

Dinah Roe

Christina Rossetti's Faithful Imagination

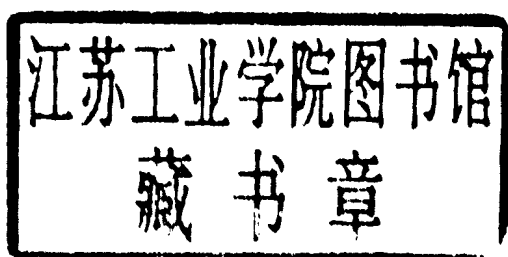
The Devotional Poetry and Prose



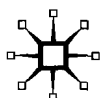
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Abbreviations

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, references to Christina Rossetti's poems are to *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. Rebecca Crump, 3 Vols., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979.

ACR	Kent, David A., ed. <i>The Achievement of Christina Rossetti</i> (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987)
CGR	Christina Georgina Rossetti
CR	Diane D'Amico, <i>Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time</i> (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999)
DGR	Dante Gabriel Rossetti
FD	Christina Rossetti, <i>The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse</i> (London: SPCK, 1892)
JK Letters	<i>The Letters of John Keats</i> . Edited by Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958)
KCP	Keats, John. <i>Complete Poems</i> . Edited by Jack Stillinger (London: Belknap Press, 1982)
LB	Jan Marsh, <i>Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography</i> (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994)
Letters	<i>The Letters of Christina Rossetti</i> . Edited by Antony H. Harrison, 4 Vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997–2005)
LS	<i>Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments</i> (London: SPCK, 1883)

<i>Memoir</i>	William Michael Rossetti, 'Memoir' in <i>The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti</i> (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1904)
PRB	Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood
<i>SF</i>	Christina Rossetti, <i>Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicte</i> . London: SPCK, 1879
<i>TF</i>	<i>Time Flies: A Reading Diary</i> (London: SPCK, 1885)
<i>TP</i>	Tennyson, Alfred. <i>The Poems of Tennyson</i> , 2nd edn., ed. Christopher Ricks (3 Vols. London: Longman, 1987)
<i>VDP</i>	G. B. Tennyson, <i>Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractaria Mode</i> (Cambridge and London Harvard University Press, 1981)
WMR	William Michael Rossetti

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Introduction

Virginia Woolf once wrote that if she were to put God on trial, she would summon Christina Rossetti as a witness.¹ If Rossetti's devotional work were submitted into evidence, this case would almost certainly result in a hung jury, if not an outright acquittal. Woolf's indictment of God comes up hard against the same problem that faces all of Rossetti's critics: a long and diverse career which takes our 'witness', and her beliefs and influences, from novice to authority. Rossetti's poetic imagination was shaped by her faith, and her faith by her poetic imagination, in a symbiotic relationship that intensified over her half-century of writing. As critics are beginning to observe, it is a mistake to think, as Woolf does, that 'years of traffic with men and books did not affect [Rossetti] in the least'.² The development of her faithful imagination is so subtle and slow that it is all too easy to miss, especially if there is an attempt to force a clear distinction, as Germaine Greer does, between 'the poems of Rossetti's rebellion and self-assertion' and 'those of her resignation and self-denial'.

The evidence of Rossetti's literary life supports neither Woolf's case against God nor Greer's charge that the poet's 'religion is a matter of devout sentiment'.³ Religious faith provided Rossetti with the two things every poet needs along with money and a room of her own: inspiration and a muse. It also gave her a text. The Authorized Version of the Bible is easily Rossetti's greatest literary influence, yet a curiously neglected source in the criticism of her work. Betty S. Flowers notes this oversight in the most recent edition of the complete poems. She argues that Rossetti would have expected her audience to be familiar with 'biblical characters and voices, and the stories in which they are embedded', and that 'her poems often depend on this knowledge for their effectiveness'.⁴

Critics like Diane D'Amico, Lynda Palazzo and Mary Arseneau have recently made great strides in the rediscovery and rehabilitation of Rossetti's devotional work. They have called for further investigation of the role of religious faith, and specifically Rossetti's reading of the Bible, in the career of this devout poet. The purpose of my project is to demonstrate the effects of religious reading (both the reading of religious texts, and the religious reading of texts) to Rossetti's poetry and thought. Rossetti's lifelong practice of religious reading significantly affected her own writing, and the way she responded to the literature of the past and of her own time. Dante and Keats were as important to her as to her brother Dante Gabriel, but she brought to her reading of both a different sensibility, an active devotional aesthetic which, though clearly influenced by the Tractarian movement, was never subordinated to it.

I place a strong emphasis on Rossetti's devotional prose as an intrinsic part of her achievement as a writer. Although she wrote five books of devotional prose in all, I concentrate on *Time Flies* and *The Face of the Deep* because they present a strong challenge to the characterization of Rossetti as an 'over-scrupulous' Christian writer.⁵ *Time Flies* is a 'Reading Diary' whose intimate, almost chatty tone, good humor, and lightness of touch counters lingering notions that Rossetti's daily life unfolded in 'dreary days of unremitting self-denial' (Greer, 376). Rossetti's seriousness and rigor as a religious thinker are confirmed by her very last work, *The Face of the Deep*, a meditation on the Book of Revelation. Its probing biblical exegesis, intense feeling, and imaginative flair are qualities which readers of Rossetti's poetry will recognize.

Both these books, moreover, weave verse into their prose fabric. Although Rossetti herself collected the poems written for her prose-works in a separate volume (*Verses*, 1893) there is much to be gained from reading them in context. The ideology and aesthetics of these poems are often explained and contextualized by the prose passages following or preceding them. Through the movement between prose and poetry, we catch a glimpse of the poet's mind at work; as Rossetti modestly puts it to Theodore Watts in a letter of 22 November 1886, during the composition of *The Face of the Deep*: 'I work at prose, and help myself forward with little bits of verse' (*Letters* 3: 346).

In associating 'work' with 'prose' and 'help' with 'verse', Rossetti seems to substantiate her brother William Michael's judgment that her 'habits' of poetic composition 'were eminently of the spontaneous kind'.⁶ Her prose struggles, at times, to balance the scholarly with the

devout; in verse she is more open to uncertainty and ambiguity. Yet the two are not separate, but parts of a single enterprise. And as Lynda Palazzo and Mary Arseneau have recently argued, the prose, like the poetry, reveals a mind more alert and less limited by Christian doctrine than that with which her freethinking brother cared to credit her.

Although the Bible was always a 'primary' influence on Rossetti, its literary and doctrinal treatment by Anglo-Catholic writers of her own time (Isaac Williams, John Henry Newman, John Keble) can be traced in her awareness of the formal and thematic differences between poetry and prose, as well as her interest in the suitability of each medium for serving God, man, woman, and writer. The extent of these Victorian influences on her mind and her work does not begin to be fully represented by the poetry alone.

This is not to suggest that these High Church influences are not identifiable in her poetry — on the contrary, a Tractarian philosophy, particularly in regard to the doctrines of analogy and reserve, often operates within both the form and the content of Rossetti's poems. The work of Anthony Harrison and G. B. Tennyson has revealed how an understanding of the Anglican theology behind her devotional poems enriches our understanding of author, text, and era. Recently, the Tractarian connection has come under scrutiny with Lynda Palazzo's contention that Rossetti's devotional work offers 'a revolutionary rejection of the dominant atonement theology of the Tractarians'.⁷ Palazzo is right to identify Rossetti as an active and critical reader of the Tractarians, but I argue that Rossetti was more receptive to the dominant themes of Tractarianism than Palazzo allows.

The criticism of Rossetti's substantial body of devotional work has historically been hampered by a discomfort about treating religious writings, particularly by a middle-class, nineteenth-century, single woman, as works of literature. The literary merit of Rossetti's devotional works was as much an issue in her own time as it is in ours, as twentieth-century critic Colleen Hobbs observes:

The reception this work has experienced may be determined less by artistic merit than by critical presuppositions regarding popular religious texts by women writers. In 1897, for instance, the *Dictionary of National Biography* unselfconsciously revealed its bias against Rossetti's successful devotional books when it described them as 'religious edification, meritorious in their way, but scarcely affecting to be literature'.⁸

Although 'poetess' was an acceptable designation for a middle-class woman (provided her status was amateur or semi-professional), 'Christian theologian' was not. During the Victorian era, women's religious texts were often treated, Robert M. Kachur observes, as 'practical and unremarkable echoes of men's exegetical texts'.⁹ The limited availability of Rossetti's devotional prose-works impedes the modern critic from challenging, updating, or even simply considering this Victorian evaluation. The argument becomes circular: lack of critical attention contributes to the impression that these writings are of little interest, which in turn discourages critical attention.

A question mark still hangs over the literary merit of Rossetti's devotional writing, with many choosing to 'treat the prose as an interruption of her stronger work' (Hobbs, 410), and to dismiss her religious poetry as reflective of 'a natural theology without concrete dogmas or concrete problems'.¹⁰ The persistence of this view is evidenced by the fact that no complete edition of her prose has been published, and none is currently planned.

The reluctance to engage with Rossetti as a serious devotional commentator is also reflected in the continuing investment in her earlier, more secular poems. Though a recent anthology gives Rossetti pride of place, along with Tennyson and Browning, as one of the three most important Victorian poets, there remains a critical and popular lack of interest in the poetry that postdates 1865, when she was only 35 years old.¹¹ Although she wrote prolifically until her death in 1894 at age 64, in the popular and critical imagination both Rossetti and the concerns of her work remain forever youthful. The evaluations of Edmund Gosse who wrote in 1893 that 'metrically her work was better in her youth than it has been since',¹² Mary F. Sandars who wrote in 1930 that 'never again does anything equal the beautiful peach-like bloom of the first-fruits of her genius',¹³ Curran who wrote in 1970 that her 'best poetry was written before she was twenty', (Curran, 288), and McGann, who concludes in the 1980s that 'most of Rossetti's greatest verse was written before 1865',¹⁴ have contributed to the neglect of Rossetti's later work. The critical consensus that Rossetti's increasingly devotional post-1865 work is somehow second-rate, artificially halts this poet's progress, freezing her in a post-Romantic / Pre-Raphaelite moment, when in fact an examination of the poetry of this period already forecasts the rejection of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. That these poems are excellent and thoroughly deserving of analysis and attention is undeniable, but their status as entirely representative of her philosophy, theology, and poetic art is limiting to the serious study of Rossetti's life and work.

The early poetry was also the focus of the feminist recovery of Rossetti in the 1980s, as these earlier works were viewed as more in sympathy with its aims, rather than later works with their discomfiting praise of patriarchal Christianity. Gilbert and Gubar's study points to a complex politics of renunciation and protest in Rossetti's early work, particularly *Goblin Market*. Germaine Greer singles out '*Goblin Market* and the poems leading up to it' as particularly important to feminist readers, while deeming Rossetti 'incorrigibly minor' as a 'religious poet' (359) largely because 'she used the aspiration of piety as a metaphor for her own frustrated sexuality' (360). This view of the poet dooms her to an existence in which her true instinct for unfettered self-expression is continuously suppressed, both by Victorian convention and her own piety. Reacting to this legacy, Dolores Rosenblum sees Rossetti's 'renunciatory aesthetic' as a liberating influence which offered her an alternative way of thinking about her position as a Victorian woman poet. However, as Linda E. Marshall notes, 'Both [Rosenblum] and Gilbert would have Rossetti wring her art from deprivation'.¹⁵

The recent work of Leighton, Lootens, and D'Amico has qualified and in some cases challenged such readings, on the grounds that their historical and psychological approaches do not take into account, on the one hand the playful aspects of Rossetti's art, and on the other hand its grounding in religious conviction. Palazzo points out that a 'critical preference ... for the negative values of renunciation', has been 'a stumbling block in the appreciation of Rossetti's devotional texts' (140). Arseneau goes further, arguing that the poet's 'most assertive, most feminist, most political, and most egalitarian statements are formulated not in resistance to her religion, but rather are firmly grounded in it'.¹⁶

My work is a response to these recent calls for a critical intervention in the feminist construction of Rossetti. While feminist scholarship has done much to revive the flagging poetic reputation of Rossetti, it has also established her in the modern imagination as a woman whose faith, gender, and creativity were incompatible impulses whose conflict made her miserable. This view confuses the poetic *persona* with the poet, and overlooks the centrally important fact that making conflict into art is not a miserable act, but a redemptive one.

I agree that there is more work to be done on Rossetti's connection to her faith and that this is a job for feminist criticism, given its interest in female agency and attention to historical context. Yet we should take care not to be so tantalized by Rossetti as a woman, or indeed as a Christian, that we forget about her as an artist. Exclusive concentration on the devotional works' challenge to patriarchy can have the undesired

effect of obscuring its other achievements. Feminist evaluations which insist on Rossetti's outsider status and subversive aims miss opportunities to examine how the poet works within the boundaries of middle-class Christian Victorian society.

William Michael's famous lament of his sister's refusal 'to ponder for herself whether a thing was true or not', and her dependence on 'whether or not it conformed to the Bible', is, in a sense, true enough (*Memoir*, lxviii). Rossetti's religious faith, especially in later years, is absolute. Neither poetry nor prose is interested in challenging or questioning the existence of God, or the authority of his Book. The great question for Rossetti was not one of God's existence or his right to judge humanity, but rather of the relationship of God to nature, to humankind, and to poetry itself. Rossetti's flights of political or social fancy always 'take off' from Christian theology, and always acknowledge — even in their most wayward maneuvers — its necessary guidance. Feminist criticism, in particular, would benefit by starting from this principle rather than trying to ignore or undermine it.

Rossetti's biography, and her own self-mythologizing, have also contributed to the critical focus on her youthful poetry, and consequent neglect of her devotional work. She remains a figure best known for her unknowability, notorious for reserve both in poetry and in her private life. On 28 April 1849, the 17-year-old Rossetti writes to William Michael that it would be 'intolerable ... to have [her] verses regarded as outpourings of a wounded spirit', communicating her fear that her poems might be interpreted as 'love personals', a horror attributable not only to her Victorian modesty but also to her burgeoning sense of herself as a true poet (*Letters* 1: 16).

Her poems, characterized by mystery and ambiguity, seem to dare biographers to uncover, in the words of *Maude's* narrator, her 'secret source of uneasiness'.¹⁷ The 'source' has been assumed to be sexual, and a number of theories have been explored, ranging from a secret affair with William Bell Scott to closeted lesbianism to sexual abuse by her father or Dante Gabriel. These theories rely exclusively on biographical interpretations of her early work, and are silent on how later devotional writings might fit into their postulations. G. B. Tennyson has attributed this critical trend to 'the strange, modern view that all longing must be sexual, especially if it is the longing of an unmarried Victorian woman'.¹⁸ What is always omitted from the love story, as Tennyson implies, is Rossetti's longing for God, which, if it is mentioned, is usually regarded as a pose or a blind, under cover of whose conventions

Rossetti is free to fantasize about sexual love or political freedom. Such disproportionate attention has been given to what is withheld in Rossetti's work that very few have taken on the more obvious task of interpreting what is actually present. Though any true-life object of Rossetti's affection is always cloaked in her amatory poems, much of the time, and particularly in her later work, he is entirely revealed as Jesus Christ. Although the identity of this love-object is no mystery at all in Rossetti's devotional works, the poet's lifelong relationship with Christ generally is underexplored biographically and critically.

Although my focus is on the religious in Rossetti's work, and on the Bible as her primary source material, I do not wish to suggest that her Christian beliefs make her devotional work antagonistic to other kinds of interpretation. On the contrary, Rossetti's own insistence, stylistically and theologically, on the slipperiness of meaning, the pitfalls of translation and interpretation, and the shortcomings of human understanding, encourages her readers to think and feel for themselves.

I argue that Rossetti is a major author precisely because of the ways in which her work skillfully synthesizes various influences, the devotional, the Romantic, the Pre-Raphaelite, the Tractarian, the Dantean, the Petrarchan, speaking not only to and about the experience of women, but the experience of art. Her claims for herself as an artist are by far the most radical, yet undervalued, aspect of her writing. That such claims are largely to be found in works of religious devotion makes their existence all the more intriguing. In her devotional prose and poetry, Rossetti invites her reader to engage with a sophisticated network of biblical allusion, in which Christian doctrine is re-thought and sometimes re-forged. Unless we take this invitation seriously, we will not take the true measure of Rossetti.

1

‘Real Things Unseen’: The Tractarian Influence

In his introduction to David A. Kent’s *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, Jerome McGann writes about the language of revelation in the devotional poem ‘Now They Desire’:

It does no good to reach back for original texts in Scripture or their exegetical and iconographical translations. Rossetti’s poetry works precisely because it forces us to read everything *simply*, in literal ways; to seek and therefore not to find any human or worlded equivalents for what we read.¹

McGann identifies reading ‘simply’ as an effective strategy for apprehending (or, indeed, not apprehending) Rossetti’s poetry. He suggests that an appreciation of Rossetti’s poetry is not helped by knowledge of the Bible; the poetry itself ‘forces us’ (willing or not) to read her words literally, simply. The problem with this approach is twofold. First, it does not address the question of Rossetti’s intended audience, for whom at least the ‘original texts’, if not their ‘exegetical and iconographical translations’, would have had more resonance than for modern readers. What is conspicuously absent from twentieth-century criticism of Rossetti is any sort of exegetical approach, which underestimates the vital and immediate role religion played in the lives and consciousness of Rossetti’s contemporaries. Literary criticism ignores what social history well knows. F. M. L. Thompson writes that during the Victorian era, ‘Religion was at the centre of middle-class lifestyles’, and that ‘regular church- or chapel-going was universal among the middle-classes, often to two or three services each Sunday’. Even social life ‘outside the home ... revolved round the church or chapel.’² Readers in the twenty-first century, unlike nineteenth-century readers, must ‘reach back for original

texts in Scripture', simply because such texts are unlikely to be as firmly established in their cultural frame of reference.

The second problem with McGann's argument against exegetical reading is that it overlooks the literary and philosophical implications of Rossetti's engagement with the Bible, arguably her primary lexicon. It could be said that Rossetti's poetry is in fact constituted by exegesis. She refers to the Bible, either by quotation or allusion, in nearly every poem, often recycling the same quotations and images in different poems. Read exegetically, her poems present complex theological arguments, not only about God's relationship to man, but also about the relationship of the Old Testament to the New, and the relationship of God, the ultimate Creator, to the poet, the human creator.

McGann adds that Rossetti uses a 'language of revelations' of 'portentous but obscure import'; he undermines any notion of the poet's deliberate and conscious process of selection and composition, making her sound something like a sibyl. He writes that 'Rossetti is not our authority ... since this language is entirely appropriated', reinforcing the idea of the poet as a sort of mouthpiece (8). Appropriation in Rossetti's devotional poetry, however, is an allusive act in itself, which reinforces rather than undermines Rossetti's 'authority.' Rossetti chooses certain biblical phrases which run like a refrain through many of her poems, in imitation of the books of the Bible in which various phrases turn up again and again to bridge the gap between different parts of the Old Testament, and between the Old Testament and the New. The significance of these phrases is unfixed, metamorphosing with each use, keeping the poet's meaning in motion. In the same way that it is difficult to find unity and consistency in the Bible, it is challenging to find unity among the mysteries and contradictions of Rossetti's poetry. Her devotional work, like the Bible, is meant for contemplation, not resolution. However, reading her poetry 'simply' and 'literally' by ignoring its theology does no justice to Rossetti's daring and imaginative agency. Her confident selection and re-imagining of biblical image and text challenges the passivity associated with simple appropriation.

For example, by using quotations from Revelation in 'Now They Desire', Rossetti places herself in the tradition of St. John, an inheritance not without its dangers, as Revelation makes clear:

For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: