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## Sing No Sad Songs for Me : A Study of the Influence of the Oxford Movement upon Christina Rossetti as Evidenced in Her Poetry

Debbie J. Brown

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## Abstract

SING NO SAD SONGS FOR ME: A Study of the  
Influence of the Oxford Movement upon Christina  
Rossetti as Evidenced in her Poetry

by Debbie J. Brown

Christina Rossetti was largely influenced by the religious reformation known as the Oxford Movement; this study attempts to record that influence by discussing the etiology and the doctrines of the Movement in relationship to Christina's life and her poetry. A cursory review of the topics of Miss Rossetti's poetry, based on her work published in *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, is included, in addition to a more in-depth evaluation of selected poems. A partial biographical study is offered, which relies primarily upon William Rossetti's *Memoir to the Poetical Works* and *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*. The significant studies of the Oxford Movement which were consulted are included in the bibliography of this thesis study.

Christina Rossetti, one of the few outstanding women poets Britain has produced, was immensely influenced by the religious milieu of her home and her country. She was born on December 5, 1830, the youngest of the four Rossetti children, and was early indoctrinated with the teachings and practices of the Church of England by her mother, Frances Lavinia Polidori. Christina was educated at home by

Mrs. Rossetti who taught Christina and her sister Maria from the Bible, St. Augustine, and *Pilgrim's Progress*, and further reinforced this religious training by involving her daughters with the religious movement to which she transferred her loyalty from the evangelical branch of the Church: the Tractarian or Oxford Movement.

July 14, 1833 is the date which is often regarded as the founding date for the Oxford Movement; on this day John Keble delivered the assize sermon "National Apostasy" which openly addressed the ominous trend of interference by the state with matters of the Church. The trend was started with the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts and intensified with Catholic emancipation; the introduction in Parliament of the Church Temporalities Bill and the resulting suppression of ten Irish bishoprics was interpreted by many of England's religious leaders as apostasy on the part of the nation.

Further, leaders at Oxford were demanding extensive reforms within the framework of the Church, for the training system of clergymen had grown lax and the salary system among clergymen was grossly uneven. The stand of the Oxford scholars inevitably came to focus upon content, doctrine, for they were essentially promoting higher ideas of the Church than the political and popular notion of it. As the Movement accelerated, so did the controversy surrounding it; indeed, it became part of the consciousness of the general public through repeated publication of the widely sold *Tracts for The Times*. It was these *Tracts*, edited by Oxford theo-

logian John H. Newman, which earned the proponents of the Oxford Movement the name *Tractarians*.

Christina Rossetti was early exposed to and influenced by this religious renaissance and this influence is evident in her poetry. Among the doctrines embraced by members of the Tractarian movement which are evident in the themes of the poetry of Christina Rossetti, as well as in accounts of her character and personality, are the beliefs of the severity of the moral life, the necessity for thorough self-examination, the need to be humble and to mistrust oneself, and the acceptance of illness and suffering as purifying communications from God.

Christina's earliest poetry evidences a preoccupation with death, a discomfiture with earthly existence. She fell in love twice, but due to religious reasons, she never married. Of Christina's poetry, the sections called "Songs for Strangers and Pilgrims," "Some Feasts and Fasts," "Divers Worlds: Time and Eternity," "New Jerusalem and its Citizens," "Christ Our All in All," "Out of the Deep I Have Called Unto Thee, O Lord," "Gifts and Graces," and "The World: Self-Destruction" total 449 poems; eleven of the sixteen sections deal with religious concerns or a discussion of impending death. Of the section entitled *Juvenilia*, most of the 54 poems are religious in nature. That leaves 226 general poems to be considered, as well as 140 poems for children. Although a good many of the general poems discuss lighter topics, the number that are devoted to spiritual concepts and

death are substantial.

There is evidence from Christina's correspondence, and from her poetry, that she was an imaginative, dynamic, cheerful, and fun-loving person. However, her tendency to become discouraged and to doubt herself often overshadows the brighter side of her nature. Although she repeatedly doubted herself and her spiritual worthiness, her concept of faith closely paralleled that of Tractarianism and her faith in God never wavered. Her religion was often a comfort to her and this comfort is expressed in some of her best poetry. The tragedy of Christina's life is that she was seemingly never able to fully accept the assurance she often expresses in her work and that, while trying to cope with the inner turmoil her perpetual doubts created, she was content to choose death over life. She died of cancer in 1894. Her poetic gifts, however great or small their potential, were used to express a great concern which no desire for poetic excellence or self recognition could ever overshadow--her intense longing for a new life in the world to come.

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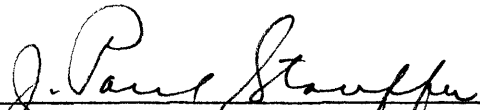
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A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts  
in the Field of English

---

August 1978

Each person whose signature appears below certifies that this thesis in his opinion is adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree Master of Arts.

  
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Victor S. Griffiths, Professor of English

*When I am dead, my dearest,  
Sing no sad songs for me;  
Plant thou no roses at my head,  
Nor shady cypress tree:  
Be the green grass above me  
With showers and dewdrops wet:  
And if thou wilt, remember,  
And if thou wilt, forget.*

--Christina Rossetti



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# I

## The Origin of the Oxford Movement

"The great paradox of the Anglo-Catholic Revival lay in the fact that, in attempting to rescue and renew the Anglican Church by means of a thorough going application of historic standards, it actually wrought a massive transformation."

E. R. Fairweather

In 1851 Britain was the workshop of the world, in addition to being the primary influence on the industrialization of other nations. Thousands of people from many European cities flocked to London at this time to visit "the Crystal Palace," a huge glass and iron building which housed machines of every kind for *The Great Exhibition*. The exhibition was a triumph for Britain's economy and a significant milestone for science and industry. Economic advances continued to take place in England, as did changes in social legislation and control.

Four years before *The Great Exhibition*, in 1847, Gaetano Polidori privately published his granddaughter's first volume of poetry, entitled *Verses*. The poetry, however, did not address the secular atmosphere of dynamic nineteenth century England, for Christina Rossetti, one of the few outstanding women poets Britain has produced, was little affected by the ambience created by economical and industrial advances.

She was affected, however, by the religious milieu

of her home and her country. The beliefs to which she was exposed as a young child, and later as a mature woman, became an inherent part of her nature, and these beliefs are evident in the poetry of Christina Rossetti. While many writers, including her brother Dantè Gabriel, addressed social concerns and political issues, Christina wrote frequently and earnestly about spiritual matters. Her poetry, if categorized by subject matter, may be said to consist largely of religious verse, but such a categorizing would be a surface appraisal. An in-depth study of Christina's poetry evidences the conflict which produced much of her own verse: her desire to commit herself totally to the spiritual realm of life and her seeming inability to accept that she had ever satisfactorily done so.

An adequate exploration of Christina's poetry must include a discussion of the Oxford Movement; indeed, this religious movement played a vital role in the life of Christina. In conjunction with a study of the Oxford Movement, a study of Christina's friends and acquaintances, as well as of her home life, must be undertaken in order to understand her works more fully. Thus, a review of the etiology and doctrines of the Oxford Movement, a discussion of Christina's relationship to the Movement and its consequences in her poetry, and a sampling of responses from friends and family to their relationship with Christina, follow.

Christina Georgina Rossetti was born on December 5, 1830, the youngest of the four Rossetti children, and was indoctrinated in her early years with the teachings and practices of the Church of England. Her mother, Frances Lavinia Polidori, had married a man whom she considered to be a conventional Roman Catholic; the marriage of Frances Polidori and Gabriele Rossetti was performed by both a priest and an Anglican minister and it was in such a heterodox environment that Frances Rossetti attempted to give her children a religious education at home. Before her marriage, Mrs. Rossetti had been trained to be a governess and was a thorough and sound instructor, conscientiously teaching her children the Catechism and reading to them from the Bible, St. Augustine, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Christina and her sister Maria received no schooling outside of this home instruction, and the religious ideas they were exposed to were reinforced by their mother's involvement with the evangelical branch of the Church. The devotion and loyalty which Mrs. Rossetti pledged to this branch of the Church was later transferred, with no loss of intensity, to a religious influence known as the Tractarian Movement.

Though some scholars have suggested that the similarities between Evangelicalism and the Oxford Movement are more striking than the differences, an appraisal of the

theological values and sources of each reveals such an evaluation as inaccurate.<sup>1</sup> R. W. Church has noted that by the end of the first quarter of the century there were two principal forms of the Church of England which were commonly accepted: The Church Party fostered the traditions of Anglicanism and was noted for its frequent and fervid, though vigorously reasoned, discussion on the points of morals and faith.<sup>2</sup> These orthodox Churchmen (who were sometimes divided into Low Church and High Church categories) were described as being "dry, unspiritual, formal, unevangelical, self-righteous; teachers of mere morality at their best, allies and servants of the world at their worse."<sup>3</sup> The Evangelicals were members of the second popularly recognized party; these men had been influenced by the theology of the Methodist revival; too, they had retained much of the zeal of the former religious movement. Church has certain positive things to say about both groups. Of the Church party,

<sup>1</sup>See especially Herbert Clegg's 3-part article entitled "Evangelicals and Tractarians" found in *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, 1966, 1967. Mr. Clegg notes what he interprets as Evangelical feeling in a number of the Oxford leaders, including Newman and Pusey. Another study which notes that even among Evangelicals there was a sympathetic audience for men such as Keble and Newman is Trevor Dearing's *Wesleyan and Tractarian Worship: an ecumenical study*. (London: Epworth P.; S.P.C.K., 1966).

<sup>2</sup>R. W. Church, *The Oxford Movement Twelve Years 1833-1845* (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1922), pp. 9-12.

<sup>3</sup>Church, p. 12.

he notes

There was nothing effeminate about it, as there was nothing fanatical; there was nothing extreme about it; it was a manly school, distrustful of high-wrought feelings and professions, cultivating self-command and shy of display and seeking its mark, in contrast to what seemed to it sentimental weakness, a reasonable and serious idea of duty. The divinity which it propounded, though it rested on learning, was rather that of strong common sense than of the schools of erudition. Its better members were highly cultivated, benevolent men, intolerant of irregularities both of doctrine and life, whose lives were governed by an unostentatious but solid and unfaltering piety, ready to burst forth on occasion into fervid devotion. <sup>4</sup>

And of the Evangelicals, he writes

The fathers of the Evangelical school were men of naturally strong and vigorous understandings, robust and rugged, and sometimes eccentric, but quite able to cope with the controversialists... who attacked them.... It [the Evangelical religion] gave a gentle stimulus to tempers which required to be excited by novelty. It recommended itself by gifts of flowing words or high-pitched rhetoric to those who expected *some* demands to be made on them, so that these demands were not too strict. <sup>5</sup>

From the Church Party Branch of these two popularly recognized schools of religious thought of early nineteenth century England another faction was to emerge: the Oxford Movement. It would gain impetus largely in response to the ambience which helped to create and to reinforce the revived interest in both the High and Low

<sup>4</sup> Church, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Church, pp. 13-15.

Churchmen and the Evangelicals. A revival in spiritual and clerical matters was sparked by the atmosphere which electrified the nation during the intense struggle over The Reform Bill. When the Bill finally passed in 1832, it was only after a tense and occasionally violent conflict; the Bill had been defeated twice before it was finally carried, and the previous defeats had been largely due to the bishops who had voted against the Bill. In retrospect, it is not difficult to understand that The Reform Bill made sense for the nation; to avoid revolution by the Irish was the most pressing, but certainly not the only concern. Parliamentary reform of England's own system of parliamentary representation was a key issue which represented the trenchant need of the aristocracy to come to grips with the plight of the unfortunate masses. For the Church, though, a higher moral issue than that of starvation was at stake; a precursor to the success of the Bill was the 1829 parliamentary election in Ireland of Daniel O'Connell, a Catholic. O'Connell won overwhelmingly and this victory forced members of Parliament to reconsider the nation's stand on Catholic emancipation. For years, Protestant Dissenters had been able to weasel by the Test and Corporation Acts which required all who held a state or national office to receive the Eucharist, because they were excused, each year, by the passing of an Indemnity Act. O'Connell's victory in Ireland (though he was never seated)

forced the ruling Tory Party to change its position on Catholic emancipation. The movement for reform in the franchise was shortly followed by the repeal of The Test and Corporation Acts and a year later Catholic emancipation also became a reality. Naturally, Catholic emancipation met with hostility and opposition by the Anglican clergy, for to them it represented an ominous threat: the possible enactment of legislation allowing governing of the Church of England by individuals who were not members of the Church.

The disquietude among the clergy initiated by Catholic emancipation was intensified by criticisms from state officials and respected theologians who called for badly needed reforms within the Church.

The pervasive attitude of clergymen throughout the Church was a careless one, largely created by an inefficient training and educational system for clergy and greatly aided by uneven clerical income. Depending upon the people they knew, clergymen could anticipate a comfortable life or tolerate an impoverished one. It was the financial system of the Church for which Parliament demanded reform; this movement increased the apprehension of Church leaders over the tendency of the state to alter Church policy, to change Church procedure.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>For a detailed account of the political genesis of the Oxford Movement, see Marvin R. O'Connell's *The Oxford Conspirators* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969).



It must be understood that criticism directed against the Church was not confined to spokesmen from the State; there was a group *within* the Church which recognized the need to preserve the integrity of the Church by changing the direction of the ominous trend of the relationship between Church and State. These Churchmen were residents of Oxford; by 1833 they believed the Anglican Church was in real danger and that its welfare rested on this crucial question: how much power or right did the State have to interfere with Church policy or procedure? The fears of the Oxford leaders were actualized later in 1833 when Parliament introduced the Church Temporalities Bill which proposed an alteration of the financial holdings of the Church in Ireland. The Bill proposed to change the form of tenure of Church property, and to set up an Ecclesiastical Commission which would have managerial as well as distributive powers. Although the Bill was finally revised considerably, ten Irish bishoprics were suppressed and this action was interpreted as apostasy by some of the Oxford residents. In fact, John Keble, on July 14, 1833, delivered a sermon in the University Pulpit entitled "National Apostasy" and it is this assize sermon which is often regarded as the founding date for the Oxford Movement.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John Henry Newman, in *Apologia*, says "I have ever considered and kept the day as the start of the religious movement of 1833."

Thus it may be seen that the factors which resulted in the Movement were many and complex, and, for the most part, initially political. The young and brilliant Oxford scholars directed their energies to preserving the integrity of the Church by taking a stand against those who moved to affect policy from outside the Church system, and by calling for extensive reform within the framework of the Church. Inevitably this stand came to focus upon content, upon doctrine, for the Oxford scholars were essentially promoting higher ideas of the Church than the political and popular notion of it; they were urging higher conceptions of the doctrine of Christian religion than those of the ordinary theology of the Evangelicals.<sup>8</sup>

As the Movement accelerated, so did the controversy surrounding it. The publication of *The Tracts for the Times* aided in making the controversy part of the consciousness of the general public, for with the publication of the tracts the country was exposed to the attempts of the Oxford leaders to rouse the clergy to action. The controversy helped to sell the tracts widely and because of the repeated publication of the articles, supporters of the Movement earned the name "Tractarians." In these tracts

<sup>8</sup>Church, p. 33.

proponents of the Movement asserted first, against any theory of individualism in religion or control of the Church by the state, the principle of the doctrinal authority of the Catholic Church to be absolute, and by "catholic" they understood that which was faithful to the teaching of the early and undivided church. The second principle emphasized by the Tractarians was the belief that it was the duty of the Church to teach. Though they believed that the Bible was inspired and that all doctrine necessary to salvation is contained in the Bible, they also believed that a certain moral state was necessary before doctrine could be apprehended. Based on this idea was the theory of "reserve": the principle of reserving the communication of religious knowledge until such time as the receiver had reached a stage of Christian education which allowed full comprehension and acceptance of knowledge. This principle embodied the main idea of Tractarian theology, for it was central to the idea of apostolic succession--the belief that the apostolic order had been endowed with the power and responsibility to educate individuals in order for them to comprehend truth--and it was also closely related to the preservation of tradition by the revival of the teaching and practices of the Church fathers.

The leaders of the Oxford Movement interpreted the practices of the early church as an endorsement of the principle

of reserve; thus, the tendency of the Evangelicals to present, wholly and enthusiastically, the doctrine of salvation to the potentially pagan masses, offended the Tractarians. The Evangelicals, on the other hand, tended to be puritanical, placing great emphasis on self-improvement, and this emphasis appealed to the individual. The active controversy waged on and permeated the nation. Dean Church caught the flavor of the moment in his description of the time:

For the air was full of new ideas; the temper of the time was bold and enterprising. It was felt by men who looked forward, that to hold their own they must have something more to show than custom or alleged expediency-- they must sound the depths of their own convictions on men's reason and imagination as <sup>9</sup> well as on their associations and feelings.

<sup>9</sup>Church, p. 3.

## II

### Tenets of the Movement

Her life had two motivating 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.

William Rossetti, *Memoir*

It was impossible to escape the influence of such a volatile environment. Frances Rossetti was caught up in this electric atmosphere. She was influenced by the Tractarians, probably attracted, speculates Lona Mosk Packer, because the Movement made available the formal rites and ceremonies of Catholicism without sacrificing theological beliefs.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the basis for the attraction, after 1843 the Rossetti women, Frances, her sisters, and her two daughters, began attending the London Christ Church located near them on Albany Street. The services were noted for their spirit of reverence and sanctity, as well as for a learned quality. The Reverend William Dodsworth was the prominent figure in Christ Church at this time, a man closely associated with John Henry Newman (later Cardinal Newman), editor of *The Tracts for The Times*. The women were exposed to a new type of religious experience; caught up in this development of new ideas, they enthusiastically supported the

<sup>10</sup> See *Christina Rossetti* by Lona Mosk Packer (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 6.

movement that was protesting the established attitudes of the Church of England, and they became a part of the change England was experiencing at this time. Thus Christina was exposed, in her formative years, to a religious renaissance. The excitement and exhilaration of this revolutionary environment, coupled with the deep religious beliefs and expectations of her mother, contributed to the depth of the lasting influence these encounters made upon the life of Christina Rossetti. The religious foundation was firm; Christina never veered from the attitudes that shaped her early thinking. As she grew older, her need to display a self-sacrificing nature in attitude and actions, and her desire to express herself in other outlets, including a desire to achieve and excel, resulted in conflicts which became frequent and intense. This struggle, manifested early in her life, is understandable in light of the requirements of her church. To achieve an understanding of some of the plausible origins of this struggle, several of the theological foundations of Tractarianism will be evaluated in relation to Christina's life and a representative selection of her poetry.

In the *Memoir to Christina's Poetical Works* William states that Christina "belonged to what was then called the Puseyite or Tractarian party in the English Church . . ." and it is Edward Pusey himself, another of the leaders of

the Movement, who defines "Puseyism." In response to queries as to what was meant by the class of views designated by his name, he offered the following summary:

- (1) High thoughts of the two Sacraments.
- (2) High estimate of Episcopacy of God's ordinance.
- (3) High estimate of the visible Church as the Body wherein we are made and continue to be members of Christ.
- (4) Regard for ordinances, as directing our devotions and disciplining us, such as daily public prayers, fasts and feasts, etc.
- (5) Regard for the visible part of devotion, such as the decoration of the house of God, which acts insensibly on the mind.
- (6) Reverence for and deference to the ancient Church, of which our own Church is looked upon as the representative to us, and by whose views and doctrines we interpret our own Church when her meaning is questioned or doubtful; in a word, reference to the ancient Church, instead of the Reformers, as the ultimate expounder of the meaning of our Church. <sup>11</sup>

Even though this list of tenets, some of which have already been noted in this study, is regarded as being an accurate general statement of views of the Tractarians, the sermons of the leaders must be consulted for a more profound explanation of the beliefs of the proponents of the Oxford Movement. John Henry Newman voices the difficult of being a Christian in Volume 1 of his *Parochial*

<sup>11</sup>Henry P. Liddon quoting Edward Pusey in *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey*, Edited by Rev. J. O. Johnston and Rev. Robert J. Wilson, vol. 1 (London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1894), p. 14.

*Sermons* as he writes of "The Severity of the Moral Life."

Doubtless many a one there is, who, on hearing doctrines such as I have been insisting on, says in his heart, that religion is thus made gloomy and repulsive; that he would attend to a teacher who spoke in a less severe way; and that in fact Christianity was not intended to be a dark burdensome law, but a religion of cheerfulness and joy. This is what young people think, though they do not express it in this argumentative form. They view a strict life as something offensive and hateful; they turn from the notion of it. And then, as they get older and see more of the world, they learn to defend their opinion, and express it more or less in the way in which I have just put it. They hate and oppose the truth, as it were upon principle; and the more they are told that they have souls, the more resolved they are to live as if they had not souls. But let us take it as a clear point from the first, and not to be disputed, that religion must ever be difficult to those who neglect it. All things that we have to learn are difficult at first, and our duties to God, and to man for His sake, are peculiarly difficult, because they call upon us to take up a new life, and quit the love of this world for the next. It cannot be avoided; we must fear and be in sorrow, before we can rejoice. The Gospel must be a burden before it comforts and brings us peace. No one can have his heart cut away from the natural objects of its love, without pain during the process and throbbing afterwards. This is plain from the nature of the case: and, however true it be, that this or that teacher may be harsh and repulsive, yet he cannot materially alter things. Religion is in itself at first a weariness to the worldly mind, and it requires an effort and a self-denial in everyone who honestly determines to be religious. <sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>John Henry Newman, *Parochial Sermons*, New Edition, Rivingtons, (London, Oxford, and Cambridge: Scribner, Wilford & Co., 1868), p. 22.



Christina did, indeed, find the religious life a difficult one at times. Even as a young child, she was noted for her exceptionally strong will; at the age of four, she is remembered for demanding what she called "her share of the cakes." Because she was the youngest of the children, she was the object of much attention from the older brothers and her sister, but she also had to contend with the natural exclusions which resulted from her being the "baby" of the family. She learned quickly that in order to receive or retain what was rightfully hers, she needed to be assertive and willing to fight for her claim. Packer suggests that the young girl's observations of her brother Dante Gabriele's "frightening displays of temper" in obtaining what he desired may have influenced her own behavior in attempting to have her own way.<sup>13</sup> Her outbursts of temper were effective means of aiding Christina in satisfying her wants, but were also a source of displeasure, pain, and frustration to Frances Rossetti. In the book *The Pre-Raphaelites*, Lionel Stevenson relates another incident which took place during Christina's early years. "In her childhood she was once so agonized by a rebuke from her mother that she snatched a

<sup>13</sup>Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 11.

pair of scissors and gashed her own arm."<sup>14</sup> This story is especially representative of the internal battle which Christina struggled with for most of her life. In this case, she was feeling terribly guilty for having caused her mother pain; that is obvious by her subsequent punishment of herself. She must have been extremely conscious and repentant of her wrong doing to feel compelled, at such a young age, to inflict a wound upon herself. It was this self-incriminating attitude and also a concern with the more serious, spiritual aspects of life that made it difficult for the intelligent, creative young woman to reconcile her desire to invent and create for simple self-fulfillment, with her very real compulsion to discredit herself and her value through expression in religious poetry.

Like her brothers and sister, Christina was instilled with a desire to create; a need to express her colorful imagination. For even though Mrs. Rossetti took great pains to instruct them in religious beliefs and practices, her children were inevitably part of another world; a world created by the political interests of their father, which brought political discussions, literary criticism and serious enthusiasms about a myriad different subjects into the Rossetti

<sup>14</sup>North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1972, p. 80.

household. The attitude created as a result of the combination of these elements was one that seemed to focus on literary production, study, and writing. All of the children were impressed with the awareness that personal creation was the result of hard work, effort, and study, and by 1843 all the young Rossetti's were practicing writing bouts rimes sonnets and were reading and learning verse scenes from Shakespeare.

One of Christina's earliest works, *Maude*, written in 1850 when she was twenty, was not published until three years after her death. *Maude* is a prose work which contains some of Christina's earliest poetry and is the story of a talented young woman who anguished over the knowledge of her imperfect motives and her lack of charity towards others. Her character is developed through comparison of the personalities of her cousins, Agnes and Mary, with whom she shares her fears that her motives for right doing are ill founded. There are definite parallels between Maude and Christina: both are very strongly attached to their mothers, both suffer from ill health, both write laudable poetry. During the story, Maude meets and is attracted to and enamored of a young woman who eventually joins the sisterhood (Maria, Christina's sister, entered the Anglican sisterhood of Saints in 1873).<sup>15</sup> Maude herself once entertained the

<sup>15</sup>See William's *Memoir*, p. lvii.

idea of joining the convent but considered herself too unworthy for such a calling. It is Agnes, one of the cousins, who informs Maude of Magdalen's decision. She writes in a letter to Maude:

Last Thursday Magdalen Ellis was finally received into the Sisterhood of Mercy. I wished much to be present, but could not, as the whole affair was conducted quite privately; only her parents were admitted of the world. However, I made interest for a lock of her beautiful hair, which I prize highly. It makes me sad to look at it: yet I know she has chosen well; and will, if she perseveres, receive hereafter an abundant recompense for all she has foregone here. Sometimes I think whether such a life can be suited to me; but then I could not bear to leave Mamma: indeed that is just what Magdalen felt so much. I met her yesterday walking with some poor children. Her veil was down, nearly hiding her face; still I fancy she looked thoughtful, but very calm and happy. She says she always prays for me, and asked my prayers; so I begged her to remember you and Mary. Then she enquired how you are; desiring her kindred love to you, and assuring me she makes no doubt your name will be known at some future period: but checking herself almost immediately, she added that she could fancy you very different, as pale Sister Maude. This surprised me: I can fancy nothing of the sort. At last she mentioned the verses you gave her months ago, which she knows by heart and values extremely:--then, having nearly reached my home, we parted. <sup>16</sup>

Though Agnes could not envision Sister Maude, her

<sup>16</sup>Christina Rossetti, *Maude: Prose and Verse*. Ed. R. W. Crump, (Connecticut: Archon Books, 1976), p.58.

cousin was struck with the idea--she says to her Mother--  
"Did you see about Magdalen? I wonder what made her think of me as a Sister. It is very nice of her; but then she is so good she never can conceive what I am like. Mamma, should you mind my being a Nun?"

Maude's mother assures her that Maude's absence would make her miserable and passes off the disparaging observation without comment; evidently she did not endorse her daughter's low esteem of her character. Neither, for that matter, did her cousins. Agnes and Mary return a visit Maude paid to them earlier in the year and during their stay Christmas Day arrives and with it Communion. Agnes is shocked when she discovers that her cousin does not plan to take Communion and assures Maude that she is ill, that the morrow will bring a brighter outlook, and that she, too, once felt as Maude did. Maude refuses to be comforted, though, and responds, "Your case is different. Whatever your faults may be, (not that I perceive any), you are trying to correct them; your own conscience tells you that. But I am not trying. No one will say that I cannot avoid putting myself forward and displaying my verses. Agnes, you must admit so much." (p. 53)

In response to this, the omniscient narrator notes "Deep-rooted indeed was that vanity which made Maude take pleasure, on such an occasion, in proving the force of

arguments directed against herself."

Agnes tries again and asks if Maude never plans to receive the Blessed Sacrament but Maude assures her that is not what she meant:

'I do not mean never to Communicate again. You remember Mr Paulson told us last Sunday that sickness and suffering are sent for our correction. I suffer very much. Perhaps a time will come when these will have done their work on me also; when I shall be purified indeed and weaned from the world. Who knows? the lost have been found, the dead have been quickened.' She paused as if in thought; then continued: 'You partake of the Blessed Sacrament in peace, Agnes, for you are good; and Mary, for she is harmless: but your conduct cannot serve to direct mine, because I am neither the one nor the other. Some day I may be fit again to approach the Holy Altar, but till then I will at least refrain from dishonouring it.'

Though this melancholy exchange prompts an indignant response from Agnes, Maude is not to be moved in her decision to refuse Communion and Agnes, discouraged, leaves the room. The description of Maude, torn, is a pitiful one;

Maude, once more alone, sat for some time just as her cousin left her. Gradually the thick, low sobs became more rare; she was beginning to feel sleepy. At last she roused herself with an effort and commenced undressing; then it struck her that her prayers had still to be said. The idea of beginning them frightened her, yet she could not settle to sleep without saying something. Strange prayers they must have been, offered with a divided

heart and a reproachful conscience. Still they were said at length; and Maude lay down harassed, wretched, remorseful, everything but penitent.

The basis for Maude's extreme guilt was, it seems, her preference to attend St. Andrews' Church rather than her local parish. Another chapter in the book censures Maude for perhaps an equally insignificant flaw in her character: shyness. Out of duty, Maude visits some friends of her mother and is unable, due to her shyness, to be very charitable towards them. Christina's humorous description of the encounter reveals how uncomfortable Maude felt:

The meal seemed endless: she fidgeted under the table with her fingers; pushed about a stool on the noiselessly soft carpet until it came in contact with some one's foot; and at last fairly deprived Caroline of her third cup of coffee, by opening the piano and claiming the fulfillment of her promise.

The evening dragged on interminably for Maude but

Finally the maid announced that Miss Porter was fetched: and Maude shortening her adieus and turning a deaf ear to Annie's suggestion that their acquaintance should not terminate with the first meeting, returned home dissatisfied with her circumstances, her friends and herself.

The book has a tragic ending, for Maude seems to remain dissatisfied with herself until her death, which occurs shortly after a carriage accident took place en route to her cousins' home to attend Mary's wedding. Mackenzie

Bell in *Christina Rossetti* suggests that at one time Christina may have believed she was destined to an early death.<sup>17</sup>

William believes that his

sister's main object in delineating Maude was to exhibit what she regarded as defects in her own character, and in her attitude towards her social circle and her religious obligations. Maude's constantly weak health is also susceptible of a personal reference, no doubt intentional: even so minor a point as her designing the pattern of a sofa-pillow might apply to Christina herself. Maude is made the subject of many unfavourable comments, from herself and from her strict-minded authoress. The worst harm she appears to have done is, that when she had written a good poem, she felt it to be good. She was also guilty of the grave sin of preferring to forego the receiving eucharist when she supposed herself to be unworthy of it; and further, of attending the musical services at St. Andrew's Church (Wells Street, Oxford Street), instead of invariably frequenting her parish church. If some readers opine that all this shows Christina Rossetti's mind to have been at that date overburdened with conscientious scruples of an extreme and even a wire-drawn kind, I share their opinion. One can trace in this tale that she was already an adherent of the advanced High Church party in the Anglican communion, including conventional sisterhoods. So far as my own views of right and wrong go, I cannot see that the much-reprehended Maude commits a single serious fault from title-page to finis.

Indeed, so far as his own views of right and wrong were concerned, William felt that his sister was virtually perfect;

<sup>17</sup> I quote Bell here because his biography was written after extensive communication with William Michael; thus, many observations, including this one, are first-hand. The discussion of Christina's possible early death is found on p. 29.



he confesses that the one serious flaw in an otherwise beautiful and admirable character was that "she was by far over-scrupulous." He admits that

Scrupulosity may be a virtue: over scrupulosity is at any rate a semi-virtue, but it has, to my thinking, the full practical bearings of a defect. It is more befitting for a nunnery than for London streets. It weakens the mind, straitens the temperament and character, chills the impulse and the influence. Over-scrupulosity made Christina Rossetti shut up her mind to almost all things save the Bible, and the admonitions and ministrations of priests. To ponder for herself whether a thing was true or not ceased to be a part of her intellect. The only question was whether or not it conformed to the Bible, as viewed by Anglo-Catholicism. Her temperament and character, naturally warm and free, became 'a fountain sealed.'

Christina applied the standard William has noted to her own life. Newman writes in *Plain Sermons* (p. 153) that "as our nightly sleep is an image of death, so the nightly self-examination of a thoughtful person is in some sort an image of the last great day." Christina was not faithless when it came to this self-examination, but she was extremely harsh on herself. At eighteen she vowed never to enter a theater again because the moral tone of the entertainers was lax and she could not encourage such laxity by her attendance. At an early age she gave up playing chess, a game of which she was fond, because she felt she was too eager to win. She would avoid stepping on scraps of paper when walking, for fear the bits might have the name

of the Holy Spirit written on them and she would, by stepping on them, be unwittingly blasphemous.<sup>18</sup>

Though Christina was evidently very conscientious in her attempts to live in an upright manner, there is nothing in her poetry or in accounts of her character or personality which suggests that she ever used her blameless life to elevate herself or to incriminate others. On the contrary, in keeping with Tractarian theology, she was known for her humility and her modest nature. In *Parochial Sermons* Newman cautions

Know thyself. Pray God to show thyself.  
Bear in God's light to see thyself, bared  
of all outward advantages, what thou thyself  
hast made thyself, what thou hast been,  
what thou art. By God's grace, the sight  
will never again let thee be proud.

Keep ever present with thee the knowledge  
of thine own infirmity.

Never seek praise, nor speak of any good  
in thee, except for some good end, nor say,  
what may draw out praise. Yea, rather if it  
be useful to speak of thine own experience, it  
is best mostly to hide, in some true way, that  
it is thine own.

Do not even blame thyself, if it makes  
others think thee humble.

Mistrust thyself in everything, and in  
the very least things, seek, whenever thou  
canst remember it, the help of God.

Newman's list is much longer but the central idea is obvious. This, too, Christina took to heart, as is substantiated by William. He says "In Christina's character

<sup>18</sup> *Memoir*, p. lxvi.

there was great dignity tempered--or rather indeed reinforced--by modesty; and to this her bearing corresponded faithfully." (*Memoir*, p. lxvii)

Christina was definitely successful, then, at her efforts to be humble and also to endure the hardships of poor health and position. Tractarian piety urged that there must be a willingness to enter into suffering:

It behoves us, brethren, to treat suffering, whether in ourselves or others, in a much more solemn way than the generality even of serious Christians are wont to do. In itself, it were a punishment for sin, oppressive, hopeless; through His mercy in Christ, it is His healing medicine, to burn out our wounds and purify us for His Presence. All are tokens of His Presence, the great Physician of our souls, looking graciously upon our spots and sores, checking our diseases ere they take deep root, or cutting deeply and healthfully into our very souls, if He have compassion upon us, when we have deeply offended Him. All, from the most passing pain of the body to the most deep-seated anguish of the soul, are messengers from Him. Some are spread over life to temper our enjoyments, lest we seek our joys here; some follow closely upon what is wrong (as discomfort upon excess); some gradually thicken upon us, if we neglect the first warnings; some come suddenly on an instant, to startle people out of their lethargy and careless ways, and show them that the life which they are wasting is an earnest thing.

All, then, pain, sickness, weariness, distress, languor, agony of mind or body, whether in ourselves or others, is to be treated reverently, since in it our Maker's hand passes over us, fashioning, by suffering, the imperfect or decayed substance of our souls. In itself, it were the earnest of Hell; through His mercy in Christ, it is a purifying for Heaven. Either way, it is a very solemn act. 19

<sup>19</sup>Newman, *Parochial Sermons*, p. 26.

Christina had ample opportunity to evidence her acceptance of the solemn act of suffering, for she was ill most of her life. As a teenager she contracted exophthalmic bronchocele (Dr. Graves's disease) and this shadowed her entire life. It was cancer, however, which caused her death and she suffered greatly from this illness, too, before passing into the sleep of death. It is not difficult to understand how a strong feeling of unworthiness and a striving for self-effacement could be created by an acceptance of Tractarian theology which interpreted illness as a direct message from God. The theme of unworthiness is central to the poetry of Christina and is presented in some of her earliest work.

### III

#### Evidences of the Influence of the Oxford Movement in Christina's Early Life

Our face is set like flint against our  
trouble,  
Yet many things there are which  
comfort us;  
This bubble is a rainbow-coloured  
bubble,  
This bubble-life tumultuous.  
Christina Rossetti

In 1847 Grandfather Polidori, using his private printing press, published Christina's first volume of poetry: *Verses*. This initial volume was eventually to be succeeded by six others, and all seven of the books appeared in William's 1904 edition of his sister's *Poetical Works*. Of Christina's poetry, the sections called "Songs for Strangers and Pilgrims," "Some Feasts and Fasts," "Divers Worlds: Time and Eternity," "New Jerusalem and its Citizens," "Christ Our All in All," "Out of the Deep I Have Called Unto Thee, O Lord," "Gifts and Graces," and "The World: Self-Destruction" total 449 poems; all in all, eleven of the sixteen sections of the book deal with religious concerns or a discussion of impending death. Of the section entitled *Juvenilia*, most of the 54 poems are religious in nature. That leaves 226 poems to be considered, as well as 140 poems for children.<sup>20</sup> Although a

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that this account does not include 61 Italian poems and 61 unpublished poems.

good many of the general poems discuss lighter topics, the number that is devoted to spiritual concepts and death is substantial. (This may be evidenced by looking through the table of contents of *The Poetical Works*.) The poems for children is the section that is primarily light in tone; however, even among this whimsical verse are shadows of heavier thoughts; the poems "Our little Baby fell asleep," "A Baby's Cradle with no Baby in it," "Why did Baby die," and "Faith and Hope are Wings to Love" support this observation. Thus a comprehensive view of the poetical works of Christina reveals her concern with spiritual matters.

This concern is first evidenced in several of the poems written from 1842 to 1847 which appeared in *Verses*. It is true that several of these early poems deal with lighter topics, too; Christina was experimenting with traditional literary forms, including the ballad, the sonnet, and the hymn. But it is even more notable that the young girl was continually preoccupied with the thought of death, and her attitude towards life, as presented in this early volume of poetry, seems to be a pessimistic one. Even during these early teen years Christina was inwardly struggling with the natural inclinations and interests of a maturing young woman and the constant undercurrent of thought about her value as a person in the sight of Christ and her deliverance from "life's strange riot." The titles of some of the early

poems, written when she was between the ages of twelve and seventeen, reflect her focus on topics associated with religion: "Hymn," "Charity," "Earth and Heaven," "The End of Time," "Mary Magdalene." This focus is evidenced in other poems, too, although not quite so obviously expressed in the titles. For example, "Burial Anthem," written in 1845, reads:

Flesh of our flesh, bone of our  
 bone--  
 For thou and we in Christ are one--  
 Thy soul unto its rest hath flown,  
 And thou hast left us all alone  
     Our weary race to run  
 In doubt and want and sin and  
     pain,  
 Whilst thou will never sin again.  
 For us remaineth heaviness;  
 Thou never more shalt feel dis-  
     stress,--  
     For thou hast found repose  
 Beside the bright eternal river,  
 That clear and pure flows on for ever  
     And sings as on it flows.  
 And it is better far for thee  
     To reach at once thy rest  
 Than share with us earth's misery,  
     Or tainted joy at best.  
 Brother, we will not mourn for thee,  
     Although, our hearts be weary  
 Of struggling with our enemy  
     When all around is dreary:  
 But we will pray that still we may  
 Press onward in the narrow way,  
 With a calm thankful resignation;  
 And joy in this desolation;  
 And we will hope at length to be  
 With our Great Head--and, friend,  
     with thee--  
 Beside that river blest.

Throughout the poem are allusions to theological topics:

the doctrine of the transubstantiation (illustrated in the first two lines; "Flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone--"); the belief that there is life after death ("Thy soul unto its rest hath flown"); the image of the river of life ("For thou hast found repose / Beside the bright eternal river...." This image is originally expressed in Genesis); the belief that this life is lived for the purpose of battling and overcoming sin ("Brother, we will not mourn for thee, / Although our hearts be weary of struggling with our enemy / When all around is dreary." Traditionally, "our enemy" refers to Satan, the devil, originator and perpetuator of sin.); the hope that such an endeavor will at last be rewarded by God; the enemy will be overcome, and the victors will be united with God ("And we will hope at length to be / With our Great Head--and, friend, with thee-- / Beside that river blest.")

Christina was 15 when she wrote "Burial Anthem;" her concern with the hope of eternal life is readily evidenced through a reading of the poem. This concern, as often expressed by a longing for death, has been regarded by some as a morbid strain in the poetry of Christina. While William recognizes what may be termed such, he takes pain to dispute the validity of the claim:

Morbid things are to be found in it [her poetry]--where are they not to be found? and the fact that her feelings and per-



ceptions were coloured by an infirm physical condition has already been stated, and was inevitable. But I cannot acknowledge that, for a person who entertained the belief which Christina really and deeply did entertain--the professed belief of all Christians--there is anything morbid in saying that this present life is far from satisfactory, that death is the avenue to a different life, which will be of eternal duration and may be made of ineffable bliss, and that therefore death is a transition to be rather wished for than shunned. No one would regard as morbid a person who, during this mundane life, should elect to pass from a condition of serious distress into one of extreme and lasting happiness, at the cost of a few minutes of physical pain; and this is a contrast infinitely smaller than that between life on earth and the promised life in heaven. As Christina's faith in these things was of iron solidity, so was her attitude of mind, consequent upon her faith, logical and sound; and to speak of morbidity in relation to it seems a decided misapplication of the term. (p. xlvii).

Although William does not address Christina's tendency to deal obsessively with strains of death at a young age, before her health was poor, he does confirm the fact that she was early involved with religion: "From her earliest years she was devout; and, after being confirmed (towards 1840), she made religion her paramount concern, attending little in comparison to anything else."<sup>21</sup> It is not inaccurate, then, to conclude that Christina was early devoted to the promise of heaven, but she did not exclude herself entirely from the concerns of this earth. It is appropriate to note, at this point, that she never married, but she fell in love with a man named James Collinson and

<sup>21</sup> *Memoir*, p. xlvii.

was engaged to him from 1847--1850, breaking the engagement when he deserted the Anglican Church and realigned himself with the Roman Catholic faith. The poems written both before and during the years of Christina's interest in Collinson are representative of two themes which recur throughout the poet's life. She was concerned with the sovereignty of love (differentiating between human and divine love), and was also caught up with the idea of martyrdom, considering this a manifestation of love for God. A poem written in October of 1843 illustrates Christina's tendency to associate love with divine elements.

LOVE AND HOPE

Love for ever dwells in  
 heaven,--  
 Hope entereth not there.  
 To despairing man Love's  
 given,--  
 Hope dwells not with despair.  
 Love reigneth high, and reigneth low,  
 and reigneth everywhere.

In the inmost heart Love dwelleth,--  
 It may not quenched be;  
 E'en when the life-blood welleth,  
 Its fond effect we see  
 In the name that leaves the lips the  
 last--fades last from  
 memory.

And when we shall awaken,  
 Ascending to the sky,  
 Though Hope shall have forsaken,  
 Sweet Love shall never die;  
 For perfect Love and perfect bliss  
 shall be our lot on high.

In May of 1846, the young woman composed a poem which re-

veals her attitude towards martyrdom was one of admiration. (The poem, entitled "The Martyr," is included in Appendix B.) A brief look at some of the titles of poems written during the years in which she was involved with Collinson substantiates the suggestion that Christina was preoccupied with religious thoughts. A number of the poems take their titles from direct Biblical quotations: "I Have Fought a Good Fight," "I Do Set My Bow in the Cloud," "Death is Swallowed Up in Victory," "For Advent," "One Certainty," "Two Pursuits," "Sweet Death," and "Symbols." It is interesting to note that the expectation of early death (which led to the parting of earthly lovers) and the yearning for eternal satisfaction in the world beyond are themes that are expressed in the poetry written during the years she was supposedly planning to marry Collinson. A poem written in February of 1849 reveals the attitude of the call of the divine to a dedicated life accompanied by the longing for death:

#### SWEET DEATH

The sweetest blossoms die.  
 And so it was that, going day by  
 day  
 Unto the Church to praise and  
 pray,  
 And crossing the green churchyard  
 thoughtfully,  
 I saw how on the graves the  
 flowers  
 Shed their fresh leaves in showers,  
 And how their perfume rose up to  
 the sky  
 Before it passed away.

The youngest blossoms die.  
 They die and fall and nourish the  
     rich earth  
 From which they lately had their  
     birth;  
 Sweet life, but sweeter death that  
     passeth by  
 And is as though it had not  
     been:--  
 All colours turn to green;  
 The bright hues vanish, and the  
     odours fly,  
 The grass hath lasting worth.

And youth and beauty die.  
 So be it, O my God, Thou God  
     of Truth:  
 Better than beauty and than youth  
 Are saints and Angels, a glad  
     company:  
 And Thou, O Lord, our Rest and  
     Ease,  
 Why should we shrink from our full  
     harvest? why  
 Prefer to glean with Ruth?

It does not seem typical that a young woman anticipating marriage to a man she loves would spend her time writing about death rather than contemplating the joys of a union supposedly desired by both. Whatever the doubts Christina may have experienced during the time she was contemplating marriage, she must have expressed pain at dissolving the relationship with Collinson. William notes ". . . he had nonetheless struck a staggering blow at Christina's peace of mind on the very threshold of womanly life, and a blow from which she did not fully recover for years." (*Memoir*, p. lii)

It appears as though Christina considered another op-

portunity for channeling her affections. In 1847 she met Charles Bagot Cayley, a man with whom she fell in love years later. He eventually proposed to her, but she refused. The only explanation William offers is that Cayley, even though he was a Christian, was not an orthodox Christian. A poem written in September of 1857 suggests Christina's regret at turning down the proposal for marriage, and is again representative of her internal conflicts:

ANOTHER SPRING

If I might see another Spring,  
 I'd not plant summer flowers and  
 wait:  
 I'd have my crocuses at once,  
 My leafless pink mezereens,  
 My chill-veined snow-drops, choicer  
 yet  
 My white or azure violet,  
 Leaf-nested primrose; anything  
 To blow at once, not late.

If I might see another Spring,  
 I'd listen to the daylight birds  
 That build their nests and pair and  
 sing,  
 Nor wait for mateless nightingale;  
 I'd listen to the lusty herds,  
 The ewes with lambs as white as  
 snow,  
 I'd find out music in the hail  
 And all the winds that blow.

If I might see another Spring--  
 Oh stinging comment on my past  
 That all my past results in 'if'--  
 If I might see another Spring  
 I'd laugh today, today is brief;  
 I would not wait for anything:  
 I'd use today that cannot last,  
 Be glad today and sing.

Again, this poem does not *state* the spiritual concerns of the writer, but that very absence reinforces her perennial conflict: Christina refused to marry a man she loved because of reasons associated with religious concerns.<sup>22</sup> It is helpful to note here, as does H. N. Fairchild in *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, Vol. IV (New York: Morningside Press, 1957), that "In relation to her spiritual experience Collinson and Cayley are symptoms, not causes. It will not do to say that whenever she voices a longing for Jesus what she really wants is union with a man. Assuredly she had much to sublimate, and the task was not easy for her. But she was only seventeen at the outset of the Collinson affair. If she had not already determined to set the love of Jesus above all other loves she could have captured the wavering milksop easily enough." (p. 307)

However weak or strong a man either Cayley or Collinson may have been, Christina chose to love them from afar. And it is this choice in all phases of her life--to lean towards that which seemed to cause her distress, pain, guilt and sorrow--which is central to the study of the Oxford Movement in relationship to Christina's life and her poetry.

<sup>22</sup>Though Christina's relationship with Cayley and Collinson are the only two noted by William, Lona Mosk Packer makes a convincing case for her theory that Christina was in love with William Scott Bell (see her book *Christina Rossetti*).

#### IV

### Christina's Poetry in Relationship to the Oxford Movement

"For now we see through a glass darkly;  
but then face to face. . . ." I Corinthians 13:12

It may be useful to note that Christina perhaps felt she had no choice but to be exposed to the painful elements of her existence, for, as stated earlier, she suffered from illness most of her life. Also, in keeping with Tractarian theology, she was keenly aware of the temporality of this earth and its value. Newman, in *Parochial Sermons*, emphasized the transient nature of the world in this way:

The unprofitableness and feebleness of the things of this world are forced upon our minds; they promise but cannot perform, they disappoint us. Or, if they do perform what they promise, still (so it is) they do not satisfy us. We still crave for something, we do not well know what; but we are sure it is something which the world has not given us. And then its changes are so many, so sudden, so silent, so continual. It never leaves changing; it goes on to change, till we are quite sick at heart: then it is that our reliance on it is broken. It is plain we cannot continue to depend upon it, unless we keep pace with it, and go on changing too, but this we cannot do. We feel that, while it changes, we are one and the same; and thus, under God's blessing, we come to have some glimpse of the meaning of our independence of things temporal, and our immortality. And should it so happen that misfortunes come upon us (as they often do), then still more are we led to understand the nothingness of this world; then still more are we led to distrust it, and we are weaned from the love of it, till at length it floats before our eyes merely as some idle veil, which, notwithstanding its many tints, cannot

hide the view of what is beyond it; and we begin, by degrees, to perceive that there are but two beings in the whole universe, our own soul, and the God who made it.<sup>23</sup>

That Christina often viewed her experience as limited to God and her soul may be observed from the mere bulk of poetry which deals with the theme.<sup>24</sup> The poem entitled "Thou, God, Seest Me" is one of dozens which expresses the poet's continual sense of awe and reverence at the idea of a God who accepts her in her imperfect state:

Ah me that I should be  
Exposed and open evermore to  
Thee!--  
'Nay, shrink not from My light,  
And I will make thee glorious in  
My sight  
With the overcoming Shulamite.'--  
Yea, Lord, Thou moulding me.

. . . Without a hiding-place  
To hide me from the terrors of Thy  
Face.--  
'Thy hiding-place is here  
In Mine own heart, wherefore  
the Roman spear  
For thy sake I accounted dear.'--

. . . Without a veil, to give  
Whiteness before Thy Face that I  
might live.--  
'Am I too poor to dress  
Thee in My royal robe of  
righteousness?  
Challenge and prove My Love's  
excess.'--  
Give, Lord, I will receive.

<sup>23</sup>Newman, *Parochial Sermons*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup>This observation substantiated in detail on pages 28--30 of this study.



. . . Without a pool wherein  
 To wash my piteous self and make  
     me clean.--  
     'My Blood hath washed away  
     Thy guilt, and still I wash thee  
     day by day:  
     Only take heed to trust and  
     pray.'--  
 Lord, help me to begin.

Here is a simple, short poem which relates the idea of  
 Christina's awareness of her God and her subsequent de-  
 sire to give Him something in return for His compassion:

Me and my gift: kind Lord, behold,  
     Be not extreme to test or sift;  
 Thy love can turn to fire and gold  
     Me and my gift.

Myself and mine to Thee I lift:  
 Gather us to Thee from the cold  
     Dead outer world where dead  
     things drift.

If much were mine, then manifold  
     Should be the offering of my thrift:  
 I am but poor, yet love makes bold  
     Me and my gift.

Though this next poem hints at the despondency which crept  
 into much of her work, the pledge of faith in her God pro-  
 hibits a despairing tone:

None other Lamb, none other Name,  
     None other Hope in heaven or  
     earth or sea,  
 None other Hiding-place from guilt  
     and shame,  
     None beside Thee.

My faith burns low, my hope burns  
     low,

Only my heart's desire cries out in  
 me  
 By the deep thunder of its want and  
 woe,  
 Cries out to Thee.

Lord, Thou art Life tho' I be dead,  
 Love's Fire Thou art, however  
 cold I be:  
 Nor heaven have I, nor place to lay  
 my head,  
 Nor home, but Thee.

The hint of despair in the previous poem is much stronger in many of her other verses, but is often balanced by poetry which expresses Christina's determination to rely upon God, in sickness, poverty, loneliness, and doubt, for restitution. This poem entitled "Who Have a Form of Godliness" evidences such determination.

When I am sick and tired it is God's will:  
 Also God's will alone is sure and best:--  
 So in my weariness I find my rest,  
 And so in poverty I take my fill.  
 Therefore I see my good in midst of ill,  
 Therefore in loneliness I build my nest,  
 And through hot noon pant toward the shady west,  
 And hope in sickening disappointment still.  
 So, when the times of restitution come,  
 The sweet times of refreshing come at last,  
 My God shall fill my longings to the brim:  
 Therefore I wait and look and long for Him:  
 Not wearied though the work is wearisome,  
 Nor fainting though the time be almost past.

## The Laughter of Christina Rossetti

There is one that has a head with-  
 out an eye,  
 And there's one that has an eye  
 without a head;  
 You may find the answer if you try;  
 And when all is said,  
 Half the answer hangs upon a  
 thread.

Christina Rossetti

Such attempts by Christina to balance her many expressions of doubt and discouragement are not isolated and they deserve mention. Equally deserving of recognition is another facet of Christina's personality which surfaces now and again in her poetry--a gay, whimsical, light, and cheery response to life which is largely ignored by William and by others who knew Christina personally.

There is nothing in the theology of Tractarianism which would seem to suggest that enjoyment of some of the positive elements of life--friends and family, for example--should be either encouraged or stifled. The leaders of the Movement would doubtless have cautioned members on becoming content with this world and its shallow promises, but Christina, assuredly, was in no danger of that. Still, she was not as thoroughly melancholy as a study of her life and poetry might initially suggest.

As noted earlier, William reports that his sister was

very humble and this observation is supported by others who knew her. Ford Madox Heuffer [Ford] suggests that Ruskin disliked Christina because she abhorred being important.<sup>25</sup> Grace Gilchrist, writing of her first encounter with Christina, which took place in June of 1863, recalls that Christina was shy and reticent to be among strangers, so much so that Grace's mother had to call Christina from her room in order for her to bring the poet out to visit the other guests. Grace observed that Christina possessed a ". . . sweet, modest nature, from which all her growing fame could not detract an iota of that shy girlish humility which clung to her through life. The great charm of her personality was an unaffected simplicity. . . ."26

Evidently, the simplicity for which she was noted was an acquired presence, for, as stated earlier, she did possess a strong spirit, a strong will. William observes that "In innate character she was vivacious, and open to pleasurable impressions; and, during her girlhood, one might readily have supposed that she would develop into a woman of expansive heart, fond of society and diversions, and

<sup>25</sup>Ford Madox Heuffer [Ford], "The Character of Christina Rossetti" in *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. XCV, N. S. Vol LXXXIX (March, 1911), pp. 422-429.

<sup>26</sup>Grace Gilchrist, "Christina Rossetti," *Good Words*, Vol. XXXVII (December, 1896), pp. 822-826.

taking a part in them of more than average brilliancy."<sup>27</sup> Of course what actually came to pass was the opposite of this prediction and William later discusses at length Christina's quiet reserve, which was sometimes interpreted as a chosen distance rather than merely shyness or humility.<sup>28</sup> But even though William notes that Christina never presumed upon her reputation as a poet, an interesting story related by Virginia Woolf during Christina's centenary celebration contradicts this assertion. It seems that Christina was attending a tea party given by Mrs. Virtue Tebbs at which the women present were discussing poetry. Abruptly, though, "there arose from a chair and paced forward into the centre of the room a little woman dressed in black, who announced solemnly, 'I am Christina Rossetti!' and having so said, returned to her chair."<sup>29</sup> Whether or not the anecdote is true or fictitious bears little relevance, it seems to represent one aspect of Christina's nature which conflicts with the traditional reports of it. Indeed, William alludes to these contradictions in the *Memoir*, but it is Christina herself who finally evidences them.

<sup>27</sup> *Memoir*, p. lxvi.

<sup>28</sup> *Memoir*, p. lvi.

<sup>29</sup> Virginia Woolf, "I Am Christina Rossetti," in *The Second Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 261.

Though she must not have kept a diary or journal, Christina wrote many letters which give helpful clues to the richness of her personality. Of these letters, perhaps the most delightful are those written to her nephew, Arthur, William's second oldest child, from 1883-1889. Though the letters, save for part of one, are not included in the *Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti* (edited by William), Lona Mosk Packer presents them in an article for *Notes and Queries* ("Christina's Correspondence with her Nephew: Some Unpublished Letters," Vol. 6, No. 11 [vol. 204 of the continuous series], December, 1959, pp. 425-432. The following letters written to Arthur especially reveal Christina's charm, her playfulness, her love of children and her ability to entertain them. This one, written in 1883, alludes to what Christina called her "feline" language:

This morning your Papa writes us word that you have been tumbling down and cutting that poor little thumb of yours and that your arm has had to be put in a sling. What a terrible little man you are for hurting yourself: now a head, and now a hand, and now I don't know what! I do hope the whole of my not large nephew will get safe back to London; without leaving a finger, or a thumb, or a nose, or any other outlying morsel behind.

Give my love to your Mamma, please, and tell her that I hope she is better than when she left town. Grandmamma sends her love to her, and joins me in love to you and to your three sisters. Why, as their one and only brother it becomes you to take care of them: and how will you manage that if you cannot take care

of your own small self? I send you a book about a Cat's Teaparty in which 'Master Tabbie' has a fall worthy of someone I know!

This letter, written in 1886, and partially quoted here, shares a story meant to amuse the young Arthur:

No one has a better right than myself to bear in mind that 'time flies,' [the name of a devotional diary which Christina published in 1885] so a double shame it would be to me if I forgot that I have a dear nephew on the verge of 9 years old. I hope he--that is, I hope you will feel satisfaction in accepting the Postal Order I enclose, and that 5/- will procure you some pleasure. Grandmamma adds her love and best birthday wishes to mine and indeed our loves offer themselves to your Mamma, sisters, and not least to our old friends Mr. and Mrs. Madox Brown. Please remember me also to your trim Mlle. Combrisson.

I happened to mention our pretty long haired pussy the other day to a friend, and she tells me in answer of a cat who when its master lay dying laid at his door first a mouse and then a bird "to tempt his appetite:" a funny feline idea of tempting fare, certainly, if such was the cat's motive. But I like puss whatever the motive.

So I conclude if not as your amusing at least as  
Your affectionate aunt,  
Christina G. Rossetti

In a letter she wrote to Arthur in 1889, she included this puzzle for him to decipher:

L N N E O P Y  
L I A T T  
L I A V Q  
L I A M E  
L I E D C D

and in a letter dated February 26, 1889, she mentions a game which she devised:

I dare say you never suspected your sober old aunt of having invented a game. Years ago, however, I did: and I send it to you in case you may like to try it some evening when sunny Biarritz may be dim and chilly. I don't know whether anyone else will think it amusing, but I entertain a weakness for it.

Yes, the sober old aunt was capable of originating games, of creating puzzles, of designing ideas which would tickle the mind of a child.

Katherine Hinkson, an acquaintance of Christina, writes of her recollections of the poet ("Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti" in the *London Bookman*, vol. 1, February, 1885, pp. 28-29) and touches upon this incongruity--that of Christina's supposedly dim and reserved nature and her actually bright personality. Mrs. Hinkson notes that "Miss Rossetti somewhat disappointed my sentimental ideas of her, because, at that time, she was so much more brisk and cheerful than I expected. I must have said something of the sort to her, for she said: 'I was a very melancholy girl; but now I am a very cheerful old woman.'" Hinkson continues with this observation--"I used to think that she laid this cheerfulness upon herself as a duty, thinking perhaps, like Dante, that sadness was one of the sins."

But this cheerfulness was expressed in spontaneity by Christina in more than one of her works. Perhaps most notable of these is the long poem written in 1859 (much before, it should be noted, Christina was an "old woman"), entitled



*Goblin Market.*

In this poem, the words are often simple and always quick moving. The story of Lizzie and Laura, sisters, and their encounter with the merchant men of the goblin market, rushes out at a fast pace that adds to the fairy tale atmosphere of the lyrics. When read aloud, the words often seem to tumble out, as in this description of Laura's encounter with the goblin men:

One had a cat's face,  
 One whisked a tail,  
 One tramped at a rat's pace,  
 One crawled like a snail,  
 One like a wombat prowled obtuse  
 and furry,  
 One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

Though this poem is obviously rhymed and the story often reads easily, in other places it is difficult to read aloud. Here, when Lizzie sets off to locate the goblins and obtain the antidote for her ailing sister, is an example of a passage which does not read easily, but is pleasingly cacaphonic and would, doubtless, capture the ear and imagination of a child. The goblins have just spotted Lizzie in the forest and they

Came towards her hobbling,  
 Flying, running, leaping,  
 Puffing and blowing,  
 Chuckling, clapping, crowing,  
 Clucking and gobbling,  
 Mopping and mowing,  
 Full of airs and graces,  
 Pulling wry faces,  
 Demure grimaces,  
 Cat-like and rat-like,  
 Ratel-and wombat-like,

Snail-paced in a hurry,  
 Parrot-voiced and whistler,  
 Helter skelter, hurry, skurry,  
 Chattering like pigeons,  
 Gliding like fishes,--  
 Hugged her and kissed her:  
 Squeezed and caressed her:  
 Stretched up their dishes,  
 Panniers and plates:  
 'Look at our apples  
 Russet and dun,  
 Bob at our cherries,  
 Bite at our peaches,  
 Citrons and dates,  
 Grapes for the asking,  
 Pears red with basking  
 Out in the sun,  
 Plums on their twigs;  
 Pluck them and suck them,--  
 Pomegranates, figs.'

This musical verse set Christina apart as an able poet; the original, fascinating tale was acknowledged as a masterpiece and is thought by some to be her best work.

While it is true that the poem has been interpreted as one with deep religious and spiritual overtones,<sup>30</sup> it is also true that a reading of the poem as simply a captivating, imaginative tale for children, is a valid one. (William writes in his notes to *Goblin Market*, I have more than once heard Christina say that she did not mean anything profound by this fairy tale--it is not a moral apologue consistently carried out in detail.")<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See especially Lona Mosk Packer's reading of *Goblin Market*.

<sup>31</sup> Notes by William Michael Rossetti, *Poetical Works of Christina G. Rossetti*, p. 459.

All of the verses included in "Sing-Song A Nursery Rhyme Book," are much shorter than *Goblin Market* and there can be no mistaking the intent: to delight children. This one, untitled, recalls the poultry noises Mr. Rossetti would make to his children when they were young:

'KOOKOOROOKOO! Kookoorookoo!'  
 Crows the cock before the morn;  
 'Kikirikee! Kikirikee!'  
 Roses in the east are born.

'KOOKOOROOKOO! Kookoorookoo!'  
 Early birds begin their singing;  
 'Kikirikee! Kikirikee!'  
 The day, the day, the day is  
 springing.

This one, also untitled, evidences Christina's penchant for playing with words:

A city plum is not a plum;  
 A dumb-bell is no bell, though  
 dumb;  
 A party rat is not a rat;  
 A sailor's cat is not a cat;  
 A soldier's frog is not a frog;  
 A captain's log is not a log.

Christina's sense of humor is revealed in ways aside from her poetry and letters to her nephews and nieces. One of her poems, "A Birthday," was parodied by an anonymous author in a verse called "An Unexpected Pleasure." Both poems follow:

#### A BIRTHDAY

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

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

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

AN UNEXPECTED PLEASURE  
 (After C. G. Rossetti)

My heart is like one asked to dine  
 Whose evening dress is up the spout;  
 My heart is like a man would be  
 Whose raging tooth is half pulled out.  
 My heart is like a howling smell  
 Who boggles on his upper C;  
 My heart is madder than all these--  
 My wife's mamma has come to tea.

Raise me a bump upon my crown  
 Bang it till given in purple dies;  
 Feed me on tombs and fulminates,  
 And turncoats of a medium size.  
 Work me a suit in crimson apes  
 And sky-blue beetles on the spree;  
 Because the mother of my wife  
 Has come--and means to stay with me.

Christina was not offended by the parody of her work; on the contrary, she was amused by the comical poem: she cut it out, and pasted it in a copy of her 1875 *Poems*! Undoubtedly, it would be a mistake to characterize Christina Rossetti as a joyless woman to whom laughter was foreign.

## VI

### Completion of the Discussion of Christina's Poetry

". . . weeping may endure for a night, but joy  
cometh in the morning." Psalms 30:5

The glimpses into other facets of Christina's personality should not serve to make her more turbulent experiences seem even more oppressive in comparison, but neither should they neutralize the significance of the conflicts noted earlier. Repeatedly in the poetry of Christina Rossetti attempts are made to reconcile knowledge of her unworthiness with the recognition of her valid efforts to merit salvation. But it is important to note, before completing the discussion of Christina's poetry which deals with the subjects mentioned earlier-- God and the soul, suffering, humility--in addition to many not noted in this study but also fundamental to Tractarian theology, such as repentance, obedience in little things, prayer without ceasing, confessions, absolution, and fasting, that Christina's faith in *God* was never lacking. In fact, the description offered by William of Christina's stance on faith closely parallels John Henry Newman's theological explication of faith. Says William:

'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. There were few things she more disliked than an 'Evidences of Chris-

tianity': I dare say she never read one, but she must have glanced at one or other sufficiently to know that she disliked it. To learn that something in the Christian faith was credible *because it was reasonable*, or because it rested upon some historic evidence of fact, went against her. Her attitude of mind was: "I believe because I am told to believe, and I know that the authority which tells me to believe is the only real authority extant, God." To press her-- 'How do you know that it is God?' would have been no use; the ultimate response could only have come this-- 'My faith is faith; it is not evolved out of argumentation, nor does it seek the aid of that.' If she did not admit of discussion of her own belief, neither did she indulge in any discussion of the belief of others: no one knows this better than myself, with whom the field of debate, had she been minded to it, would have been a very large one. In fact, though enormously strict with herself in matters of religious faith and dogma, she was not intolerant of difference of opinion in others: she met on terms of close or amicable good-will many persons whom she knew to be decided disbelievers, not to speak of earnest and devout Dissenters. (p. liv)

Even though Christina carefully avoided theological argument and debate, she occasionally did make known to William and his wife Lucy how she felt about their children not being baptized. She writes of this matter to Lucy:

I have been thinking over something that passed yesterday, and, as I am sure of my own affectionate feeling, I confidently appeal to yours.

We were talking about your 'happy' children. And so I think them in the daily home-matters. But I cannot pointedly use that word *happy* without meaning something beyond the present life. And baptism (where attainable) is the sole door I know whereby entrance is promised into the happiness which eye hath not seen nor ear heard neither hath heart of man conceived. I now live

so much in the other world--or at least I ought to do so, having my chief Treasure there--that please do not take offense at what I say. . . .<sup>32</sup>

When William's infant son Michael was in obvious danger of his life, Christina pleaded with his parents to allow her to baptize the baby. They agreed and Christina baptized Michael with her own hands. William later admitted that he doubted whether anything else she did ever gave her so much satisfaction as the act of baptizing his dying son.

Though she felt a burden for her nephews and nieces and thus raised the issue of baptism from time to time, she was able, as William has mentioned, to tolerate views other than her own; in fact, Algernon Swinburne, the atheist, and Christina were good friends.<sup>33</sup> Again, relationships with individuals who possessed values which differed from her own caused Christina no problem, for she strictly endorsed the Tractarian concept of faith. Newman delivered three principle sermons on faith at the University; Owen Chadwick, in his "Introduction" to *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (California: Stanford University Press, 1960), offers a succinct and workable summary of Newman's conception

<sup>32</sup>Letter from Christina Rossetti to Lucy Rossetti, Summer, 1887, in *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1968), p. 164.

<sup>33</sup>See Lona Mosk Packer, "Swinburne and Christina Rossetti," in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol. 33 (October, 1963), pp. 30-42.

of faith:

Faith is not, as Paley and the religious philosophers had taught or implied, an assent to argument, an assent after weighing the probable evidences. According to the New Testament faith is the gift of God, it comes by hearing the testimony of God and accepting it. Though nothing can be claimed to be true in faith which is rejected by the reason, it does not therefore follow that faith is the result of reasoning in the mind. Reason tests, and verifies faith, does not create it.

A child may act savingly on faith, though he cannot give reasons, knows nothing of logic and proof. Reason is always, for Newman, the analytical reason. And though faith is seen to be an act of the reason, he is anxious to demonstrate that it is not act of proof, demonstration or analysis, or syllogism; that it is an act based partly upon the moral judgment of the conscience, which insists that we venture now because act we must, and which is content (like every other practical decision of our lives) with evidence short of the demonstration, perhaps far short. Faith is more a principle of action than of intellectual assent.

How, then, does one distinguish from credulity? Philosophers suggested that, since reason was the foundation of faith, then reason was also the safeguard of faith. But, as Chadwick notes,

Newman denied it. Reason is not the safeguard of faith. Why not? Because he was afraid that, the moment reason is allowed to be the safeguard of faith, it will become detached from it, will hold the facts of religion at arm's length, instead of embracing them, will examine and dissect them, will pass into irreverence. God cannot be God if the proper human attitude is to dissect His qualities and prove His existence.... He [Newman] was denying reason is the safeguard of faith because he believed (with all the Tractarians) that there was a deeper and a better



safeguard--a right state of heart. Holiness, or dutifulness, or love--that is the eye of faith which keeps it from fastening upon unworthy objects, *fides formata*, faith working by love--there is the stability which prevents the faith from wandering after unworthy objects.<sup>34</sup>

It is this safeguard, the right state of heart, which so troubled Christina. She could not discover an acceptable equilibrium between her efforts to belittle herself and her knowledge of just how much effort was required to maintain such a self deprecating attitude. Her brother observes that while some believers--Maria Rossetti, for example, feel the firmest confidence of salvation, it was never so with 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

<sup>34</sup>Chadwick, pp. 43-44.

coupled with an awful sense of unworthiness,  
shadowed by an awful uncertainty. (p. liv, lv)

This uncertainty, the same which caused her repentance as a young child to take the form of self-inflicted pain, the same which compelled her to deprecate herself, to walk cautiously and to avoid any possibility for wrong doing, is the strain which permeates most of her poetry. On the one hand, Christina is aware that another order, eternity, is possible, but the deadly element on the opposing side is self-love. A poem composed by Christina when she was young (included in the original version of *Maude*) entitled "Three Nuns" effectively presents what have been interpreted as different sides of Christina's personality. The poem was intended as a representation of three of the characters of the story of *Maude*, Agnes, Mary, and Magdalen, and it deals with the emotional experience of three different women who have taken the veil. The first woman may be viewed as a poet; the second is a girl who has renounced the man she still loves; and the third is a genuinely religious woman. The poem is written in the form of a soliloquy and could easily represent the life of Christina. The trio described in the poem reveals, says Packer, "the three sides of her nature, the poetic, the erotic, and the religious. All her life she was to reveal one of these facets of her personality in her poetry, often all simultaneously,

and sometimes in warring conflict."<sup>35</sup> In the first poem (the entire poem is included in Appendix A), the speaker expresses relief at being separated from a world which was evidently painful ("When my yellow hair was curled / Though men saw and called me fair / I was weary in the world / Full of vanity and care"), and yet simultaneously suggests that the present mode of experience is somehow lacking: "But the vigil is so long / My heart sickens:--sing thy song / Blythe bird that canst do no wrong." The bird may be representative of the poetic spirit; this representation is obviously part of life which was valued by Christina.<sup>36</sup>

The second poem changes in tone, for the woman has an almost defensive attitude. First admitting love for a man, the speaker then queries if that is wrong--"I loved him; yes, where was the sin?" Throughout, the speaker seems to be trying to convince the listener of a genuineness that

<sup>35</sup>Packer, *Christina Rossetti*, p. 57.

<sup>36</sup>Again, this interpretation is original with Packer; although Christina records nothing in her letters to document this reading of the poem, I find the theory a persuasive one. Christina did mention the work in a letter to William, referring to it as "my dreary little poem."

The original copy of the poem was accompanied by this request: "Pray read the mottoes; put together, they form a most exquisite little song which the nuns sing in Italy." The meaning of the mottoes is: "This heart sighs, and I know not wherefore. It may be sighing for love, to me it says not so. Answer me, my heart, wherefore sighest thou? It answers: I want God--I sigh for Jesus." (This explication found in William's notes to the *Poetical Works*, P. 460.)

does not exist--"Yea the reward is almost won....; /  
 Soon I shall sing the unknown psalm.... / Nay, bear with  
 me: you need not grudge this peace; / the vows that I have  
 vowed / Have all been kept...." By suggesting that this  
 woman has questionable motives for her struggle, Chris-  
 tina seems to be implying that there is a distinctive  
 gap between those who are genuinely religious and those  
 who seek to be fulfilled by developing meaningful relation-  
 ships with others. Perhaps in creating in her world a  
 hierarchy of matters of value to herself, Christina could  
 not reconcile the seeming contradiction of her need for  
 reciprocity with another human being and her desire to  
 "sacrifice all to the Lord."

What is meant to represent the sincere religious  
 struggle is conveyed in the third and final poem. The  
 speaker is in agony as she expresses her desire for grace  
 and salvation, and eternal life--"Oh for the grapes of  
 the True Vine Growing in Paradise.... / Oh for the waters  
 of that Well / Round which the Angels stand-- / Oh for  
 the Shadow of the Rock / On my heart's weary land. . . ."  
 The struggle intensified as the woman renounces worldly  
 things and ends with an acknowledgement that what had once  
 been burdensome is now what she loves.

The struggle with which Christina wrestles in much of  
 her poetry is not always completed with the type of assur-  
 ance expressed by the final speaker of "The Three Nuns."

The utter weariness inevitably produced as a result of uncertainty as to the outcome of the struggle is conveyed in a poem called "Out of the Deep;" the poet, heart-sick of the pain which not knowing creates, pleads

Have mercy, Thou my God--mercy, my God!  
 For I can hardly bear life day by day.  
 Be I here or there, I fret myself away:  
 Lo for Thy staff I have but felt Thy rod  
 Along this tedious desert--path long trod.  
 When will Thy judgment judge me, yea or nay?  
 I pray for grace: but then my sins unpray  
 My prayer; on holy ground I fool stand shod--  
 While still Thou haunt'st me, faint upon the cross,  
 A sorrow beyond sorrow in Thy look,  
 Unutterable craving for my soul.  
 All-faithful Thou, Lord: I, not Thou, forsook  
 Myself: I traitor slunk back from the goal:  
 Lord, I repent--help Thou my helpless loss.

Christina always repents. In the poem "Ash Wednesday," she voices the haunting question: "Jesus, do I love Thee?" and closes the verse with one ultimate request:

Good Lord, I ask much of Thee  
 But most I ask to love Thee:  
 Kind Lord, be mindful of me,  
 Love me and make me love Thee.

Though almost all her devotional poems evidence a certain amount of pain and fear, most also allude to the potential redemption. Using the heavens as a comforting and promising image, Christina writes

Heaven overarches earth and sea,  
 Earth-sadness and sea-bitterness.  
 Heaven overarches you and me:  
 A little while and we shall be--  
 Please God--where there is no more sea  
 Nor barren wilderness.

Heaven overarches you and me,  
 And all earth's gardens and her graves.  
 Look up with me, until we see  
 The day break and the shadows flee.  
 What though to-night wrecks you and me  
 If so to-morrow saves?

And Christina does, often, find comfort in her religion. This poem, one of her best known, effectively presents a poignant question and answers it with an inspiringly hopeful response:

Does the road wind up-hill all the  
 way?  
 Yes, to the very end.  
 Will the day's journey take the whole  
 long day?  
 From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-  
 place?  
 A roof for when the slow dark  
 hours begin.  
 May not the darkness hide it from  
 my face?  
 You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at  
 night?  
 Those who have gone before.  
 Then must I knock, or call when  
 just in sight?  
 They will not keep you standing  
 at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and  
 weak?  
 Of labour you shall find the sum.  
 Will there be beds for me and all  
 who seek?  
 Yes, beds for all who come.

In her "Devotional Poems," Christina includes some equally victorious verse, for the intense inward struggle

she experiences often creates an expression of poetry in which the language used equals the divine theme and results in some of her best work. But more often than not Christina expresses utter weariness with her struggle.

As William has noted, the fact that Christina operates her life on the assurance of tomorrow's salvation should not be condemned; the tragedy is that she is never able to accept the assurance she is urging and that, while trying to cope with the inner turmoil her perpetual doubts created, she was quite content to choose death over life, in hopes that she would know, finally, how it had fared with her. Perhaps in no other poem than this one, in which she openly longs for death, is her life-weary tone so prominent--

I weary of my life  
 Through the long sultry day,  
 While happy creatues play  
 Their harmless lives away:--  
 What is my life?

I weary of my life  
 Through the slow tedious night,  
 While, earth and heaven's delight,  
 The moon walks forth in white:--  
 What is my life?

If I might, I would die:  
 My soul should flee away  
 To day that is not day  
 Where sweet souls sing and say--  
 If I might die!

If I might, I would die:  
 My body out of sight,

All night that is not night  
 My soul should walk in white--  
 If I might die!

As has been suggested, this tone expressing weariness with life remained with Christina until her death. She had always been of frail constitution, but from 1885 until her death in 1894, her health became a cause of increased anxiety. A persistent cough and the occasional spitting of blood seemed to confirm the suspicion of tuberculosis. Dr. Graves's disease tormented the latter part of her life, but during this time, as always, she did all things with great serenity and dignity. The pain did age her, though, and her Mother's death added to her grief. Katharine Hinkson tells of a letter she received from Christina in April of 1888; the poet wrote, "Advancing age and ailing health tell upon me. I am not strong, and I am more than content not to be strong." The following year Hinkson, who much earlier had been surprised at Christina's cheerfulness, revisited the sick woman. She observed that the brisk cheerfulness had disappeared because Christina "was allowing herself to grow old."<sup>37</sup>

William painfully watched his sister grow worse; it is he who notes that on December 25, a few days before her death, she was gloomy and distressed because of "religious

<sup>37</sup> Katharine Hinkson in the *Bookman* article noted earlier in this text.



ideas" and he observes, two days later, that his sister was in constant mental prayer. The nurse reported that Christina was praying up to five minutes of the end; on December 29 Christina was relieved of her constant vigil. The obituary which marked her passing praised her as a poet and a good woman, and some have since placed her in the ranks of Shelley and Tennyson.<sup>38</sup> The praise, of course, was never shared with Christina and that is how she would have wished it. These verses, discovered by William after Christina's death, are believed to be the last Christina wrote:

Sleeping at last, the trouble and  
 tumult over,  
 Sleeping at last, the struggle and  
 horror past,  
 Cold and white, out of sight of friend  
 and of lover,  
 Sleeping at last.

No more a tired heart downcast  
 or overcast,  
 Nor pangs that wring or shifting  
 fears that hover,  
 Sleeping at last in a dreamless  
 sleep locked fast.

Fast asleep. Singing birds in their  
 leafy cover  
 Cannot wake her, nor shake her  
 the gusty blast.  
 Under the purple thyme and the  
 purple clover  
 Sleeping at last.

<sup>38</sup>The Obituary is found in *Academy*, vol. 47 (January 5, 1895), p. 12. Among others, Sir Edmund Gosse in "Christina Rossetti" in *The Century*, vol. XLVI, N. S. vol. XXIV (June, 1893), pp. 211-217, offers generous praise of Christina Rossetti's poetry.

And so the sobering attitude instilled in Christina as a young child remained a part of her being until her death. Her poetic gifts, however great or small their potential, were used to express a great concern that no desire for poetic excellence or self recognition could ever overshadow--her intense longing for a new life in the world to come.

The hope of eternal life was taught by the leaders of the Oxford Movement, and Christina, encouraged by the expectations of her mother, whom she devoutly loved, and by exposure to the reformation triggered by the Movement, embraced this hope as a young child. The influence of the teachings and practices of the Oxford Movement is evident in the poetry of Christina Rossetti, for her verse deals with many of the doctrines of Tractarianism: the necessity to treat suffering as a direct message from God, the need to be aware of the omnipotence of God, to know that the godly life is a rigorous one, a trying one. The acceptance of these teachings seemed to cause distress to the poet from the time she was a child to the last days of her life, for she was not able to reconcile her feelings of unworthiness with what seems to be that which she considered a merited value of herself. The struggle evidenced itself in her actions

as a child and again, in much of her poetry. To be sure, Christina also composed some light, gay verse, but in comparison to that poetry which deals with spiritual themes--predominantly a feeling of unworthiness and a longing for death--the lighter verse is minimal. The longing for death is often accompanied by the anticipation of heaven; thus, the influence of the Oxford Movement, while perhaps contributing to the struggle which caused Christina Rossetti significant pain, also offered the poet her greatest comfort.

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APPENDIX A

Three Nuns

I

*Sospira questo core,  
E non so dir perche.*

Shadow, shadow on the wall,  
Spread thy shelter over me;  
Wrap me with a heavy pall,  
With the dark that none may see:  
Fold thyself around me, come;  
Shut out all the troublesome  
Noise of life; I would be dumb.

Shadow, thou hast reached my feet;  
Rise and cover up my head;  
Be my stainless winding-sheet,  
Buried before I am dead.  
Lay thy cool head upon my breast:  
Once I thought that joy was best,  
Now I only care for rest.

By the grating of my cell  
Sings a solitary bird;  
Sweeter than the vesper bell,  
Sweetest song ever was heard,  
Sing upon thy living tree;  
Happy echoes answer thee;  
Happy songster, sing to me.

When my yellow hair was curled,  
Though men saw and called me  
fair,  
I was weary in the world  
Full of vanity and care.  
Gold was left behind, curls shorn,  
When I came here; that same morn  
Made a bride no gems adorn.

Here wrapt in my spotless veil,  
Curtained from intruding eyes,  
I whom prayers and fasts turn pale  
Wait the flush of Paradise,  
But the vigil is so long  
My heart sickens: -- sing thy song,  
Blythe bird that canst do no wrong.



Sing on, making me forget  
 Present sorrow and past sin.  
 Sing a little longer yet:  
 Soon the matins will begin;  
 And I must turn back again  
 To that aching, worse than pain,--  
 I must bear and not complain.

Sing; that in thy song I may  
 Dream myself once more a child  
 In the green woods far away,  
 Plucking clematis and wild  
 Hyacinths, till pleasure grew  
 Tired, yet so was pleasure too,  
 Resting with no work to do.

In the thickest of the wood  
 I remember long ago  
 How a stately oaktree stood  
 With a sluggish pool below  
 Almost shadowed out of sight;  
 On the waters dark as night  
 Water-lilies lay like light.

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

## II

*Sospirera d'amore,  
 Ma non lo dice a me.*

I loved him; yes, where was the sin?  
 I loved him with my heart and soul;  
 But I pressed forward to no goal,  
 There was no prize I strove to win.  
 Show me my sin that I may see:  
 Throw the first stone, thou Pharisee.

I loved him, but I never thought  
 That he should know that I was  
 fair.  
 I prayed for him; was my sin  
 prayer?

I sacrificed, he never bought;  
 He nothing gave, he nothing took;  
 We never bartered look for look.

My voice rose in the sacred choir,  
 The choir of nuns: do you condemn  
 Even if when kneeling among  
 them  
 Faith, zeal, and love, kindled a fire,  
 And I prayed for his happiness  
 Who knew not? was my error this?

I only prayed that in the end  
 His trust and hope may not be  
 vain;  
 I prayed not we may meet again;  
 I would not let our names ascend,  
 No not to Heaven, in the same  
 breath;  
 Nor will I join the two in death.

Oh sweet is death, for I am weak  
 And weary, and it giveth rest.  
 The crucifix lies on my breast,  
 And all night long it seems to speak  
 Of rest; I hear it through my sleep,  
 And the great comfort makes me  
 weep.

Oh sweet is death, that bindeth up  
 The broken and the bleeding  
 heart,  
 The draught chilled, but a cordial  
 part,  
 Lurked at the bottom of the cup;  
 And for my patience will my Lord  
 Give an exceeding great reward.

Yea the reward is almost won,  
 A crown of glory and a palm.  
 Soon I shall sing the unknown  
 psalm;  
 Soon gaze on light, not on the sun;  
 And soon with surer faith shall pray  
 For him, and cease not night nor  
 day.

My life is breaking like a cloud-  
 God judgeth not as man doth  
 judge-  
 Nay, bear with me: you need not grudge  
 This peace; the vows that I have  
 vowed  
 Have all been kept: Eternal Strength  
 Holds me, though mine own falls at  
 length.

Bury me in the Convent-ground  
 Among the flowers that are so  
 sweet;  
 And lay a green turf at my feet,  
 Where thick trees cast a gloom  
 around;  
 At my head let a cross be, white  
 Through the long blackness of the  
 night.

Now I kneel and pray beside my bed  
 That I may sleep being free from  
 pain;  
 And pray that I may wake again  
 After His likeness who hath said  
 (Faithful is He who promiseth)  
 We shall be satisfied therewith.

### III

*Rispondimi, cor mio,  
 Perche sospiri tu?  
 Risponde: Voglio Iddio,  
 Sospiro per Gesu.*

My heart is as a freeborn bird  
 Caged in my cruel breast,  
 That flutters, flutters evermore,  
 Nor sings nor is at rest,  
 But beats against the prison bars,  
 As knowing its own nest  
 Far off beyond the clouded west.

My soul is as a hidden fount  
 Shut in by clammy clay  
 That struggles with an upward moan,  
 Striving to force its way  
 Up through the turf, over the grass,  
 Up up into the day  
 Where twilight no more turneth grey.

Oh for grapes of the True Vine  
    Growing in Paradise,  
Whose tendrils join the Tree of Life  
    To that which maketh wise-  
Growing beside the Living Well  
    Whose sweetest waters rise  
Where tears are wiped from tearful  
    eyes!

Oh for the waters of that Well  
    Round which the Angels stand-  
Oh for the Shadow of the Rock  
    On my heart's weary land-  
Oh for the Voice to guide me when  
    I turn to either hand,  
Guiding me till I reach heaven's  
    strand!

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

The Martyr

See, the sun hath risen--  
Lead her from the prison;  
She is young and tender,--lead her  
tenderly:  
May no fear subdue her,  
Lest the saints be fewer--  
Lest her place in heaven be lost eternally.

Forth she came, not trem-  
bling,  
No nor yet dissembling  
An o'erwhelming terror weighing her  
down, down;  
Little, little heeding  
Earth, but only pleading  
For the strength to triumph and to  
win a crown.

All her might was rallied  
To her heart; not pallid  
Was her cheek, but glowing with a  
glorious red;  
Glorious red and saintly,  
Never paling faintly,  
But still flushing, kindling still, with-  
out thought of dread.

On she went, on faster,  
Trusting in her Master,  
Feeling that His eye watched o'er  
her lovingly;  
He would prove and try her,  
But would not deny her  
When her soul had past, for His  
sake, patiently.

'Christ,' she said, 'receive  
me--  
Let no terrors grieve me,--  
Take my soul and guard it with Thy  
heavenly care:  
Take my soul and guard it,--  
Take it and reward it  
With the love Thou bearest for the  
love it bears.'

Quickened with a fire  
 Of sublime desire,  
 She looked up to heaven, and she  
     cried aloud:  
 'Death, I do entreat thee,  
 Come! I go to meet thee;  
 Wrap me in the whiteness of a virgin  
     shroud.'

On she went, hope-laden-  
 Happy, happy maiden!  
 Never more to tremble, and to weep  
     no more:  
 All her sins forgiven,  
 Straight the path to heaven,  
 Through the glowing fire, lay her  
     feet before.

On she went, on quickly,  
 And her breath came thickly,  
 With the longing to see God coming  
     pantingly:  
 Now the fire is kindled,  
 And her flesh has dwindled  
 Unto dust; her soul is mounting up  
     on high:

Higher, higher mounting,  
 The swift moments count--  
     ing,  
 Fear is left beneath her, and the  
     chastening rod:  
 Tears no more shall blind  
     her;  
 Trouble lies behind her;  
 Satisfied with hopeful rest, and replete  
     with God.