Rossetti had a true lyric voice is certain."[61]

Lionel Stevenson too acknowledges her success in writing to her own standards: "By the age of eighteen she had perfected her characteristic poetic manner. Her sonnets move with a pellucid grace wholly different from the ornateness in those of her brother. Her lyrics sing to apparently spontaneous melodies that seldom depart from simple quatrain patterns."[62] He explains her seemingly spontaneous poetry by acknowledging her firm technical control, which constantly creates elegant poetic style, despite the monotony of her themes.

"Christina Rossetti's poetry comes closer to the pure lyric mode than that of any other Victorian, male or female, for the reason that it contains a minimum of intellectual substance."[63] Although her poems carry meaning, they never do become successful intellectual debates. Christina Rossetti strikes admiration from her critics by recognizing her own strengths and erecting her standards upon them. Her poetic facility and her emotional depth

[61]Curran, p. 299.

[62]Stevenson, p. 86.

[63]Stevenson, p. 88.

combine to develop poems that control the lyric cry with the poet's insistence on meaning and unity.

Despite the clarity of her avowed aims, Christina Rossetti freely admitted her inability to judge her own poems, especially the ones written early in her career. When she was forty-five in 1875, she wrote about this problem in a letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti:

> Now for a little bit about my new ed[ition]. It gratifies me much to receive your sympathetic praise, and find you care to accept the copy I store for you. The whole subject of youthful poems grows anxious in middle age, or may at some moments appear so; one is so different, and yet so vividly the same. I am truly sorry if I have judged amiss including The Lowest Room; which however, I remind you, had already seen light in Mac's Mag. To my thinking it is by no means one of the most morbid or most personal of the group; but I am no good judge in my own cause.[64]

In another letter to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti again remarks on her inability to judge her own poems, this time too in reference to "The Lowest Room" (1856): "I still don't dislike it myself, but

[64] Family Letters, 14 December 1875, pp. 55-56.

can lay no claim to impartiality."[65]

Because of her reluctance to judge her own poems for fear of her subjectivity, Christina Rossetti often accepted the opinion of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in arranging and editing her work for publication as this letter shows: "After impervious density I begin to see light (I think) on your objection to The Lowest Room; and I already regret having inserted it, you having scale-dipping weight with me."[66]

Christina Rossetti did, however, rely on her own judgment with enough self-confidence to present finished poems for her family's opinions and to offer them to the prestigious Athenaeum, when only in her teens. In the "Memoir" William Michael Rossetti reports her view of herself:

> It may be asked - Did Christina Rossetti consider herself truly a poetess, and a good one? Truly a poetess, most decidedly yes; and, within the range of her subject and thought, and the limits of her executive endeavor, a good one. This did not make her in the least conceited or arrogant as regards herself, nor captious as to the work of others; but it did render her very resolute in setting a line of demarca-

[65] Family Letters, "[1875-? 22 December.]," p. 55.

[66] Family Letters, "[1875-? 22 December.]," p. 55.

> tion between a person who is a poet and another person who is a versifier. Pleadings *in misericordiam* were of no use with her, and she never could see any good reason why one who is not a poet should write in metre.[67]

Christina Rossetti also had a clear idea of her audience, from early in her career until its end. Of course, the Rossetti family became the first audience for the Christina Rossetti poems, and they remained her eager readers for all their lives. Although she worked for their praise and approval, even as a child she refused their help in initial composition. Their encouragement included her first publication by her grandfather:

> ... her grandfather's new residence near Regent's Park Canal, within walking distance of Charlotte Street [the Rossetti residence], offered other advantages, not the least of which was the private printing press Polidon installed in the shed behind the garden. Here he published Christina's *Verses* of 1847.
>
> She had been writing poetry for some five years now. It was in 1842 that she first began to write down and to date her poems in a notebook. On the flyleaf of the first of the seventeen black notebooks in

[67] *Poetical Works*, p. lxix.

> which until 1866 she kept her poetry, her mother wrote, "These verses are truly and literally by my little daughter, who scrupulously rejected all assistance in her rhyming efforts under the impression that in that case they would not be her own."[68]

William Michael Rossetti describes Christina Rossetti's relationship with her family audience in these words: "What she wrote was pretty well known in the family as soon as her impeccably neat manuscript of it appeared in one of her little notebooks [1842-1866]; but she did not show it about as an achievement, and still less had she, in the course of her work, invited any hint, counsel, or co-operation."[69]

Her admirers' circle widened from her mother Frances, her older sister Maria, her older brother Dante Gabriel, and her younger brother William Michael Rossetti to the friends of the family and the Pre-Raphaelite group and other writers and critics, from Swinburne to Emerson; in fact, Christina Rossetti was the first of the Pre-Raphaelite poets to publish, with two poems in The

[68]Packer, p. 19.

[69]Poetical Works, p. lxix.

Athenaeum in October, 1848,[70] and seven poems in the four issues of the Germ[71] under "the pen name of Ellen Alleyn,"[72] which Dante Gabriel Rossetti chose. Publication introduced Christina Rossetti to a popular audience who, while not necessarily understanding the brilliant pyrotechnics of "Goblin Market," bought her volumes of verse year after year. During her lifetime Christina Rossetti's poetry sold enough copies to give her some financial independence in mature life; she earned enough even to worry over the income tax forms with William Michael Rossetti in 1889.[73]

The audience Christina Rossetti's religious poems attracted rejoiced in the seeming simplicity of the conventional and orthodox outlook of the verse. Stevenson reports that "Her status as a poet won its widest public recognition in 1893 when the poems that had been mingled with the prose in three of her devotional books were extracted and issued in a volume under the modest title

[70]Stevenson, p. 89.

[71]Stevenson, p. 90.

[72]Packer, p. 39.

[73]Packer, pp. 376-377.

Verses."[74] Packer also notes the success of this volume and its favorable reviews in The Athenaeum and Saturday Review:

> With the publication by the S. P. C. K. [Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge] of the 1893 Verses (collected from three devotional works), Christina was recognized as "one of the greatest living poets," and one of "the foremost poets of the age." Within her lifetime she had won her niche in English poetry and had achieved the status of an immortal. But the 1893 volume had an overwhelming popular as well as critical success. By Christmas the first edition was sold out, and Christina heard that "there was no meeting the demand" for the Verses. In one shop alone thirty people were on the waiting list hoping to obtain their copies by Christmas; and the volume went through three editions before spring.[75]

This report shows the large audience for Christina Rossetti's devotional poems. With what themes did she gratify their tastes over the years, while remaining true to her own standards of fresh diction, original metaphor, lyric cry, and "unity of purpose?" Viewed as a whole, the entire body of her religious poetry develops the old

[74]Stevenson, p. 120.

[75]Packer, p. 391.

and familiar theme of the Christian pilgrimage to heaven. Two underlying themes unify the poems: the hope of salvation through grace and God's love and the expectation of fulfilling this hope through devotion to Jesus Christ as redeemer. Individual poems present Christian precepts to guide the pilgrim on his journey; and, if he follows their guidance, he quiets his heart's restlessness as he prepares himself for heaven.

Because Christina Rossetti takes the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer as her main source, many of the images and sentiments of the devotional poems are conventional and ready-made, but such is not the case with the meditative poems, about one hundred and twenty of the five hundred religious poems. The uniquely personal and sincere voice of these poems speaks in strikingly original imagery. Beginning in the 1850s and continuing for the rest of her life, Christina Rossetti wrote these intense and beautiful poems with their passionate and urgent devotion.

The themes show some changes through the poet's career. Up to 1860 three related themes appear: the variety of earthly life, the anticipation of early death, and the hope of heaven. With the development of the themes of the earlier poems, Christina Rossetti often draws attention to creation in the natural world, but she does so only to emphasize its transience in contrast to the permanent beauty

of heaven. As an inevitable corollary the Christian's death becomes a release from earthly life into God's presence. Underlying these themes, the positive attitude implicit in these poems suggests the confidence of the persona in obtaining God's love and in achieving salvation, despite unworthiness of humanity.

During Christina Rossetti's thirties a definite shift in that attitude occurs. The familiar themes remain, but a sense of unworthiness changes the confident attitude of the persona to a negative one, pleading, despairing, or self-reproaching. The poems become more profoundly spiritual under the effect of this severe struggle to control fear of rejecting Christ and of being unworthy of redemption. Some poems show a great desire to believe in the promise of salvation, and others blacken with fear, doubt, and unworthiness. The themes of patience and acceptance emerge strongly in these mature poems. In them Christina Rossetti exhorts her readers to submit to Christ's will in love and patience. The sinner must ask for the grace and love of Christ, to be able to live with love and virtue. With these themes, the persona becomes exhortatory. Christina Rossetti continues to write meditative and didactic poems through these years.

In the final period of the poet's life, themes of warning and hope alternate with the central theme of the

early poems: rejection of earthly life, anticipation of coming death, and reliance on Christ. William Michael Rossetti reinforces this delineation of his sister's dominant theme throughout the religious poetry:

> 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: she clung to and loved the Christian creed because she loved Jesus Christ. "Christ is God" was her one dominant idea. Faith with her was faith pure and absolute: an entire acceptance of a thing revealed - not a quest for any confirmation or demonstrative proof.[76]

Although William Michael Rossetti does see the "one dominant idea" or theme of Christina Rossetti's religious poetry as Christ the Redeemer, he omits an important part of her religious attitude in his statement on her faith. Although faith, not thought, and emotion, not intellect, underlie the devotional poems, many show a wavering of faith because of a sense of unworthiness or weakness. This tremulousness creates a passionate emotional tone in many of the best poems. Their conventional prosody strains against fear and doubt and illuminates a soul in struggle. The religious attitude of the poet, conveyed by her con-

[76] Poetical Works, p. liv.

summate technique, communicates her tension to the reader.

Christina Rossetti's religious poems at their best offer her readers the shock of opposites as they perceive the devotional intensity of her utterance within the controlled formality of the poem. Form and feeling clash to create a charged and potent tone that grips the readers and draws them to acknowledge her inner tumult. These are not the didactic poems with their simple religious certainties, but meditative poems with their complex devotional explorations.

In another passage of his "Memoir" William Michael Rossetti does discuss Christina Rossetti's sense of guilt and unworthiness, the basis of many poems. Packer attributes it to a lifelong passion for a married man, William Bell Scott, but the assertion rests on too weak a foundation for most scholars to accept it as valid, and it seriously flaws the biography.

William Michael Rossetti attributes Christina Rossetti's sense of unworthiness to a defect of character. This powerful strain in the poet's nature becomes "one serious flaw in a beautiful and admirable character - she was by far over-scrupulous."[77] He compares her to her older sister Maria, an Anglican nun in the order to which Christina Rossetti herself belonged, as a lay sister, after her re-

[77]Poetical Works, p. lxvii.

jection for duty as a nurse in the Crimea:

> Some believers, perceiving themselves to be undoubted Christians in faith, become serenely and perhaps exuberantly happy in their inner selves: it may be said that Maria Rossetti was of these, for (at any rate in her later years) she felt the firmest confidence of salvation. Not so Christina, who always distrusted herself, and her relation to that standard of Christian duty which she constantly acknowledged and professed. In this regard her tone of mind was mainly despondent: it was painfully despondent in the last few months of her life, but as to that the physical minor reasons may have been as truly operative as the spiritual major reason. All her life long she felt - or rather she exaggerated - her deficiencies or backslidings: she did not face religion with that courageous yet modest front with which a virtuous woman, who knows something of the world, faces life. Passages can no doubt be found in her writings in which she is more hopeful than abased; in which her ardent aspirations towards heaven so identify her with its bliss that she seems to be almost there, or on the very threshold. These passages are of course perfectly genuine; but they are coupled with an awful sense of unworthiness, shadowed by an awful uncertainty.[78]

This religious attitude appears increasingly in the poems after 1860, when Christina's own health and family circumstances became much more troubled. In earlier poems

[78] Poetical Works, pp. liv-lv.

the speakers renounce earthly love for spiritual love, as in "The Convent Threshold" (1858), and celebrate the abnegation of religious life, as in "The Three Enemies" (1851). They accept and anticipate death in such poems as "Death is Swallowed up in Victory" (1848), "Sweet Death" (1849), "How Long" (1856), "A Martyr" (1856), "Now they desire (There is a sleep we have not slept)" (1856), "'What good shall my Life do me?'" (1858), and "Weary in Well-Doing" (1864).

In 1871 Christina Rossetti suffered the onset of Graves' disease and the ruin of her physical beauty. Also within that decade the close family began to break up. Dante Gabriel Rossetti established a separate home, Maria Rossetti became a nun, and later both died. The Rossetti mother too died. William Michael Rossetti married. Eventually Christina Rossetti found herself alone in the house they had all shared. Changes in her religious attitude naturally occurred as a result. The poems show her anguish with such titles as "Where Love is, there comes Sorrow," "Joy is but Sorrow," "A heavy Heart, if ever Heart was heavy," "Cast down but not destroyed, chastened not slain," "Have I not striven, my God, and watched and prayed?," "'Cried out with Tears,'" and "'An exceeding bitter Cry.'" Unfortunately, no accurate dating system for the poems exists after the last of the Christina Rossetti notebooks in 1886, but the religious attitudes finally

made her a religious recluse by 1880. Ford Madox Ford [Hueffer], her distant cousin through his mother, was able to see her in her "cloistral seclusion." She received him in a drawing room like a black box with heavy, dusty leaves of sooty London trees to darken it. He pictured her as "a black-robed figure, with clear-cut and olive features, dark hair, restrained and formal gestures, hands always folded in the lap, head always judicially a little on one side, ... the tranquil religious ... undergoing within herself always a fierce struggle between the pagan desire for life and an asceticism that, in its more than Calvinistic restraint, reached also a point of frenzy."[79]

Her religious dedication faltered during the trial of her fatal illness. In the early 1890s breast cancer attacked Christina Rossetti. Although she submitted to an unsuccessful operation, the disease tortured her for nearly four years. Always "overscrupulous," she suffered terribly both from "troubles of soul" and of body. William Michael Rossetti blames a severe confessor, the Reverend Charles Gutch of St. Cyrians, for arousing her anxieties.[80] He describes her pathetic emotional condition under such awful stress in these words: "In August, 1894, she took finally

[79]Ford [Hueffer], Ford Madox, Memories and Impressions (London, 1911), p. 66.

[80]Packer, pp. 397-404.

to her bed, in a calm and resigned mood, but, as the time advanced, with troublous agitation, both of the spirit and of the bodily frame. Not that she was ever abashed by pain, or craven-hearted - far indeed from that; but the terrors of her religion compassed her about, to the over-clouding of its radiances."[81]

No study of Christina Rossetti's religious verse dares ignore its core, her religious attitude, imbued as it is with the sense of unworthiness that so influenced her living and dying. A neighbor wrote to William Michael Rossetti twice and threatened to give up her house to avoid hearing the poet's fearful screams. Christina Rossetti wrote no more poems then, but those cries sound as art in many of the poems written before her final sickness. The power of her meditative poetry reveals her soul naked before her God. Its waverings make her religious attitude elusive. Houghton and Stange concur in this opinion of her religious attitude: "Ultimately, what made Christina's inner life so agitated, one suspects, was the instability of her religious consciousness."[82]

[81]Poetical Works, p. lix.

[82]Victorian Poetry and Poetics, p. 600.

II. THE EDITION

Before Dante Gabriel Rossetti's death (1882), Christina Rossetti had assumed he would outlive her and prepare her complete edition. Instead, the only surviving Rossetti, not a poet, prepared the 1904 edition from her previous volumes of verse. Until 1979 no plan had existed for a complete edition: William Michael Rossetti's collection made no claim to completeness. Section B of the "Appendix" of The Poetical Works lists sixty poems "extant in ms. (a few in print also), but not used in the present edition, nor in the new poems printed in 1896."[83] These poems and others remained scattered among various persons and institutions holding Christina Rossetti manuscripts.

Within the volume itself the editor took great liberty. He not only omitted poems arbitrarily, but he divided the poems into a non-chronological series of six cumbersome categories: "The Longer Poems," "Juvenilia," "Devotional Poems," "General Poems," "Poems for Children and Minor Verse," and "Italian Poems." If William Michael Rossetti thought a poem insufficiently spiritual, it became "Gener-

[83] Poetical Works, p. xli.

al" or "Longer." No statement of standards for these divisions appears in the volume. The setting of the poems on the double-column page causes a break in many lines of verse. These broken lines compete with a capricious pattern of indentions for the reader's eye. The effect confuses and detracts attention from the poems themselves. McGann remarks: "Anyone who has studied Christina Rossetti knows the maddening frustration of working with the hitherto 'standard' collection of her poems edited by her brother William Michael Rossetti. His edition is beset with problems, not the least of which is the carelessness and high-handed behavior of the editor. He prints posthumously published works incompletely and incorrectly in numerous cases: lines and stanzas are dropped, punctuation is altered or mishandled, and titles are changed."[84] Packer shows numerous cases in which he drops or adds stanzas and changes words at will.

William Michael Rossetti's edition remains valuable, however, despite its lacks, "for the wealth of information in his notes and prefatory material. But his edition has no apparatus, and it provides little data illustrating Christina Rossetti's habits of composition and revision."[85]

[84]McGann, p. 239.

[85]McGann, p. 239.

He claims Christina Rossetti composed only on impulse:

> I have said elsewhere, but may as well repeat it here, that her habits of composition were entirely of the casual and spontaneous kind, from her earliest to her latest years. If something came into her head which she found suggestive of verse, she put it into verse. It came to her (I take it) very easily, without her meditating a possible subject, and without her making any great difference in the first from the latest form of the verses which embodied it; but some difference, with a view to right and fine execution, she did of course make when needful. If the thing did not present itself before her as craving a vesture of verse at her hands, she did not write at all.[86]

Bellas and Curran accept his opinion unquestioningly, although Packer's biography with its references to the manuscripts and the Rossetti-Macmillan letters conflicts with William Michael Rossetti's view. Bellas says, "By 1844 [age fourteen], the number of poems increased significantly; and thereafter she seemed fully committed to poetry, though she actually composed only on impulse, as she said many times in later years."[87] Curran quotes William Michael Rossetti directly from the introduction to the post-

[86] Poetical Works, pp. lxviii-lxix.

[87] Bellas, p. 20.

humous New Poems on "her attitude toward writing:"[88]

> Christina's habits of composing were eminently of the spontaneous kind. I question her having ever once deliberated with herself whether or not she would write something or other, and then, after thinking out a subject, having proceeded to treat it in regular spells of work. Instead of this, something impelled her feelings, or "came into her head," and her hand obeyed the dictation. I suppose she scribbled the lines off rapidly enough, and afterwards took whatever amount of pains she deemed requisite for keeping them right in form and expression - for she was quite conscious that a poem demands to be good in execution, as well as genuine in impulse; but (strange as it seems to say so of a sister who, up to the year 1876, was almost constantly in the same house with me) I cannot ever remember seeing her in the act of composition.[89]

Packer comments, "Although Christina may have been the 'spontaneous poet' William claims she was, she revised and rewrote her poems much as most working poets do. A good example of the kind of carpentry work (fitting and joining, knocking out and nailing together) her poems frequently

[88]Curran, p. 292

[89]Quoted in Curran, p. 292.

underwent is the piece called Spring Fancies, published in the April, 1865, issue of Macmillan's Magazine:

> How is it possible [she wrote Gabriel] that not only you recognize No. I of Spring Fancies, but resuscitate defunct lines from memory? The great original stands as The Spring Quiet in a little book dated 1847; a little book so primitive that for aught I know you did not drag its depths for G[oblin] M[arket] vol.: whence pray do not deduce that it contains other treasures, for I am not aware that it does. I will send you an exact copy of its primeval form: then will you most kindly set it right from printed copy? but suppressing fifth lines and keeping extra stanzas as you judge best. Or, on second thought, I will retain certain alterations which I know are in the printed copy and which were the result of mature reflection, and will make the sea-stanza come last, as you put it; but I must still trust to your kindness to compare and alter it by the printed copy, in case I get a word here or there wrong.[90]

Aside from her willingness to see early versions of her work changed, this passage shows Christina Rossetti's reliance on Dante Gabriel Rossetti, especially when publication loomed. Sometimes too he gave her general criti-

90 Packer, p. 205, quoting the Rossetti-Macmillan Letters, Lttr. 41 (March 30, 1865).

cism: "I wish you would try any rendering either of narrative or sentiment from real abundant Nature, which presents much more variety, even in any one of its phases, than all such 'dreamings.'"[91]

Packer presents evidence of her younger brother too advising her and, after her death, changing poems. "Echo," three stanzas in his edition, appears as seven in the notebook.[92] This change leads Stevenson to wonder "how much of the illusion of easy and discriminating artistry in Christina [Rossetti]'s lyrics arose from rigorous eliminations, whether performed by herself or by her wise editorial brother."[93]

Christina Rossetti and both her brothers possessed an innate facility for writing verse that no doubt influenced her method of composition. Over a period of half a century she produced her canon of more than one thousand poems, half of them religious in nature. Aside from periods of disability from sickness, she wrote almost daily, as did her family. William Michael Rossetti gives some idea of the rapid faculty Christina Rossetti showed in composing

[91]Oswald Doughty and John Robert Wahl, eds. Letters of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 4 vols. (Oxford: 1965-67), I: 162.

[92]Packer, pp. 90-91.

[93]Stevenson, pp. 94-95.

bout-rimé sonnets:

> Our brother Dante Gabriel and myself were, towards 1848, greatly addicted to writing sonnets together to bout-rimés;... Christina did not do much in the like way; but, being in my company at Brighton in the summer of 1848, she consented to try her chance. Like her brothers, she was very rapid at the work. The first sonnet in this present series was done in nine minutes; the ninth in five. After the Brighton days she renewed this exercise not at all. A few of her bout-rimés sonnets, after the first scribbling of them, were retouched to some, but only a small, extent.[94]

The edition of her poems by William Michael Rossetti offers a baker's dozen of these sonnets.[95]

An incident in Christina Rossetti's short story Maude attests to the ease with which she wrote verse, but it also testifies to her preparing several versions of particular poems and tempers the view of her as a "spontaneous" poet. William Michael Rossetti comments on the incident in his "Notes" to the edition:

> Sonnets xa, b, and c, pp. 420, 421. - The sonnet marked c was, like 1 to 9, written at Brighton. At a later date - 1850, or perhaps earlier - Christina wrote the prose story for girls entitled Maude (published in 1897). An incident in this story is the competition of

[94] Poetical Works, p. 490.

[95] Poetical Works, pp. 417-420, 423.

> three young ladies composing *bout-rimés* sonnets; *c* is pronounced to be the best of the three. The sonnet *a* (it will at once be observed) is not a true sonnet at all, having lines of unequal length. This was, of course, intentional on Christina's part, to mark the ineptitude of the young lady who is supposed to have indited *a*. None the less I give the three sonnets together, as showing how readily Christina could utilize the same rhymes for three entirely distinct lines of thought or subject.[96]

Christina Rossetti's method of work then did not scorn revision, although it relied on the spontaneity which preceded her development as a practiced craftsman. She curbed her natural ease by reliance on strict form, most notably the Petrarchan sonnet. Bellas observes that her "practice in the formal requirements of the Petrarchan sonnet was a valuable discipline, controlling what might have become excessive fluency."[97] With her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Christina Rossetti, according to George Saintsbury, did produce "the greatest English sonnets on the commoner Italian model."[98]

[96] *Poetical Works*, p. 490.

[97] Bellas, p. 86.

[98] Saintsbury, *Historical Manual*, p. 311.

Christina Rossetti's ease of writing and method of work lead to a natural question on the quality of the poems she composed. Their quality varies astonishingly. She wrote too much, revised too little, and destroyed too few poems. Neither she nor her editor, William Michael Rossetti, viewed her work with the cold and critical eye necessary to prune the over five hundred religious poems to a body representative of her best writing. Dorothy Stuart made that same observation in her monograph celebrating the centenary of Christina Rossetti's birth:

> Unfortunately for that reputation and for us, she was a too prolific and a too facile writer, writing far too much and consigning far too little to the merciful oblivion of the waste-basket. For this reason it is not easy to strike a just balance between her best work and her worst. As Owen Meredith observed long since, "Uniformity of good workmanship is the hall-mark of mere talent," and there is no such uniformity in the poems of Miss R.[99]

The difficulty of dating poems prevents assigning them securely to specific periods of development. After 1866 Christina Rossetti no longer dated the poems at all. Seventeen manuscript notebooks record the poems written be-

[99]Dorothy Stuart, Christina Rossetti, The English Association Pamphlet, No. 78, p. 18.

fore 1866 and after 1842, when she was twelve, but she would continue to write poetry until 1894, almost thirty years beyond the dates of the notebooks. The dating of the poems after 1866 remains only conjectural. When William Michael Rossetti edited the only collection of his sister's poetry, he assigned widely approximate dates, such as "Before 1893," "Before 1863," by the appearance of the individual poems in volumes published in those years. The imprecision of such a method becomes immediately apparent. For example, when he says of a particular poem "Before 1893," he means it appeared in the 1893 volume Verses and was written after 1866, when the notebooks ceased; therefore, Christina Rossetti probably wrote the poem between 1866 and 1893, any time within a span of twenty-seven years. Those he dates "Before 1882," she probably wrote between the 1881 A Pageant and the 1886 Prince's Progress volume. To compound the dating problem, early poems appear occasionally for the first time in print in late volumes, and stanzas from some early poems transpose into later poems.

One can only conclude that Christina Rossetti herself lost interest in dating the poems after 1866. The disappointments and sufferings of her life resulted in a spiritual maturity that produced her best poetry. Perhaps she began to view the keeping of the poems' dates as simply another unimportant earthly vanity like the many she re-

jects in her religious poetry. In any event, the vagueness of the dating after the cessation of the notebooks renders a theory based solely on the poems' dates untenable.

All her life Christina Rossetti wrote competent verse. She early developed her natural technical facility by constant practice over sixty years. Her competence does not make her a memorable minor poet. If a century and a half later she still gives pleasure to readers with her limpid secular lyrics, she moves them deeply with her desire to believe expressed in the meditative poems. She remains a shrouded and reclusive figure, but she yields her naked soul in these fine poems as she explores the mystery and uncertainty of her spiritual life. Her victory is her ability to use her mastery of craft to communicate her struggles to all who read her meditative poems.

The task of this study becomes one of devising a standard of discrimination among the religious poems while attempting to show their range and diversity. I see them as falling roughly into three groups of increasingly personal and successful poems. At the furthest remove lies the group of "dramatic" poems; nearer to personal expression but still quite exterior in approach come the "didactic" poems; most moving and artistically satisfying are the personal "meditative" poems, which reveal the innermost struggles of the poet's spiritual life. These poems most

approach her own ultimate goal of the "lyric cry." That is not to say that she does not compose fine dramatic or didactic religious poems. A high standard of craftsmanship persists in all her work, even when convention reduces many poems' effect to the insipid. The didactic and dramatic poems show the same skill as do the meditative poems, but they lack the informing spirit of sincere experience and conviction the meditative poems possess. Ready-made sentiments infuse the didactic and dramatic poems to render them bland, complacent, formal, and rhetorical. They exhort and expound; the meditative poems draw the reader into their intimate spiritual life. Their desperation to believe in the face of doubt and misfortune creates artistic tension; Christina Rossetti imprisons this fearful agitation in a cage of conventional prosody, which only heightens its impact upon the perceptive reader. A closer examination of representative poems from each of these three groups: dramatic, didactic, and meditative poems, presents convincing evidence that Christina Rossetti deserves to hold a high place among the distinguished religious poets of the English language. Her devotional poems ornament its literature with those of Hopkins, Donne, Vaughan, and Herbert. Her status as the only woman to grace such a group adds to her distinction.

Rebecca Crump's edition, of which the first volume is soon to be available, promises to illuminate the working method of Christina Rossetti and answer many puzzling questions. McGann describes its hoped-for effects: "While it is true that her manuscripts do not resemble Keats's or even Byron's her habits of revision are extremely interesting. Crump's edition shows, for example that Rossetti not infrequently established her final texts by cutting away the original openings and conclusions. The word-by-word changes are not especially remarkable, but these more severe prunings are unusual and very important. Whole stanzas and stanza sequences are lopped away from the poems' original beginnings and endings, and equally large passages are sometimes also removed from other parts of the poems. The lean and often enigmatic beauty and power of her work is certainly related to such revisionary practices."[100]

[100]McGann, p. 239

III. THROUGH THE FIRE: THE QUALITY OF THE POEMS

Christina Rossetti wrote more than five hundred religious poems during her life (1830-1894). Elisabeth Luther Cary tells "that her first formulated ambition was to write a really fine hymn," and indeed one of her first juvenile poems, "Hymn," dates from her thirteenth year.

HYMN

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

2 July 1843. (PW, p. 83)

By the time she reached the end of her life by far the greater proportion of her verse was religious.[101] The religious poems account for approximately half of her total production. More than three hundred and fifty of the religious poems bear dates after 1870, under the dating system of William Michael Rossetti's edition of The Poetical Works (1904).

[101]Elisabeth Luther Cary, The Rossettis: Dante Gabriel and Christina (New York, 1900), p. 270.

The key to her development as a devotional poet is in the variation in her poetic output before and after what can be called her "crisis years," and in the type of religious poems she wrote before and after that period. This period contained her most difficult years; aged forty to fifty, or even fifty-five, Christina Rossetti felt her spirit crushed by the events of this period: the deaths of her sister, brother, and mother, and the onset of her own painful and disfiguring disease. These events seriously limited her poetic output. In comparison earlier crises hardly affected her work at all. In 1850 Christina Rossetti broke her engagement to James Collinson and in 1866 she refused the proposal of Charles Cayley, both ostensibly on religious grounds. Through these emotional trials she continued to compose poetry, but the gravity of those misfortunes occurring after 1870 almost dried up the flow of her talent:

"In 1871 she was stricken with the terrible disease that so changed her appearance during the remaining three-and-twenty years of her life, the exophthalmic bronchocele which has for its most noticeable symptom a marked protrusion of the eyeballs."[102]

[102]Cary, p. 240.

Also known as Graves' Syndrome, this disease changed the beautiful young woman of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's pencil sketch "as a frontispiece to her privately printed volume Verses, of 1847"[103] to a yellow-skinned, weighty sick woman with bulging eyes. She tried to hide from the sight of others by going into seclusion. Already dependent on her close family and preferring to remain with them rather than to marry, Christina Rossetti then began losing her family members one after another. In 1873 Maria Rossetti, the eldest of the family of four, left home to enter the Anglican order of All Saints. Two years later, in 1876, Maria Rossetti died, after Christina and her mother had nursed her through her final summer.[104] Lucy Brown Rossetti, wife to William Michael since 1874, had now begun to resent sharing her husband with his sister and mother in the same home. By 1877 the conflict was settled when Christina Rossetti and her mother Frances Rossetti ceded the family house to William Michael and Lucy Rossetti. They moved to a house at 30 Torrington Square where Maria, Gabriel (1882), Frances (1886), and finally Christina Rossetti (1894), all died. Maria Rossetti required two opera-

[103] Poetical Works, p. lxiv.

[104] Packer, p. 318.

tions, as did Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who, in addition, suffered from an addiction to chloral. Because her mother was now seventy-seven, the burden of her brother's nursing over ten years naturally fell to Christina Rossetti, and several witnesses attest to the difficulty of the patient, always melancholy, anxious, and fearful.

The volume of Christina Rossetti's children's poetry Sing-Song appeared in 1872. Christina Rossetti wrote the poems in 1870, as Packer attests.[105] In a letter to the publisher Ellis, dated February 23, 1870, she uses the phrase "Nursery Rhymes I have just completed."[106] Despite her popularity, she did not publish another volume of poetry for nearly ten years (1881), except for a reprint in 1875. In 1874 she testifies to her lack of new poems by saying, "'Of never-printed pieces, I fear I shall scarcely find one or two for use.'"[107] She does, however, refer to A Pageant and Other Poems (1881) as a new volume, which put her "'somewhat in a quake, a fresh volume being a formidable upset of nerves.'"[108]

[105]Packer, p. 265.

[106]Quoted in Packer, p. 274.

[107]Quoted in Packer, p. 339.

[108]Packer, p. 339.

Though all of her religious poetry before and after the crisis years shows her to be a poet of a highly competent and constant technical facility, the bulk of the Christina Rossetti devotional canon comes from the last fifteen years, after this rapid succession of misfortunes had scarred her life. These events, powerful enough to stop her writing for a period of years, not only caused her to write devotional poems in larger numbers, but to develop in them greater spiritual intensity. Although a more conventional kind of devotional poetry predominates in her work and even continues to be written after her years of crisis, the suffering she endured produced a totally different, more moving and distinguished body of devotional verse.

I have devised three working categories for discussion of the Christina Rossetti religious poems: "dramatic," "didactic," and "meditative." Of some five hundred devotional poems, the didactic make up the largest group, about three hundred, or approximately sixty per cent of the total religious poetic production. The meditative poems comprise another group of about one hundred and fifty poems, or about thirty per cent of the total, and the dramatic religious poems the remainder, about fifty poems, or approximately ten per cent.

In defining these groups I attach particular meanings

to the three terms, "dramatic," "didactic," and "meditative." The "dramatic" religious poems of Christina Rossetti consist of situations and speakers, ranging from one (monologue), or two (dialogue), to more (multiple characters, chorus, or narrator); for example, one of the first, "Death is Swallowed up in Victory," consists of a dialogue between a devout dying Christian and a skeptical wordly friend:

DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY

'Tell me: doth it not grieve thee
  to lie there,
 And see the cornfields waving not
  for thee,
Just in the waking summer of the
  year?'
 'I fade from earth and lo along
  with me
The season that I love will fade
  away:
 How should I look for autumn
  longingly?'
'Yet autumn beareth fruit whilst day
  by day
 The leaves grow browner with a
  mellow hue,
Declining to a beautiful decay.'
 'Decay is death, with which I
  have to do,
And see it near: behold, it is more
  good
 Than length of days and length
  of sorrow too.'
'But thy heart hath not dwelt in
  solitude;
 Many have loved and love thee:
  dost not heed
Free love, for which in vain have
  others sued?'
 'I thirst for love, love is mine
  only need,

Love such as none hath borne me
nor can bear,
True love that prompteth thought
and word and deed.'
'Here it is not: why seek it other-
where?
Nay, bow thy head, and own that
on this earth
Are many goodly things and sweet
and fair.'
'There are tears in man's laughter:
in his mirth
There is a fearful forward look; and lo
An infant's cry gives token of its
birth.'
'I mark the ocean of Time ebb and
flow:
He who hath care one day and is
perplext
To-morrow may have joy in place of
woe.'
'Evil becomes good: and to this
annext
Good becomes evil: speak of it no
more:
My heart is wearied and my spirit
vext.'
'Is there no place it grieves thee to
give o'er?
Is there no home thou lov'st, and
so wouldst fain
Tarry a little longer at the door?'
I must go hence and not return
again:
But the friends whom I have shall
come to me,
And dwell together with me safe
from pain.'
'Where is that mansion mortals
cannot see?
Behold, the tombs are full of
worms: shalt thou
Rise hence and soar up skywards
gloriously?'
'Even as the planets shine we
know not how,
We shall be raised then, changed
yet still the same --
Being made like Christ, yea being
as He is now.'

'Thither thou go'st whence no man
ever came:
Death's voyagers return not, and
in death
There is no room for speech or sign
or fame.'
'There is room for repose that
comforteth;
There weariness is not: and there
content
Broodeth for ever, and hope
hovereth.'
'When the stars fall and when the
graves are rent,
Shalt thou have safety? shalt thou
look for life
When the great light of the broad
sun is spent?'
'These elements shall consum-
mate their strife,
This heaven and earth shall shrivel
like a scroll,
And then be re-created, beauty-
rife.'
'Who shall abide it when from pole
to pole
The world's foundations shall be
overthrown?
Who shall abide to scan the perfect
whole?'
'He who hath strength given to
him, not his own:
He who hath faith in that which is
not seen,
And patient hope: who trusts in
Love alone.'
'Yet thou -- the death-struggle must
intervene
Ere thou win rest: think better
of it: think
Of all that is and shall be and hath
been.'
'The cup my Father giveth me to
drink,
Shall I not take it meekly? though
my heart
Tremble a moment, it shall never
shrink.'

'Satan will wrestle with thee when
thou art
In the last agony; and Death
will bring
Sins to remembrance ere thy spirit
part.'
'In that great hour of unknown
suffering
God shall be with me, and His arm
made bare
Shall fight for me: yea, under-
neath His wing
I shall lie safe at rest and freed
from care.'

20 February 1848 (PW, pp. 114-116)

The punctuation of the poem carefully marks off the speakers. One of two poems uses a narrator and a group of speakers, "Behold I stand at the Door and Knock." (PW, pp. 147-148; see pp. 77-78), some are monologues, such as "The Love of Christ which passeth Knowledge:"

THE LOVE OF CHRIST
WHICH PASSETH KNOW-
LEDGE

I bore with thee long weary days
and nights,
Through many pangs of heart,
through many tears;
I bore with thee, thy hardness, cold-
ness, slights,
For three-and-thirty years.

Who else had dared for thee what I
have dared?
I plunged the depth most deep
from bliss above;
I not My flesh, I not my spirit
spared:
Give thou Me love for love.

For thee I thirsted in the daily
drought,
For thee I trembled in the nightly
frost:
Much sweeter thou than honey to
My mouth:
Why wilt thou still be lost?

I bore thee on My shoulders and
rejoiced:
Men only marked upon My
shoulders borne
The branding cross; and shouted
hungry-voiced,
Or wagged their heads in scorn.

Thee did nails grave upon My hands,
thy name
Did thorns for frontlets stamp
between Mine eyes:
I, Holy One, put on thy guilt and
I, God, Priest, Sacrifice.

A thief upon My right hand and
My left;
Six hours alone, athirst, in misery:
At length in death, one smote My
heart and cleft
A hiding-place for thee.

Nailed to the racking cross, than
bed of down
More dear, whereon to stretch
Myself and sleep:
So did I win a kingdom, -- Share My crown;
A harvest, -- Come and reap.

15 October 1858. (PW, pp. 215-216)

Some are liturgical, as "A Burden:"

A BURDEN

They lie at rest asleep and dead,
The dew is cool above their head,
They knew not when past summer
fled-- Amen.

They lie at rest and quite forget
The hopes and fears that wring us
yet:
Their eyes are set, their heart is set--
Amen.

They lie with us, yet gone away
Hear nothing that we sob or say
Beneath the thorn of wintry May--
Miserere.

They lie asleep with us, and take
Sweet rest although our heart should
ache,
Rest on although our heart should
break-- Miserere.

Together all yet each alone,
Each laid at rest beneath his own
Smooth turf or white appointed
stone-- Amen.

When shall our slumbers be so deep,
And bleeding heart and eyes that
weep
Lie lapped in the sufficient sleep?--
Miserere.

We dream of them, and who shall say
They never dream while far away
Of us between the night and day?--
Sursum Corda.

Gone far away: or it may be
They lean toward us and hear and
see,
Yea and remember more than we--
Amen.

For wherefore should we think them
far
Who know not where those spirits are
That shall be glorious as a star?--
Hallelujah.

Where chill or change can never
rise,
Deep in the depths of Paradise
They rest world-wearied heart and
eyes-- Jubilate.

Safe as a hidden brooding dove,
With perfect peace within, above,
They love, and look for perfect
love-- Halleluiah.

We hope and love with throbbing
breast,
They hope and love and are at rest:
And yet we question which is best--
Miserere.

Oh what is earth that we should
build
Our houses here, and seek concealed
Poor treasure, and add field to field

And heap to heap and store to store,
Still grasping more and seeking more
While Death stands knocking at the
door?-- Cui bono?

But one will answer: Changed and
pale
And sick at heart, I thirst, I fail
For love, I thirst without avail--
Miserrima.

Sweet love, a fountain sealed to me:
Sweet love, the one sufficiency
For all the longings that can be--
Amen.

Oh happy they alone whose lot
Is love! I search from spot to spot:
In life, in death, I find it not--
Miserrima.

Not found in life: nay verily.
I too have sought: come sit with
me,
And grief for grief shall answer
thee-- Miserrima.

Sit with me where the sapless leaves
Are heaped and sere: to him who
grieves
What cheer have last year's harvest-
sheaves?-- Cui bono?

Not found in life, yet found in death.
Hush, throbbing heart and sobbing
breath!
There is a nest of love beneath

The sod, a home prepared before:
Our brethren whom one mother bore
Live there, and toil and ache no
more-- Hallelujah.

Our friends, our kinfolk, great and
small,
Our loved, our best beloved of all,
They watch across the parting wall

(Do they not watch?) and count the
creep
Of time, and sound the shallowing
deep,
Till we in port shall also sleep--
Hallelujah, Amen.

16 July 1858. (PW, pp. 204-205)

and "Dost Thou not care?" (PW, pp. 242-243; see pp. 95-96). After 1870 nearly all of these poems are dialogues between Christ and the Christian only. The exceptions are "'As cold Waters to a thirsty Soul, so is good News from a far Country,'" (PW, pp. 209-210) a dialogue between an angel and a Christian, and "YE have forgotten the EXHORTATION," (PW, pp. 181-182) between an angel and the soul. About half of the dramatic poems appear before 1870 and half after that date, the latter half divided almost equally between the 1886 and 1893 approximate dating periods used by William Michael Rossetti.

The "didactic" poems are not only poems that teach Christian virtues and beliefs, but in the Christina Rosset-

ti religious canon they have a special voice, always a public exhortatory voice, apparent in the pronouns of the second person singular and plural and the first and third person plural. They comprise such a large group because Christina Rossetti wrote a poem for each day of the Christian year in an 1874 book, Annus Domini. Later, of course, these poems appeared in the collections of verse and in The Poetical Works. Such a poem as "Easter Day"

EASTER DAY

Words cannot utter
  Christ His returning:
Mankind, keep jubilee,
  Strip off your mourning,
Crown you with garlands,
  Set your lamps burning.

Speech is left speechless;
  Set you to singing,
Fling your hearts open wide,
  Set your bells ringing:
Christ the Chief Reaper
  Comes, His sheaf bringing.

Earth wakes her song-birds,
  Puts on her flowers,
Leads out her lambkins,
  Builds up her bowers:
This is man's spousal day,
  Christ's day and ours.

Before 1886 (PW, p. 168)

is typical of this group, which Cary characterizes as "the conventional intonation of an uninspired though devout worshipper."[109]

[109]Cary, p. 274.

The "meditative" poems are the crown of achievement in the devotional canon of Christina Rossetti. Although her poems in all three categories demonstrate her mastery of craft, these poems show a profound and deeply personal spiritual experience. They raise her from the ranks of tractarian writers of religious verse to a place among the noteworthy devotional poets in English. Cary remarks that the "two great qualities of her religious poems are those that also distinguish her most purely secular songs,--sincerity and fervour."[110] Cary also writes that Christina Rossetti's best type of devotional poems contains the "Christian cry of entreaty and adoration that rings with so melodious a sound."[111] She also acknowledges the ability of this poetry to attract those not sharing her beliefs, "an audience ordinarily untouched by religious poetry."[112]

Not only the tone of sincerity and intensity marks the meditative poems. Their use of the personal pronoun almost exclusively and their ability to employ all the poetic ease Christina Rossetti possesses to a higher purpose than affecting the behavior of others, as do the propagandistic didactic poems, distinguish them from both the didactic and

[110]Cary, p. 270.

[111]Cary, p. 274.

[112]Cary, p. 271.

dramatic poems. Primarily poems of the self, for in them Christina Rossetti intimately confronts her God, most of the poems date from 1875, after the years of bereavement and disease. About one quarter of them fall between 1857 and 1866. None again occurs until "Wrestling" in 1875; the rest come from either the group of 1882 or 1886 poems, those dating around the deaths of her mother and older brother, or the 1893 poems before her final sickness and death. This last group from 1875 to 1893 comprises three-fourths of the meditative poems. Her biographer supports this theory of change: "Thus for the sentimental self-abnegation of the late 'sixties she substituted in the 'seventies a self-exaltation which, arising not from pride of ego but from the full acknowledgment of the dignity of personality, was more in harmony with the requirements of her development in her mature years."[113]

"Wrestling," which marks her beginning again to write personal poetry after the terrible years, may stand as an example of the meditative poems. Stevenson praises it specifically: "In the religious poems the fervor of her worship and the agony of her supplications for divine mercy have seldom been rivaled by an English poet, and certainly never by a woman. They merit comparison with those of

[113]Packer, p. 324.

Donne, Crashaw, and Herbert, as in the metaphysical paradoxes of 'Wrestling.'"[114]

WRESTLING

Alas my Lord,
How should I wrestle all the live-
long night
With Thee my God, my strength
and my delight?

How can it need
So agonized an effort and a strain
To make Thy face of mercy shine
again?

How can it need
Such wringing out of breathless
prayer to move
Thee to Thy wonted love, when
Thou art Love?

Yet Abraham
So hung about Thine arm, out-
stretcht and bared,
That for ten righteous Sodom had
been spared.

Yet Jacob did
So hold Thee by the clenched hand
of prayer
That he prevailed and Thou didst
bless him there.

Elias prayed,
And sealed the founts of heaven:
he prayed again,
And lo Thy blessing fell in showers
of rain.

Gulpt by the fish
And by the pit, lost Jonah made
his moan,
And Thou forgavest, waiting to
atone.

[114]Stevenson, p. 119

All Nineveh
Fasting and girt in sackcloth raised
a cry,
Which moved Thee ere the day of
grace went by.

Thy Church prayed on
And on for blessed Peter in his
strait,
Till opened of its own accord the
gate.

Yea Thou my God
Hast prayed all night, and in the
garden prayed,
Even while like melting wax Thy
strength was made.

Alas for him
Who faints despite Thy pattern,
King of Saints!
Alas alas for me the one that
faints!

Lord, give us strength
To hold Thee fast until we hear
Thy voice,
Which Thine own know who hearing
it rejoice.

Lord, give us strength
To hold Thee fast until we see Thy
Face,
Full fountain of all rapture and all
grace.

But, when our strength
Shall be made darkness, and our
bodies clay,
Hold Thou us fast and give us sleep
till day.

Before 1875. (PW, pp. 247-248)

Until Christina Rossetti begins to write religious poems from her own spiritual life, she strikes little fire.

Some early poems show an apprenticeship, but they do not flame with the intensity of the later meditative poems, despite their grasp of technique. Her best religious poems approach the passion of Hopkins, although they do not equal his in technical daring. Yet they still show a unique virtuosity at the service of her spiritual expression. All of the devotional poems appear deceptively simple, a fact Cary notes: "the language is usually so homely and direct, that we are sometimes inclined to deny that the form is artistic at all." At the core of Christina Rossetti's facility is her ability to appear perfectly spontaneous, almost never labored.

The rhetorical technique she most favors that gives this impression is parallel structure, including the use of questions and answers. The personal emotion of the meditative poems raises them above the artistic level of the dramatic and didactic poems, even though all use the same techniques with equal skill. Among the dramatic poems, which comprise only fifty of her five hundred religious poems, "Behold, I stand at the Door and Knock" (1851), one of two poems with narrator in the dramatic group, employs the question and answer technique in its development. Each of its five octaves begins with a question, answered in the rest of each stanza:

BEHOLD, I STAND AT THE DOOR AND KNOCK

Who standeth at the gate?-- A
woman old,
A widow from the husband of her
love.
'O lady, stay, this wind is piercing cold,
Oh look at the keen frosty moon above;
I have no home, am hungry, feeble,
poor.'--
'I'm really very sorry, but I can
Do nothing for you; there's the
Clergyman,'
The lady said, and shivering closed
the door.

Who standeth at the gate?--Way-
worn and pale
A grey-haired man asks charity
again.
'Kind lady, I have journeyed far,
and fail
Through weariness; for I have
begged in vain
Some shelter, and can find no
lodging-place.'--
She answered: 'There's the work-
house very near;
Go, for they'll certainly receive you there'--
Then shut the door against his pleading face.

Who standeth at the gate?--A
stunted child,
Her sunk eyes sharpened with
precocious care.
'O lady, save me from a home
defiled,
From shameful sights and sounds
that taint the air:
Take pity on me, teach me something good.'--
'For shame, why don't you work
instead of cry?
I keep no young impostors here,
not I.'
She slammed the door, indignant
where she stood.

Who standeth at the gate, and will
be heard?
Arise, O woman, from thy comforts
now:
Go forth again to speak the careless
word,
The cruel word unjust, with
hardened brow.
But who is this, that standeth not to
pray
As once, but terrible to judge thy
sin?
This whom thou wouldst not succour nor take in
Nor teach but leave to perish by the
way.

'Thou didst it not unto the least of
these,
And in them hast not done it unto
Me.
Thou wast as a princess rich and at
ease--
Now sit in dust and howl for poverty.
Three times I stood beseeching at
thy gate,
Three times I came to bless thy
soul and save;
But now I come to judge for what
I gave,
And now at length thy sorrow is too late.'

1 December 1851 (PW, pp. 147-148)

In the first stanza the narrator queries, "Who standeth at the gate?" A dash indicates the beginning of an answer by this narrator, or possibly a second narrator, who describes the first speaker, a widow. The same pattern shapes the following stanzas, as a widow, an old man, a stunted child, and, after a stanza of sermon the narrator addresses to the woman of the house, Christ Himself appears. The

first three speakers plead with an indifferent "lady," who answers them with brief disclaimers of responsibility ("there's the clergyman," or "workhouse") and closes her doors to them. The stock situation and the stereotypical characters excite little interest or response, despite the careful construction of the poem. The speakers, undistinguished by individual traits, cannot move the reader, even though the question and answer technique cogently organizes the thought of the poem. In fact, the stock situation and stereotypical speakers actually undercut and detract from the effective use of the rhetorical device. The general diction of this trite religious conception robs it of any power to affect the thoughts and feelings of the reader. The only reader who may possibly respond to this poem, such as an evangelical Christian, already comes to the composition convinced of its ideas from a background of agreement, that includes a regard for the Gospels as God-inspired and sacred books. The non-Christian reader cannot respond with the same assurance, for he does not share these beliefs. He merely reads a dull, unaffecting, trite religious poem. The poem lacks concrete experience, deeply felt. It merely passes on the beliefs of others in the most general and mundane way.

Other dramatic poems show the same question and answer technique, used as effectively, with as little poetic power.

"The Master is come, and calleth for Thee," ("Before 1876.") in William Michael Rossetti's standard reference form, illustrates this point. The approximate date the poet's editor assigns it only means the poem does not appear in the manuscript notebooks to 1866. Therefore, its time of writing could fall anytime from the close of the notebooks in 1866 to the composite volume of verse in 1875, that included the previously published poems, as well as this one, Goblin Market, The Prince's Progress, and Other Poems. Because she wrote so little in this period, and because of the poem's characteristics, I place it with the religious poems of the 1860s, before the attack of her thyroid disorder.

THE MASTER IS COME, AND
CALLETH FOR THEE

Who calleth?--Thy Father calleth,
Run, O Daughter, to wait on
Him:
He Who chastened but for a season
Trims thy lamp that it burn not
dim.

Who calleth?--Thy Master calleth,
Sit, Disciple, and learn of Him:
He Who teacheth wisdom of Angels
Makes thee wise as the Cherubim.

Who calleth?--Thy Monarch calleth,
Rise, O Subject, and follow Him:
He is stronger than Death or Devil,
Fear not thou if the foe be grim.

Who calleth?--Thy Lord God
calleth,
Fall, O Creature, adoring Him:
He is jealous, thy God Almighty,
Count not dear to thee life or
limb.

Who calleth?--Thy bridegroom
calleth,
Soar, O Bride, with the Seraphim:
He Who loves thee as no man loveth
Bids thee give up thy heart to
Him.

Before 1876. (PW, p. 248)

Another stock situation confronts the reader from the Gospel parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins. Each of the five quatrains begins with the question "Who calleth?" A dash marks the entrance of the Divine speakers: "Thy Father," "Thy Master," "Thy Monarch," "Thy Lord God," and "Thy Bridegroom." Surely the arrangement indicates the spiritual immaturity of the poet and supports the claim for a dating around 1867 or 1868. Although Christina Rossetti characterizes the speakers appropriately, such as "Who chasteneth" for "Thy Father," and "He who teacheth wisdom of angels" for "Thy Master," the vague generalities make the poem ineffective. Each stanza ends in a typically conventional Christian sentiment that could be drawn from almost any religious writing of the period, as "He Who loves thee as no man loveth / Bids thee give up thy heart to Him."

These poems offer a key to understanding the poet at this time. Their ineffectiveness shows either that she lacks a fund of personal religious thought and feeling, or that such experience, if she does possess it, has remained, for whatever reason, inaccessible to her as a poet. In its absence, many of her poems become mere exercises of form.

Packer tells that Christina Rossetti's religion in her early life had come to her from her mother Frances Rossetti and her sister Maria Rossetti. Her mother's favorite author was Jeremy Taylor,[115] and she educated her children at home with the Cathechism and the Bible (particularly Revelation), with an emphasis on Tractarian doctrine in the Anglican High Church, of which all three women all their lives were devout members. Never an intellectual, Christina Rossetti accepted without question the beliefs of her family and their custom of worship.

Until the experience of her own severe illness and the ordeals and deaths of her close family, apparently Christina Rossetti either did not forge a personal spiritual life or had no strong incentive to make poetry of it. Of course, much of her life remains obscure because of scarce documentation, but events strong enough to suspend her gift intermittently over a decade, such as her own disfigurement from disease, her decision never to marry, the deaths of her parents, sister, and brother, pushed her to reassess her relation to God to find strength to bear them. That reassessment changed her poetry from the mere competence shown in these poems previously cited to the true feeling present in

[115]Packer, p. 5.

the meditative poems.

This spiritual development came to inform her already skillful use of the technique of question and answer to create her great devotional poems. Hallmarks of this change appear in these poems as a willingness to write in the first person and to shorten the distance between the speaker and the reader by forsaking the stock figures of religious writing found in the Parables and Gospels of Christ in the New Testament. Whether one chooses to think this "I" Christina Rossetti herself or a persona hardly matters. Her life and her writings both in poetry and prose closely identify her with the persona of the religious poems; they testify to the personal spiritual life of their speaker. In the poems she continues to use her most common device, parallel structure, especially as question and answer, but most successfully as a unity of thought and feeling, not an external ordering device. A unified composition, comprising more than its individual parts, results.

Curran astutely praises the first of a triplet of sonnets "'If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not,'" as "one of the small number of Christina Rossetti's poems which bear comparison with masterpieces"[116] and "one of the monumental expositions of the form in Victorian poetry."[117] (PW,

[116]Curran, p. 295.

[117]Curran, p. 296.

pp. 261-262; see pp. 17-18) This fine sonnet shows the use of question and answer technique with a "formal energy,"[118] quite characteristic of the fine group of meditative poems which communicate emotional sincerity.

The sonnet begins its octave with a question that restates the title of the group of sonnets, with pathos that conveys a simple strength by its reliance on monosyllable: "I have done I know not what,--what have I done?" The two quatrains compose two waves of emotional accusation that culminate in the macabre and grotesque image of "Rank with death-savour underneath the sun!". The masculine boldness and daring here do suggest Hopkins, as Christina Rossetti dares the double alliteration of "Fruitless it may be, fleeting fruitless by."

Christina Rossetti uses question and answer also in the sestet as a separation of it from the octave, as indeed the emphatic punctuation indicates. Two unanswered questions and a plea compose the sestet. The power of the questions resides in the uselessness of their implied answers: nothing, no avail and no profit, comes from pleading lack of knowledge. Only the pity of Christ can outweigh this terrible responsibility, says the closing couplet.

[118]Curran, p. 296.

The liturgical rhythms of the poet's passionate pleas for mercy in the last line complete the theme in a way that satisfies the reader emotionally and thematically. This sonnet shows a radically new use of an old technique, an important indicator of a differing religious sensibility. The poet's vulnerable condition differs markedly from the certainty of earlier poems. Her faith in Christ to balance her sin, even the sin of omission, shows a mature level of spiritual experience wrested from the hard blows of her decade of suffering. The masculine force of the diction appears in Christina Rossetti's harsh monosyllables and underscores the equally harsh judgment of God that only Christ can relieve; for the speaker calls on God to pity Christ, as the "Thou" in the thirteenth line shows, before she asks for pity for herself in the last line. "If it may be" means that if God the Father may pity and forgive the sins of omission of God the Son as Jesus Christ, he may also pity and forgive the speaker.

Obviously Christina Rossetti handles the question and answer skillfully in "Behold, I stand at the Door and Knock," but in "'If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not,'" she uses it with greater freedom and less rigidity. She shows she need not answer the questions, and certainly not answering them opens them to the reader's imaginative participation in the poem. She also demonstrates that the

questions need not appear in strictly spaced rhetorical units; in fact, they may follow the answers, as in "'Cried out with Tears:'"

'Cried out with Tears.'

Lord, I believe, help Thou mine
unbelief:
Lord, I repent, help mine impeni-
tence:
Hide not Thy Face from me, nor
spurn me hence,
Nor utterly despise me in my grief;
Nor say me nay, who worship with the thief
Bemoaning my so long lost in-
nocence:--
Ah me! my penitence a fresh
offence,
Too tardy and too tepid and too
brief.
Lord, must I perish, I who look to
Thee?
Look Thou upon me, bid me live, not die;
Say 'Come,' say not 'Depart,'
Yea, Lord, be mindful how of the dust
I look to Thee while Thou dost look
on me,
Thou face to face with me and
Eye to eye.

Before 1893. (PW, pp. 266-267)

In this sonnet the question appears as the last line of the octave, after statements of belief and repentance and pleas for mercy and forgiveness. God does not answer within the poem, for the answer depends on the faith of the penitent speaker, even though the penance is "Too tardy and too tepid and too brief."

Not as splendid a poem as the one previously cited, this devotional sonnet is still of fine quality. Its ad-

mirable parallel structure enhances its appeal in such lines as the final couplet:

"I look to Thee while Thou dost look
on me,
Thou Face to face with me and
Eye to eye."

The paired lines, such as the first and second and the fourth and fifth, give external structure to the sonnet while adding internal rhythm and balance:

"Lord, I believe, help Thou mine
unbelief:
Lord, I repent, help mine impeni-
tence:"

"Nor utterly despise me in my grief;
Nor say me nay, who worship with the thief"

Within lines the repetition of syntactic units, such as the adverb-adjective series of line eight, creates energy and momentum, in this case to carry the fear of the sinner's insufficiency into the sestet where the poet counters it with a reliance on God's mercy:

"Ah me! my penitence a fresh
offence,
Too tardy and too tepid and too
brief."

The spacing of the units and the repetition of the plosive t and b make the line hard and foreboding in its initial sounds. Their assonance makes a strong syllabic binder that heightens the emotional push into the question beginning the sestet.

The significant spiritual attitude in this poem is the realization of no certainty but faith in a revealed Christ. The speaker sees limits to her understanding that only faith can overcome, limits beyond the imagination of the untried poet of the poems before 1870, who lacks the profundity of the later writer. "'What good shall my Life do me?'" (1858) begins with a question after its title question, which is a quotation.

'What good shall my life do me?'

Have dead men long to wait?--

There is a certain term
For their bodies to the worm
And their souls at heaven gate:
Dust to dust, clod to clod,
These precious things of God,
Trampled underfoot by man
And beast the appointed years.--

Their longest life was but a span
For change and smiles and tears:
Is it worth while to live,
Rejoice and grieve,
Hope, fear, and die?
Man with man, truth with lie,
The slow show dwindles by:
At last what shall we have
Besides a grave?--

Lies and shows no more,
No fear, no pain,
But after hope and sleep
Dear joys again.
Those who sowed shall reap:
Those wo bore
The Cross shall wear the Crown;
Those who clomb [sic] the steep
There shall sit down.

The Shepherd of the sheep
Feeds His flock there:
In watered pastures fair
They rest and leap.
'Is it worth while to live?'
Be of good cheer:
Love casts out fear:
Rise up, achieve.

September, 1858. (PW, p. 215)

Christina Rossetti spaces the opening question before the pattern of four stanzas begins; this placement gives the question great emphasis, but the rigidity of the device seems amateurish. She asks, "Have dead men long to wait?", but in the stanzas that follow she ignores the question by palming it off with the phrase "a certain term," and in the second stanza poses two new queries:

"Is it worth while to live,
Rejoice and grieve,
Hope, fear, and die?"

"At last what shall we have
Besides a grave?--"

In the final stanza the poet repeats the second question, and she answers it with a vague platitude:

"'Is it worth while to live?'
Be of good cheer:
Love casts out fear:
Rise up, achieve."

This poor didactic poem scarcely qualifies as more than attempted verse. No evidence of the poet's "lyric cry," or "unity of purpose" appears here, nor even her concern for diction. The stanzas have irregular lengths, and the lines have erratic rhyme, yet even in this poem she knows how to

use parallel structure. Lines two and three use exact syntactical order. Line four employs internal parallelism, even though clod coming after dust acts as deflationary diction, probably unintentional. In the third stanza the first four lines show a similar use of parallel structure, but three of the final four lines have a similar initial syntactical pattern:

"Those who sowed..."

"Those who bore..."

...

"Those who clomb [sic] ..."

The fuzzy purpose of this poem, not thought or felt in any concrete way, prevents its developing any poetic power. Its general and vague diction contribute to the poem's failure. The parallel structure protrudes from the poem as perhaps its only merit.

What makes some poems using question and answer, and other forms of parallel structure, superior to other poems is their revelation of personal, rather than conventional, religious thought and feeling, providing that the poet can handle other poetic techniques with equal skill. A later didactic poem shows a skillful handling of all the material and techniques, particularly the question and answer device. This poem does, however, belong among the didactic poems because it accepts without searching or struggling the Christian doctrine of life after death. Yet its assertion

of the belief rests on the image of the rose introducing each of its three stanzas, and the use of a form of the French rondeau to reinforce the patterns of parallel structure.

Where shall I find a white rose blowing?--
Out in the garden where all sweets be.--
But out in the garden the snow was snowing
And never a white rose opened for me.
Nought but snow and a wind were blowing
And snowing.

Where shall I find a blush rose blushing?--
On the garden wall or the garden bed.--
But out in my garden the rain was rushing
And never a blush rose raised its head.
Nothing glowing, flushing or blushing:
Rain rushing.

Where shall I find a red rose budding?--
Out in the garden where all things grow.--
But out in the garden a floow was flooding
And never a red rose began to blow.
Out in a flooding what should be budding?
All flooding!

Now is winter and now is sorrow,
  No roses but only thorns to-
  day:
Thorns will put on roses to-morrow,
  Winter and sorrow scudding away.
No more winter and no more sorrow
  To-morrow.

Circa 1884. (PW, p. 131)

These questions are nearly always parallel, so as to form a structure within which the answers appear.

Although didactic, this poem approaches a more personal poetry. The persona proposes and answers the questions, but the doctrine is not applied to her own salvation or personal destiny. The parallel elements give expression to a more personal and a distinctive rhythm, especially the accumulation of present participles within stanzas and as the final line to each stanza but the last. This stanza, also of six verses, although containing parallel nouns and adjectives in the fifth line and parallel clauses in the first line, adds nothing to the poem. Its different form seems anticlimactic after the patterns that preceded it.

A look at a fine meditative poem beginning "Lord, what have I to offer?" ("Before 1886.") shows the use of the question and answer device in a truly moving way, as does "'If thou sayest, Behold, we knew it not.'"

Lord, what have I to offer? sicken-
  ing fear
  And a heart-breaking loss.
Are these the cross Thou givest me?
  then dear
  I will account this cross.

If this is all I have, accept even this
Poor priceless offering,
A quaking heart with all that therein
is,
O Thou my thorn-crowned King.

Accept the whole, my God, accept
my heart
And its own love within:
Wilt Thou accept us and not sift
apart?
--Only sift out my sin.

Before 1886. (PW, pp. 124-125)

This poem begins with a question and answer and ends with a question and answer. The two rhetorical units frame the poem's three quatrains, while the alternating line lengths of iambic pentameter and trimeter give it serenity and balance that reflect its faith.

The first question shows the humility and vulnerability of the speaker, for her cross of fear and loss, suffering given by God is the answer to the question. The "poor priceless offering" is, however, acceptable because Jesus Christ, "O Thou my thorn-crowned King" is within. The final question asks that God in his judgment not separate the speaker from Christ, only from "my sin." The poem ends with what appears to be a question and answer by the punctuation, yet it is a metaphysical question only, for no one answers in the poem, implying a new mode of religious feeling. The speaker must wait, but her faith in Christ's power to save her suggests the favorable answer. The power of this poem and of the meditative verse it typifies lies in

its human weakness that encompasses the effort of belief and the admission of uncertainty.

This poem shows the mature level of religious experience Christina Rossetti had wrested from her life's difficulties. In earlier years she had written this kind of poem, but she wrote it as a dramatic poem in which she invented the dialogue for Christ, rather than accepting the necessity of unanswerable questions supported by faith. "Not Yours but You" (1856) shows the double development, for the speaker takes the octave, and she and Christ share lines in the sestet.

NOT YOURS BUT YOU

'He died for me: what can I offer
Him?
Toward Him swells incense of
perpetual prayer:
His court wear crowns and aureoles
round their hair:
His ministers are subtle Cherubim;
Ring within ring, white intense
Seraphim
Leap like immortal lightnings
through the air.
What shall I offer Him? defiled
and bare,
My spirit broken and my brightness
dim.'--
'Give Me thy youth.'--'I yield it to
Thy rod,
As Thou didst yield Thy prime
of youth for me.'--
'Give Me thy life.'--'I give it
breath by breath;

As Thou didst give Thy life so
give I Thee.'--
'Give Me thy love.'--'So be it, my
God, my God,
As Thou hast loved me even
to bitter death.'

27 October 1856 (PW, p. 188)

Ten years later Christina Rossetti writes a similar poem, "Dost Thou not care?" (1864).

DOST THOU NOT CARE?

'I love and love not: Lord, it breaks
my heart
To love and not to love.
Thou veiled within Thy glory, gone
apart
Into Thy shrine which is above,
Dost Thou not love me, Lord, or care
For this mine ill?'--
'I love thee here or there,
I will accept thy broken heart--
lie still.'

'Lord, it was well with me in time
gone by
That cometh not again,
When I was fresh and cheerful, who
but I?
I fresh, I cheerful: worn out with pain
Now, out of sight and out of heart;
O Lord, how long?'--
'I watch thee as thou art,
I will accept thy fainting heart--
be strong.'

'Lie still, be strong, to-day: but,
Lord, to-morrow,
What of to-morrow, Lord?
Shall thrre be rest from tiol, be truce
from sorrow,
Be living green upon the sward,
Now but a barren grave to me,
Be joy for sorrow?'--

'Did I not die for thee?
Do I not live for thee? Leave
Me to-morrow.'
24 December 1864 (PW, pp. 242-243)

The question and answer device and other parallel elements appear with skillful use in these poems, but the spiritual attitude of the poet's ability to provide all the answers by writing dialogue for Christ gives the poems a tone of artificiality and insincerity.

A simple double-quatrain poem that begins "Lord Jesus, who would think that I am Thine?" ("Before 1886.") stands as a more successful poem than these two because of its spiritual attitude as well as its craft. The two questions of the first quatrain follow its other without pause; their rapid succession suggests the pressure of the speaker's questioning and its importance to her life.

Lord Jesus, who would think that
I am Thine?
Ah who would think,
Who sees me ready to turn back or
sink,
That Thou art mine?

I cannot hold Thee fast tho' Thou
art mine;
Hold Thou me fast,
So earth shall know at last and
heaven at last
That I am Thine.
Before 1886. (PW, p. 219)

The skillful reversal of "Thine" and "mine" emphasizes the unity of the speaker and God through faith, even though the

world can see her imperfections and doubt her belonging to Jesus. When the speaker admits her weakness in the second quatrain, she phrases it as paradox, a device which again indicates the necessity for faith and the human inability to know the Divine and understand it completely. The plea to Jesus Christ to hold her because she cannot hold Him emphasizes the nature of the relationship between a powerful God and a weak human being. The poet's ability to unite technique, emotion, and thought effortlessly gives a deceptively easy appearance to this short poem. The final line of each stanza of this poem emphasizes the reversal of Christ and the speaker and implies an oblique answer to the questions, when the lines appear together:

"That Thou art mine?"

"That I am Thine."

The parallelism provides the link showing the bond between the speaker and Christ, for the implied answer is that all shall know the speaker belongs to Christ, if He holds her fast. Because of her humanity and His divinity, He must hold her. She cannot hold Him without His help, a touching admission of the vulnerability of the speaker and her dependence on the Savior.

Christina Rossetti can write verse of high technical command with parallel structure when she is not using the

question and answer device. She skillfully manipulates verse and meaning in "The Three Enemies," (1851) another of the dramatic religious poems. Parallel structure appears on several levels in this composition.

THE THREE ENEMIES

The Flesh

'Sweet, thou art pale.'
'More pale to see,
Christ hung upon the cruel tree
And bore His Father's wrath for me.'

'Sweet, thou art sad.'
'Beneath a rod
More heavy, Christ for my sake trod
The winepress of the wrath of God.'

'Sweet, thou art weary.'
'Not so Christ;
Whose mighty love of me sufficed
For Strength, Salvation, Eucharist.'

'Sweet, thou art footsore.'
'If I bleed,
His feet have bled; yea in my need
His Heart once bled for mine indeed.'

The World

'Sweet, thou art young.'
'So He was young
Who for my sake in silence hung
Upon the Cross with Passion wrung.'

'Look, thou art fair.'
'He was more fair
Than men, Who deigned for me to
wear
A visage marred beyond compare.'

'And thou hast riches.'
'Daily bread:
All else is His: Who, living, dead,
For me lacked where to lay His
Head.'

'And life is sweet.'
'It was not so
To Him, Whose Cup did overflow
With mine unutterable woe.'

The Devil

'Thou drinkest deep.'
'When Christ would sup
He drained the dregs from out my
cup:
So how should I be lifted up?'

'Thou shalt win Glory.'
'In the skies
Lord Jesus, cover up mine eyes
Lest they should look on vanities.'

'Thou shalt have Knowledge.'
'Helpless dust!
In Thee, O Lord, I put my trust:
Answer Thou for me, Wise and Just.'

'And Might.'--
'Get thee behind me, Lord,
Who hast redeemed and not abhorred
My soul, oh keep it by Thy Word.'

15 June 1851 (PW, pp. 146-147)

Three speakers, the World, the Flesh, and the Devil, issue provocative statements in the first verse of each quatrain, and each tempter is allotted four quatrains. For example, the Flesh appeals, appropriately, by reference to the body of the young woman. Each of his four quatrains begins with one of these four lines:

"Sweet, thou art pale." (l. 1)
"Sweet, thou art sad." (l. 5)
"Sweet, thou art weary." (l. 9)
"Sweet, thou art footsore." (l. 13).

The Christian replies in three lines after each temptation, for example, to line one, she says:

"Sweet, thou art pale."
"More pale to see,
Christ hung upon the cruel tree
And bore his father's wrath for me."
(ll. 1-4)

The punctuation and the spacing show the change of speakers. The perfect balance and symmetry of the larger structure of the poem appears as well in smaller proportion in each of its three sections and within each quatrain to form a classical design. Such form draws admiration for its remarkable technical control, but the distance between the writer's thoughts and emotions and the reader's response to its conventional religious sentiments and its lack of personal spiritual experience renders this poem a bloodless technical exercise rather than great poetry. The final effect becomes that of technique undercut by the immaturity of the poet's understanding and her reliance on the standard Christian dilemmas. She sees simple problems and simple solutions because she lacks the life experience for complex truth tested by trials.

Many of the didactic poems, as well as the dramatic, demonstrate this problem in Christina Rossetti's religious verse. To her contemporary readers, generally convinced

Christians and less critical poetry lovers, the stock nature of these poems did not pose a formidable barrier to enjoyment of them. During her lifetime Christina Rossetti found a wide public of readers philosophically inclined to agree with her Christian sentiments and beliefs. Even the early poems, like "The Three Enemies," written when she was twenty-one, attracted much favorable notice because they publicly espoused Christian doctrines and virtues. After her death, Cary reports, the congregation of the church she had attended held a commemorative service to hang a reredos painted by Burne-Jones. At this service "the venerable Bishop of Durham told the large concourse of people assembled in her honour that the dedication of her poetical genius to the service of God had been the most complete this century had known."[119] Later judgment has not bowed to the taste of her time nor secured her many readers now because of the flatly didactic poems that nevertheless show such ease in the expression of her religious views. "Sorrow hath a double Voice" shows this precision and grace at work:

> Sorrow hath a double voice,
> Sharp to-day but sweet to-morrow:
> Wait in patience, hope, rejoice,
> Tried friends of sorrow.

[119] Cary, pp. 271-272

Pleasure hath a double taste,
  Sweet to-day but sharp to-morrow:
Friends of pleasure, rise in haste,
    Make friends with sorrow.

Pleasure set aside to-day
  Comes again to rule to-morrow:
Welcomed sorrow will not stay,
    Farewell to sorrow!

Before 1886. (PW, p. 142)

This poem consists of three quatrains, each ending in a prepositional phrase to emphasize the theme of sorrow, "of sorrow," "with sorrow," and "to sorrow." The first two verses of the first two stanzas consist of exact syntactical elements and some of the same words repeated to create a lilting rhythm, as in:

"Sorrow hath a double voice,
  Sharp to-day but sweet to-morrow."
(ll. 1-2)

"Pleasure hath a double taste,
  Sweet to-day but sharp to-morrow."
(ll. 5-6)

The shock of the substitutions of sorrow and pleasure, voice and taste, sweet and sharp within the repeated phrases creates a high competence, but the high level of abstraction with which the poem plays cancels its craftsmanship and makes of it a dead exercise, despite the polish of style.

Other poems show the same high level of craftsmanship in their use of parallel structure, among them the poems written in celebration of the Christian year, such as "Ad-

vent" (Before 1886):

ADVENT

Earth grown old, yet still so green,
Deep beneath her crust of
cold
Nurses fire unfelt, unseen:
Earth grown old.

We who live are quickly
told:
Millions more lie hid between
Inner swathings of her fold.

When will fire break up her screen?
When will life burst thro' her
mould?
Earth, earth, earth, thy cold is keen,
Earth grown old.

Before 1886. (PW, p. 157)

Written in a loose form of the old French rondeau, the poem uses parallel structure and repetition skillfully for rhythm and balance. It consists of two quatrains with a tercet between them. Both quatrains end in the single short verse "Earth grown old," (ll. 4, 11) which also appears as the first phrase of the poem. The first two verses of the final quatrain use exactly parallel syntax:

"When will fire break up her screen?
When will life burst thro' her
mould?"
(ll. 8-9).

The poet makes no attempt to answer the two rhetorical questions. Instead they stress a longing for the Day of Judgment when the fires shall break through the crust of the earth and the "millions more" shall come forth. The

last two lines of the poem stress the theme of the poem as earth, repeated four times, verges on the chant or lament, an echo of the first phrase of the poem. This circularity provides a satisfying artistic close to the poem. Its craftsmanship pleases, and the fiery response of the earth to Christ's return to it offers dramatic imagery. Nevertheless, the didactic poem's interest does not render it completely effective. The we of the tercet is so broad as to include all "who live." From the repetition old and cold the reader senses the poet's desire for the Second Coming, but no direct statement of her wish asserts itself in the poem, nor does she elaborate on her spiritual preparation for the event. The final effect of the weariness with earthly life the poem implies is very abstract and impersonal.

A somewhat similar poem in conception begins "Time seems not short."

> Time seems not short:
> If so I call to mind
> Its vast prerogative to loose or
> bind,
> And bear and strike amort
> All humankind.
>
> Time seems not long:
> If I peer out and see
> Sphere within sphere, time in eternity,
> And hear the alternate song
> Cry endlessly.

Time greatly short,
  O time so briefly long,
  Yea, time sole battle-ground of
      right and wrong:
Art thou a time for sport
  And for a song?
  Before 1893. (PW, p. 198)

Almost metaphysical in its sudden changing conception of time, this poem teaches Christian doctrine, too, for Christ returns to Earth and ends human time, and "time in eternity" then starts. The "I" of the poem withholds her thoughts, but not so much as her feelings, as she depends on the numerous abstractions, even in her definition of time. The three cinquains use short lines effectively to introduce the explanatory four verses after the colon. With the paradox embedded in the parallel lines, the poem takes on a formal structure suitable to its abstract subject and unrelieved by the remoteness of the use of the personal pronoun. This persona admits she peers out of human time into eternal time, observes it from a hidden vantage point remote from others. Yet she cannot escape the effects of time such as death "amort" for "All humankind."

A third didactic poem uses references to time and the Second Coming, shaped skillfully in parallel structure, too. Often Christina Rossetti begins and ends poems with phrases of identical syntax, as in "The Earth shall tremble at the Look of Him." Two quatrains frame a tercet:

'The Earth shall tremble at the Look
of Him.'

Tremble, thou earth, at the Presence
of the Lord
Whose Will conceived thee and
brought thee to the birth,
Always, everywhere, thy Lord to be
adored:
Tremble, thou earth.

Wilt thou laugh time away in
music and mirth?
Time hath days of pestilence, hath
days of a sword,
Hath days of hunger and thirst in
desolate dearth.

Till eternity wake up the multichord
Thrilled harp of heaven, and
breathe full its organ's girth
For joy of heaven and infinite
reward,
Tremble, thou earth.

Before 1893. (PW, p. 199)

The first quatrain begins and ends with the imperative: "Tremble, thou earth...," and the final verse repeats the command. The use of the light rondeau form for this heavy poem draws attention. Its battering plosives, open vowels, and long lines before the dimeter repetition slow the poem to produce a suitable atmosphere of threat.

"Looking back" employs a dimeter refrain at the end of three tetrameter verses to underscore its parallelism. Within the lines Christina Rossetti creates formal balance with the technique by pairs of verbs, nouns, and adjective-noun phrases:

Looking back along life's trodden ways,
  Gleams and greeness linger on
    the track;
Distance melts and mellows all
    to-day,
      Looking back.

Rose and purple and a silvery grey,
  Is that cloud the cloud we called
     so black?
Evening harmonizes all to-day,
       Looking back.

Foolish feet so prone to halt or stray,
  Foolish heart so restive on the
    rack!
Yesterday we sighed, but not to-day,
       Looking back.

Before 1886. (PW, p. 145)

The theme of the poem, that in retrospect the suffering one endured in life must fade, at least in memory, takes its conciliatory nature into the images, particularly those of colors. Although the trite language of "life's trodden way," "foolish feet," and "foolish heart" adds nothing to this rather shallow idea of the relation of past and present, the poem's taut construction strikes admiration. A parallel phrase precedes the final dimeter foot in each of the three quatrains:

"... all to-day,
Looking back." (ll. 3-4)

"... all to-day,
Looking back." (ll. 7-8)

"... not to-day,
Looking back." (ll. 11-12).

The amount of parallel structure within such a brief poem appears excessive, but, read as a whole rather than in fragments of lines and parts of lines, the poem is highly rhythmic and lyrical, its use of parallelism unobtrusive.

The same refined technique appears in "For Thine own Sake, O my God,":

FOR THINE OWN SAKE,
O MY GOD

Wearied of sinning, wearied of
repentence,
Wearied of self, I turn, my God,
to Thee;
To Thee, my judge, on Whose all-
righteous sentence
Hangs mine eternity:
I turn to Thee, I plead Thyself with
Thee,--
Be pitiful to me.

Wearied I loathe myself, I loathe my
sinning,
My stains, my festering sores, my
misery:
Thou the Beginning, Thou ere my
beginning
Didst see and didst foresee
Me miserable, me sinful, ruined
me,--
I plead Thyself with Thee.

I plead Thyself with Thee Who art
my maker,
Regard Thy Handiwork that cries
to Thee;
I plead Thyself with Thee Who wast
partaker
Of mine infirmity;
Love made Thee what Thou art, the
love of me,--
I plead Thyself with Thee.

Before 1882. (PW, p. 252)

This poem creates a powerful spiritual statement of the self-loathing of the sinner, whose only basis for her plea of acceptance is the Incarnation of Christ: "Love made Thee what Thou art, the love of me,-- I plead Thyself with Thee." The phrases and clauses repeat and redound to assert the pitiful condition of the speaker, likened to a prisoner before the bench for sentencing, by diction consisting of "Judge," "sentence," "hangs," and "plead." The first three phrases of the poem, parallel past participles followed by their prepositional phrases, emphasize the exhaustion of the persona. The initial trochee of "wearied," here as elsewhere in the poem, emphasizes the effect of heaviness within the iambic base meter. The second line repeats the phrases that make up the first line, and then introduces a new phrase "I turn, my God, to Thee," that goes into the third line and the fifth line, with slight variations. The complex interwoven texture of the rhythmic phrases and clauses, parallel and repetitive, break with the dash for the restful clarity of the refrain.

After the pause the tension again begins to mount. First the poet connects the first and second stanza by repeating the important past participle "wearied" from lines one and two. Immediately afterwards she uses the powerful verb "loathe" in a pair of clauses with an extended series of direct objects that grow more ugly and graphic than the

abstract "sinning," for they draw the shudders for disease of a foul and visible nature, like leprosy. The choice of sibilants ("sinning," "stains," "sores," "misery) with their implication of the hiss of the serpent in these hard words carries to the colon of the second stanza, where the poem begins to look to God to save "Me miserable, me sinful, ruined me," rather than judge. The position of the pronoun me shifts the emphasis from the sins to the sinner, who is perhaps not entirely to blame for his condition because God did foresee it as "the Beginning" Himself. Christina Rossetti raised the thorny problem of the extent of free will, not to explore it (for such a sidepath would break the intensity of the poem) but to show the unity of Christ and Man. In the third stanza she states God is her "maker" and she His "handiwork," and he too became man, "partaker of mine infirmity." The repetition of "I plead Thyself" six times acts as a liturgical response and stresses the poem as private prayer between man realizing his unworthiness and God saving him through love. The parallel structure becomes the thought; it perfectly conveys the strength of the emotion of its speaker in its rhythms. As in other meditative poems, the lack of certainty creates tension in the speaker. Only the will to believe can provide the desirable reply.

The desperation of the pleas appears both in parallel

construction and question and answer in the moving poem "Of him that was ready to Perish:"

'OF HIM THAT WAS READY
TO PERISH'

Lord, I am waiting, weeping, watching for Thee:
My youth and hope lie by me buried and dead,
My wandering love hath not where to lay its head
Except Thou say, 'Come to Me.'

My noon is ended, abolished from life and light,
My noon is ended, ended and done away,
My sun went down in the hours that still were day,
And my lingering day is night.

How long, O Lord, how long in my desperate pain
Shall I weep and watch, shall I weep and long for Thee?
Is Thy grace ended, Thy love cut off from me?
How long shall I long in vain?

O God, Who before the beginning hast seen the end,
Who hast made me flesh and blood, not frost and not fire,
Who hast filled me full of needs and love and desire
And a heart that craves a friend,--

Who hast said "Come to Me and I will give thee rest,'
Who hast said 'Take on thee My yoke and learn of Me,'
Who calledst a little child to come to Thee,
And pillowedst John on Thy breast;

Who spak'st to women that followed
Thee sorrowing,
Bidding them weep for themselves
and weep for their own;
Who didst welcome the outlaw
adoring Thee all alone,
And plight Thy word as a
King,--

By Thy love of these and of all that
ever shall be,
By Thy love of these and of all
the born and unborn,
Turn Thy gracious eyes on me
and think no scorn
Of me, not even of me.

Beside Thy Cross, I hang on my
cross in shame,
My wounds, weakness, extremity
cry to Thee:
Bid me also to Paradise, also me,
For the glory of Thy Name.

Before 1882 (PW, p. 253)

The reiterated verbs of the first line and balanced nouns and past participles of the second open the poem. The alliteration of the w sound and the resonance of the nasal ng make the series of verbs difficult, slow, and harsh, as "wearied" in the poem previously cited used the terminal plosive for a harsh and restrained sound with the alliteration.

The parallel elements of "youth and hope" and "buried and dead" link with a daring internal rhyme ("lie by") that serves to bind them closer syntactically and to create vowel music that returns to the i of the first line and rhymes with it as well.

The second stanza uses repeated words and strong parallel clauses to create vowel music, as the syntax states the speaker's loss with syntactical balance to convey her dignity. Repeating the verb "ended" emphasizes the finality of the loss of the high point of the speaker's life, her "noon," and she reinforces that idea by the last line that suggests she is dead, although technically still alive.

Three successive questions comprise the third stanza, the emotional climax of the poem. The speaker names the mood of her life as one of "desperate pain." The enjambment of the first two lines of stanza three shows the desperation of the speaker, for the questions pile up without pause. The poet uses the verbs "weep" and "watch," this time without the present participle ending to slow them. They thus tumble headlong, like the questions, with her pain behind them. She adds a new verb, "long," and in the last line of stanza three uses it twice more. The l liquid sound with the return of the ng slow the poem again to enable her to begin the fourth stanza with the noble dignity of the sonorous o of "God, Who before." The final ng as well as the medial double n also cause the line to slow because of the resonance their nasality rings through the line. The final plosives in "hast," "end," "hast," "blood," "frost," "hast," "filled," "needs," "heart," and "friend," their aspiration particularly strong in end posi-

tion makes them very harsh, and the alliterating f increases the effect. Sound and diction cooperate, for the pounding monosyllables of the stanza and the parallel groupings of the nouns conveys the harshness of the speaker's loveless life, "flesh and blood, not frost and not fire."

To counter that harshness the poet catalogues instances of Christ's promises and deeds for the suffering. In their name the speaker appeals to God. She hangs on her own cross beside that of Christ and lets her "wounds, weakness, extremity cry" to God to take her to Him in death.

The meditative poems, such as these two cited and the sonnet "'If thou sayest, Behold we knew it not.'", use question and answer technique in a different manner from the way the didactic poems use it. These poems do not ask for information; instead they rephrase a plea. When the speaker of a didactic poem asks a question he expresses a wish that information could possibly satisfy because the force of need does not press on the question in the didactic poems as it does in the meditative. Both the speakers of "'Of him that was ready to Perish'" and of "Advent" ask questions related to time. The meditative poem's speaker asks a question of personal concern: when may I die and join God? The speaker of the didactic "Advent" asks a question that affects everyone on earth: when will the earth respond to the Second Coming of Christ? The difference lies in one group

of poems' being public in nature, and one's being private, and appropriate material belongs to each group. Naturally a sense of greater urgency attaches to the individual fate than to the more objective and more removed fate of the group. The struggle to accept the will of God and the desire to achieve her freedom from life create a pitch of artistic tension in the meditative poems. With her awareness of sound and form, Christina Rossetti was able to channel this artistic tension into a unique form of poetry that transformed her to the status of a distinguished minor poet and a great devotional poet. Whether the reader shares Christina Rossetti's beliefs or not, her skills as a poet convince him of the power of her passionate struggle to reconcile the will of God and her own will. The key to the reconciliation for her lay in the love possible between God and man, as she says in the meditative poem "The randsomed of the Lord:"

'The randsomed of the Lord.'

Thy lovely saints do bring Thee love,
  Incense and joy and gold;
Fair star with star, fair dove with
    dove,
  Beloved by Thee of old.
I, Master, neither star nor dove,
  Have brought Thee sins and
    tears;
Yet I too bring a little love
  Amid my flaw and fears.
A trembling love that faints and
    fails
  Yet still is love of Thee,

A wondering hope that hopes and
hails
Thy boundless Love of me;
Love kindling faith and pure desire,
Love following on to bliss,
A spark, O Jesu, from Thy fire,
A drop from Thine abyss.

Before 1893. (PW, p. 218)

IV. CONCLUSION

Although the large body of Christina Rossetti's religious canon contains many poems that show her ability as a poet, only a section of her devotional poems demonstrates a high level of poetry, beyond the merely facile. The events of a tragic decade or more, (1871-1886) which included severe illness and family disintegration and deaths, caused her to write little or no poetry for nearly a decade until she reconciled her belief in God with her suffering in life. She does effect this reconciliation and undergoes a period of religious and artistic development as a result. The meditative poems from the years after 1870 demonstrate her spiritual maturity in their depth of feeling which she expresses in her most sophisticated and most subtle techniques.

Although she uses techniques such as question and answer, and other parallel elements, in all the poems, she employs the devices in the meditative poems with particular attention to sound, rhythm, balance, and diction to achieve her effects. These fine poems deserve more critical attention than they have received since the ebb of her

critical fortunes after World War I. The lack of a scholarly edition has long hampered efforts to revive interest in the poet; the one prepared by her brother in 1904 lacks an apparatus and uses arbitrary classifications for the poems. The edition in progress by Rebecca Crump, in three planned volumes, intends to remedy this great gap in Christina Rossetti studies by providing a reliable text, by opening her method of composition to investigation, and by printing the complete poems without the changes and omissions of William Michael Rossetti's edition. Christina Rossetti then may take her rightful place among the Victorians as a distinguished minor poet and among the English devotional poets as a great practitioner of their specialized art on the basis of the personal meditative poem.

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From 1967 to 1969 she taught as an assistant professor of English at Trenton State College, Trenton, NJ. From 1969 to 1970 she taught English for senior students of The International School, Bangkok, Thailand. From 1970 to 1973 she studied piano at the Wiesbaden Konservatorium in Wiesbaden, West Germany. From 1974 to 1979 she taught English at Trenton State College, as a co-adjutant instructor, while studying at Lehigh University. She received a full tuition grant of $3,500 for 1974-1975 from Lehigh University.