John Donne Journal
Vol. 4, No. 2 (1985)

Reading and Rereading George Herbert and Christina Rossetti

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From the early reviews of Christina Rossetti's poetry to the most recent biography, it has been a commonplace of literary history to see her as a direct literary descendant of George Herbert.[1] With one exception in the commentary,[2] however, the comparison to Herbert is brief; often one finds just a passing mention that Rossetti's verse is reminiscent of Herbert's. Moreover, no general agreement emerges as to the nature of this literary connection. Some critics simply associate the two on the basis of a similar faith, the "'high' Anglo-Catholic persuasion."[3] Others hear clear echoes of Herbert in such poems by Rossetti as "Wrestling" and "Escape to the Mountain."[4] Still others conclude that Rossetti consciously sought to imitate Herbert. Molly Mahood, for example, considers Rossetti's "Sweet Death" an imitation of Herbert's "Life."[5] The current dearth of critical commentary on Rossetti's religious writings increases the difficulty of assessing this literary association. In sharp contrast to the wealth of material available on Herbert, there are no book-length studies of Rossetti's devotional poetry and only a few articles.[6] An attempt to clarify the seemingly obligatory association of these two Anglican poets will explain why Rossetti, especially as a religious poet, has not attracted much attention among modern critics; it will also provide some indication of the direction we should take in reassessing Christina Rossetti as a religious poet.

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Rossetti's status as a devotional poet during her lifetime and for approximately thirty years after her death in 1894 was exceedingly high. The first edition of her devotional volume, *Verses* (1893), was sold out approximately ten days after publication.[7] Such literary figures as Arthur Symons, Edmund Gosse, Ford Madox Ford, and George Saintsbury all praised her poetry, especially her religious verse. Symons considered

her to be Herbert's equal,[8] and Saintsbury claimed that without question she had "surpassed" him.[9] Beginning in the 1920s, and becoming increasingly more apparent by the 1930s, however, a noticeable change in attitude emerges; Rossetti is no longer a favorite. Verse once praised for its "spontaneous lyric fervour"[10] now is seen to lack "supreme craftsmanship."[11] James Noble, writing for *Literary Opinion* in 1891, found in Rossetti's verse a "searching penetration of spiritual vision."[12] Yet in 1930 when writing for *Cornhill Magazine*, Kathleen Green concludes that Rossetti "sees things always in shadow."[13] William Robertson Nicoll, when reviewing Mackenzie Bell's biography of Rossetti in 1898, predicted that future generations would see her as superior to Herbert.[14] However, Majorie Bald in 1923, when discussing women writers of the nineteenth century, predicted that later generations would consider Rossetti to have been "a solitary, exquisite flower, blooming for a season, fading, and casting no seed."[15]

We might at first attribute such a radical change in critical opinion to changing religious attitudes. In the period after World War I, a poet like Rossetti who held a firm traditional faith in God would naturally find, it might be assumed, fewer sympathetic listeners. But the revival of interest in Herbert and other Metaphysical poets (one could also include the renewed interest in Hopkins) testifies to the fact that the religious character of a poem did not necessarily hinder twentieth-century appreciation. We must therefore look elsewhere, beyond the issue of her religious subject matter, for an answer to Rossetti's loss of poetic stature while Herbert's reputation was gaining ground: what did the modern readers of the post-war period find in Herbert they did not find in Rossetti?

T. S. Eliot's evaluation of Herbert, published in 1932, includes mention of Rossetti and suggests that the answer concerns intellectual depth and emotional range:

> Throughout Herbert's poetry there is brain work, and a very high level of intensity. Of all devotional poets, certainly of all Anglican poets, George Herbert seems nearest in feeling to Christina Rossetti who indeed, in a humble way, found herself obliged to make as great, and perhaps a greater, sacrifice of this world than did Herbert. But a certain resemblance of temperament immediately suggests also profound differences. Christina's religious verse suffers, when we read much of it together, from a monotony due to a narrower range of emotion and an inferior intellectual gift. Herbert is an

> anatomist of feeling and a trained theologian too; his mind is working continually both on the mysteries of faith and the motives of the heart.[16]

Echoing Eliot, later critics have tended to stress the intellectual and emotional power displayed in formal aspects of Herbert's verse, the intricate structural devices and metaphysical conceits. Such aspects of form were often considered by earlier readers to be "ridiculous," "bizarre," and "unmusical." Yet we find that after the 1930s, these same poetic devices are perceived to be "penetrating," "dynamic," and "challenging."[17] By contrast, although Rossetti is still ranked as "a sweet singer," her poetry is seen to offer little of substance, little to engage the mind. John Heath-Stubbs concludes that "little can be said of her poetry except to praise its perfections";[18] he emphasizes its formal, even aesthetic virtues, not its intellectual power. Lionel Stevenson asserts that her poetry "comes closer to the pure lyric mode than any other Victorian, male or female, for the obvious reason that it contains a minimum of intellectual substance."[19] Even in Margaret Sawtell's book on Rossetti's life and religion, a work written with the explicit purpose of presenting the poet's faith in a favorable light, we are told that Herbert is for the "scholar and expert in intricate device," while Rossetti is for the "simple-minded Christian."[20] From this assessment, one might easily infer that Rossetti's poetry is superficial because it lacks metaphysical devices of the sort Herbert employs.

Clearly, changes in poetic taste and literary values have directly affected the comparative positions of Rossetti and Herbert in literary history. When "felicitous music" is popular, especially when it is seen as evidence of genuine emotion, then Rossetti's "sweet melodies" place her above Herbert: sweet melody is in keeping with profound faith and is a sign of lyrical power, not superficiality of thought, whereas intricate poetic devices suggest artificiality and a lack of sincerity. Once the opposing view is fully established—that an intricate use of poetic form not only displays intellect but is also a sign of "deep feeling"[21]—then Herbert has "penetrating vision," and Rossetti's verse is at its best sweet melody and at its worst monotonous "pretty language." Stuart Curran, evaluating Rossetti's lyric voice in 1971, provides the most striking example of the results of evaluating her poetry according to modern criteria. He insists that for Rossetti, "God is the all-embracing fact." She is "humble and submissive before Him."

> Humble and submissive; entirely unpretentious. But a great poet cannot be unpretentious: he dares and questions; he attempts to answer, not only in matters of the

> human being and his universe but in the less glamorous matters of diction and meter, of dramatic imagery and formal necessities. . . . [Rossetti] is neither an intellectual nor an imaginative woman, for the most part, but she has the not inconsiderable gift of felicitious music. She falls back on pretty language, the bane of so many women poets.[22]

Curran's comment that "pretty language" is the "bane of women poets" indicates another factor that has affected the shift in attitude towards the relative positions of Rossetti and Herbert in the canon: whether to her advantage or disadvantage, Rossetti has been read and evaluated as a "woman poet," and the sound and sense of her poetry judged accordingly. In the nineteenth century, a woman poet was to sing sweetly; smooth melody was considered essential. (In 1868, for instance, an anonymous article entitled "Poetesses" claimed the "smooth beauty" of Rossetti's verse to be "a considerable advance on the ruggedness" of Emily Bronte's poetry.)[23] Furthermore, women poets were to stay within prescribed limits: they were to sing of personal subjects pertaining to the "woman's sphere." They were not supposed to question and probe into intellectual matters and more worldly subjects. To find ample evidence of such critical views, one need only turn to the commentary comparing Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. When the Victorians compared these two poets, Rossetti was consistently praised for her femininity and Browning criticized for attempting to be masculine. Edmund Gosse, in *Critical Kit-Kats*, writes, "It is no new theory that women, in order to succeed in poetry, must be brief, personal, and concentrated," and according to this criteria Rossetti succeeds as a poet, while Browning in attempting to follow her male counterparts by "striking every chord of the Lyre" fails.[24] Limiting the woman poet to a narrow range of subjects, the nineteenth-century mind also tended to think that the female poet should be passive in regard to her subject, whether it be secular or divine. For example, in comparing Rossetti and Browning, Paul Elmer More contends that "it is this perfectly passive attitude towards the powers that command [Rossetti's] heart and soul—a passivity which by its completeness assumes the misguiding semblance of a deliberate determination of life—that makes her to me the purest expression in English of the feminine genius. I know that many would think this preeminence belongs to Mrs. Browning. . . . On the contrary, it is the very scope attempted by Mrs. Browning that prevents her from holding the place I would give to Christina Rossetti."[25]

Although the Victorians obviously considered the female poet as subordinate to the male, they did, nevertheless, find the traditional feminine voice (one seemingly passive, sweet and unintellectual) worthy of some praise. The voice heard in melodic poetry, a voice that focused on the emotional self with a minimum of intellectual substance, was an ideal, although a secondary one and only for the female poet. As the influence of the Victorian era fades and the modern period takes shape, however, the feminine voice has fewer listeners; once the display of intellect no longer indicates lack of feeling but is actually a sign of sincere emotional expression, then there is less space, so to speak, for poetry judged to have been written from a conventional feminine stance.

After this diminishment of "female space" occurs, one finds that Herbert and other Metaphysical poets long noted for their "masculine expression"[26] begin to receive special praise for such expression. In the modern commentary on Herbert, there is a marked tendency toward masculinist admiration. Douglas Bush finds that Herbert's verse displays "muscular density."[27] George Sampson claims that "[t]he boldness of [Herbert's] faith is matched with bold images of expression which rarely fail."[28] Mahood finds Herbert's poetry "bold," "audacious," and full of "bravado," while she finds Rossetti's verse full of "repression," "anxiety," and "fear."[29] Coinciding with the complete shift in literary opinion—a shift from seeing intricate poetic devices as evidence of a lack of feeling to seeing them as signs of emotional intensity—a change also appears in regard to how women poets should sound and the attitudes they should take toward their subjects: for both male and female poets, after the 1930s the traditional masculine voice is the desired norm, and the conventional feminine voice has decidedly less appeal. It is therefore not surprising to find in a recent dissertation on Rossetti's religious poetry, praise of her work when it exhibits signs of "masculine force of diction" and "masculine boldness and daring."[30]

Changing attitudes toward the conventional feminine stance with regard to religion have also affected evaluations of Rossetti's faith. In the nineteenth century, the sincerity of her faith was unquestioned; in fact, in the Victorian period, Herbert and Rossetti actually held their "saint-hood" in common. Although Herbert's poetry met with some negative criticism, his faith was never questioned. The saintly life which Walton had first stressed in his 1670 biography was still emphasized; indeed, his holy life and Walton's record of it were seen to be the main reason for Herbert's fame.[31] Similarly, Rossetti's first biographers willingly conferred "sainthood" upon her. Gosse saw her as "a great saint" who "passed into the world of her visions" when she died.[32] William Sharp

recalled that she was "one of the saintliest of women."[33] Although tendencies toward hagiography have lessened in the twentieth-century biographies of both poets, Herbert continues to be seen as "vigorous" in his faith, whereas Rossetti is overly passive and self-deprecating: as F. L. Lucas chooses to put it, "it may well be, she would have been happier unborn."[34]

Rossetti's loss of stature in spiritual matters is related to changing attitudes toward the life of an unmarried woman. Rossetti's quiet, unmarried life with her mother, her longing for an end to earthly life and her desire for the joys of heaven, once signs of saintliness to the average Victorian, are after Freud, signs of a "terror of sexual love and the responsibilities of adult life."[35] We find it is typical of modern critics to regard Rossetti as having committed "emotional suicide," dooming herself to sorrow.[36] Frances Winwar in her work on the Pre-Raphaelites, *Poor Splendid Wings* (1933), even goes so far as to conclude that in rejecting two marriage proposals Rossetti committed "crimes[s] against life."[37] As a consequence of such views, the sincerity of her religious poetry is questioned: the voice we hear in her poetry is not to be interpreted as the soul longing for the Divine Bridegroom, but the voice of a frustrated woman longing for an earthly lover. Perhaps because Herbert was married, questions of sexual repression or sublimation do not appear in analyses of his poetry. In any case, when Rossetti and Herbert are compared on the basis of faith after 1930, Herbert holds a decidedly higher place, and Rossetti's lower status is directly related to her spinsterhood. We can see a certain irony in this ranking and the use of marriage as a criterion to arrive at it if we remember that Herbert himself considered "virginity" to be a "higher state than Matrimony."[38] A reading of Rossetti's devotional prose reveals a similar commitment to this view. Although she does see value in the married state, she presents the life of "she whose heart is virginal" as more closely connected to God: the virgin can approach God directly, "aloft and aloof in spirit," whereas the wife must first "behold Christ" in her husband; therefore, she "sees not face to face, but as it were in a glass darkly."[39] This similarity in opinion between Herbert and Rossetti suggests that before judging the sincerity of Rossetti's religious poetry we need to examine more closely what she herself believed; for as G. B. Tennyson has noted, "the strange modern view that all longing must be sexual, especially if it is the longing of an unmarried Victorian woman" has distorted our reading of her poetry.[40]

This brief historical review of the criticism helps us to see why Rossetti and Herbert have, so to speak, traded places. Attitudes toward the presence of thought and feeling in poetic language, especially as they

relate to the female poet, and attitudes toward the expression of faith in both words and actions (again especially as it relates to the female worshipper), during the last quarter of a century have powerfully influenced the reversal of Rossetti's and Herbert's positions in the canon of religious poets. This exchange becomes all the more fascinating, however, when we scrutinize the role George Herbert actually played in Rossetti's poetic development. In assessing the scope and nature of his influence, we shall find that we must assign Herbert and Rossetti equal status in the hierarchy of religious poets.

ii

In assessing Herbert's influence, we must first consider the most obvious questions: what poetry by Herbert did Rossetti read, and is there concrete evidence of her response to that poetry? Most likely it was Frances Rossetti, Christina's mother, who first introduced her to Herbert's poetry. When Christina Rossetti was approximately thirteen years old, Frances Rossetti was keeping a commonplace book for the benefit of her children. It contains two poems by Herbert, "Misery" and "Virtue."[41] At this time, Christina may also have been familiar with Herbert's "Peace," since in December 1844 her brother William gave her his copy of *The Sacred Harp*, a collection of religious verse that includes this poem. However, Battiscombe's recent biography of Rossetti informs us that although the poems in this volume are "copiously annotated in a childish hand," it is "impossible to tell whether the writer is William or Christina."[42] Although we cannot be certain of Rossetti's response to "Peace," two pieces of evidence indicate that both "Virtue" and "Misery" made strong impressions.

On September 20, 1844, Rossetti wrote "Charity," the manuscript of which has the following note in Rossetti's hand: "The foregoing verses are imitated from the beautiful little poem 'Virtue' by George Herbert."[43] Such a notation in the manuscripts of Rossetti's early work is not unusual. For example, the manuscripts of her early poems contain references to Maturin's novel *Women*, Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*, and the ballads in Percy's *Reliques*. Such noting of sources does not appear in the manuscripts of her more mature work. This of course does not mean that literary influence suddenly ceased; it simply suggests that as she matured, finding her own poetic voice, she felt herself to be drawing less directly from other writers for inspiration. We can reasonably conclude that as the various literary influences merged with her own imaginative power, Herbert's poetry was among them.[44]

Rossetti's second mention of Herbert occurs almost fifty years later in her devotional commentary on the Apocalypse, *The Face of the Deep*. She quotes the last line of Herbert's "Misery" as part of her response to Revelations 7:3 ("Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads"). In the process of interpreting what we may understand the "seal" to be, she considers the relationship between hatred and "the unrighteous":

> We talk of the unrighteous hating the righteous: do they hate because they are unrighteous, or are they unrighteous because they hate? If at all the latter, I fear there are so-called and self-called righteous people who will scarcely if at all be saved.
>
> "My God, I mean myself," said holy George Herbert. God grant us a like self-knowledge and humility.[45]

In her devotional works, Rossetti does not often mention particular people by name (except for biblical figures and saints); therefore, this direct reference to Herbert suggests that he held a high place in her regard, especially for his humility, an essential virtue in Rossetti's moral vision.[46] Unless further evidence is found, we cannot know exactly which Herbert poem inspired a given poem by Rossetti, except for "Charity"; nevertheless, these two references to Herbert, one at the beginning of her poetic career and one toward the end, indicate that she was consistently responsive to the beauty of his poetry and the holiness of his life.

Having established Rossetti's admiration for Herbert's poetry, we may examine individual poems more closely to see how that admiration may have revealed itself poetically. When we compare Rossetti's "Charity" to Herbert's "Virtue," the most obvious similarity we find is one of structure. Although "Charity" consists of three stanzas while "Virtue" has four,[47] Rossetti does use the same metrical pattern as that employed by Herbert: three lines of iambic tetrameter with a shortened fourth line. Here is the last stanza of "Virtue":

> Onely a sweet and vertuous soul,
> Like season'd timber, never gives;
> But though the whole world turn to coal,
> Then chiefly lives. (p. 88)

And here are the concluding lines of "Charity":

After this bleak world's stormy weather,
All, all, save Love alone, shall die;
For Faith and Hope shall merge together
In Charity. (*PW*, p. 84)

When we examine the thematic effects of this metrical pattern, we find another similarity: in both poems, a movement from death to life, from the end of the world to eternity occurs in the third and fourth lines of these concluding stanzas. Thus the fourth line produces a sudden contrast, made more apparent by its shortened metrical length. This sudden movement to renewed life is further underscored in both "Virtue" and "Charity" when we see these two last lines in the context of the other shortened lines. In both poems the fourth line of each stanza emphasizes death except in the last stanza where the emphasis is then placed upon life.

We find a further correlation in poetic technique when we examine image patterns: Rossetti follows Herbert's pattern of focusing on a single point in each stanza that is embodied in a central image. In "Virtue," it is first the day that must die, then the rose, then the spring, and finally the "whole world" which "must turn to coal." In "Charity," Rossetti first focuses on the flowers that must die, then on the rays of the summer sun, and lastly on an apocalyptic image, the "world's stormy weather."

Although no other poems by Rossetti can be identified as imitations of Herbert, we do find throughout her later work, numerous echoes of Herbert's rhetorical strategies. For example, compare the opening stanza of Rossetti's "A Better Resurrection" with the first stanza of Herbert's "Grace":

I have no wit, no words, no tears;
My heart within me like a stone
Is numbed too much for hopes or fears.
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;
I lift mine eyes, but dimmed with grief
No everlasting hills I see;
My life is in the falling leaf:
O Jesus, quicken me. (Crump, I, 68)

My stock lies dead, and no increase
Doth my dull husbandrie improve:
O let thy graces without cease
Drop from above! ("Grace," p. 60)

In each poem we first hear the voice of the speaker describing a state of spiritual drought, and then a sudden cry is directed to Christ as the life-giving power. In Rossetti's "The Love of Christ Which Passeth Knowledge," we hear Christ speak of his suffering for mankind's sake:

> Thee did nails grave upon My hands, thy name
> Did thorns for frontlets stamp between Mine eyes:
> I, Holy One, put on thy guilt and shame;
> I, God, Priest, Sacrifice.
>
> A thief upon My right hand and My left;
> Six hours alone, athirst, in misery:
> At length in death one smote My heart and cleft
> A hiding-place for thee. (Crump, I, 67)

In Herbert's "Sacrifice," we find the following:

> Betwixt two thieves I spend my utmost breath,
> As he that for some robberie suffereth.
> Alas! what have I stolen from you? Death:
> Was ever grief like mine? (p. 34)

In both poems, the intent seems similar: both Rossetti and Herbert want the reader to recall vividly the extent of Christ's suffering, for through such recollection the soul will realize more fully the debt of love that is owed to God.

Even certain strategic uses of rhyme echo back and forth between the two poets. See for example Herbert's "Clasping of Hands" with its repeated use of "thine" and "mine" (p. 157), and compare it to Rossetti's "Because Thy Love has Sought Me":

> Because Thy Love hath sought me,
> All mine is Thine and Thine mine:
> Because Thy Blood hath bought me,
> I will not be mine own but Thine. (Crump, II, 208)

Again, the rhetorical effect is similar: in both poems, the repetition of "thine" and "mine" suggests that the human individual and God can be made one through Divine Love and human faith; the individual has only to believe, and "mine" becomes "Thine."

Noting even only a few echoes of Herbert in Rossetti's work, one can easily understand why so many readers have felt Rossetti was more akin

to George Herbert than her own contemporaries, even her own Pre-Raphaelite circle[48] and why still others have seen her as consciously imitating Herbert. However, if we test this perspective further by moving from a simple list of Herbertian echoes to a closer examination of specific poems, we find that seeing Rossetti merely as Herbert's literary descendant is reductive; if used exclusively, this approach to her work will result in our overlooking significant aspects of Rossetti's unique poetic voice and religious vision.

iii

The most striking distinctions between these two Anglican poets can be found by comparing two poems on similar subjects, for example Herbert's "The H. Communion" and Rossetti's "After Communion." In "The H. Communion," Herbert concentrates on Christ as the redeemer who suffered for our sakes, who through "heav'nly blood" restored human beings to the "ease" of passing from earth to heaven as if going from "one room t'another." Domestic images dominate, and the tone is quiet and subdued: "the souls most subtile rooms" have been opened. In Rossetti, the major image pattern is derived from The Song of Songs; the soul has become the bride of a heavenly spouse:

> Why should I call Thee Lord, Who are my God?
> Why should I call Thee Friend, Who are my Love?
> Or King, Who are my very Spouse above:
> Or call Thy Sceptre on my heart Thy rod?
> Lo, now Thy banner over me is love,
> All heaven flies open to me at Thy nod. (Crump, I, 228)

The tone of this eschatological poem is jubilant as the soul anticipates the consummation now promised. In Herbert, however, we find that communion allows him to enjoy the heavenly home while still on earth:

> Thou hast restor'd us to this ease
> By this thy heav'nly blood;
> Which I can go to, when I please,
> And leave th' earth to their food. (p. 53)

In "After Communion," by contrast, heaven is open, but the speaker has not yet entered. She has become a home for God, "a nest for dwelling of Thy dove." Now she is God's "friend"; like John at the Last Supper, she sits near Christ, but the marriage is still to come:

Now Thou dost bid me come and sup with Thee,
Now Thou dost make me lean upon Thy breast:
How will it be with me in time of love? (Crump, I, 229)

The differences between these two poems are characteristic. Rossetti repeatedly employs bride/bridegroom imagery, often alluding to the Song of Songs, and accordingly the tone is often one of expectation as the bride awaits the bridegroom. The waiting time that is required leads naturally to the need for patience, and thus we find Rossetti's poetry telling us repeatedly that here on earth, "Patience must dwell with Love, for Love and Sorrow / Have pitched their tent together here" (Crump, II, 253). In Herbert the imagery is rarely drawn from Christ's Second Coming, when he shall be the Spouse of Souls, but rather from Christ's Passion, more specifically from the feast of the Last Supper as a symbol of his sacrifice and from the Crucifixion itself. Moreover, as Mary Paynter points out, Herbert "never refers to the Passion of Christ as if it were simply a past historical event";[49] it continues as long as man's earthly history continues. Accordingly, the overall tone of Herbert's poetry varies from Rossetti's: he is less of a bride and more of an apostle.

Returning to Rossetti's imitation of "Virtue," one realizes that the same points of contrast between the two poets are evident there as well. In "Charity," experience occurs in stages: praise of earthly beauty and earthly love ("I praised the myrtle and the rose"), realization of their transiency (both the flowers and the rays of the sun die at the close of day), and finally a recognition of the permanence of Divine Love, a love to be known fully only after time ends. In "Virtue," the temporal and eternal seem to overlap in the very beginning, where the speaker already realizes that death is part of life: "Sweet rose . . . Thy root is ever in the grave." The poem then guides the reader from a recognition of this fact to the only exception: the virtuous soul as it lives now on earth is rooted not in death but in the eternal life of God. And although death will release such a soul to a fuller life, by implication the soul experiences eternity, God's presence, now.

I do not mean to imply that Rossetti did not feel God's presence in the world. As her poem on communion indicates, she had moments when she saw herself as St. John leaning on Christ's breast; however, as in "After Communion," the major emphasis is on the glory of Love that is to come. The anticipatory question—"How will it be with me in time of Love?"—is a central one in the Rossetti canon. When we turn to Herbert's *Temple*, we find that he has already answered such a question.

In Herbert's poem "Love," the concluding work of the *Temple* (the poem, therefore, towards which the others move and upon which the

others rest), begins in the past tense. The speaker has already been invited to God's table: "Love bade me welcome." Moreover, as Love's guest, he has already been served and nourished by Love. The implication is not only that the speaker has already met Love inside time, but also that this meeting can occur again. Notice that Herbert changes the tense of the verb "to say": Love first speaks in the past tense; however, in the last stanza, Love speaks in the present: "You must sit down, sayes Love and taste my meat." Thus Herbert indicates that a past event represents a universal and timeless truth: Love waits on us and nourishes us daily. Of course, there is also in this imagery of the feast a prefiguring of the marriage feast to come in heaven when the soul shall be the bride greeted by Christ the Bridegroom, but the major emphasis of the poem is on the present human experience, and there is nothing of anticipation or anxiety in this experience; all is certain: "So I did sit and eat."

In the Rossetti canon, celebration of the meeting with Divine Love in this temporal existence is quite rare. If one interprets her jubilant poem "A Birthday" as celebrating the spiritual birth or rebirth of the soul, then one can certainly find expressed in those lines of a glad heart the joy of God's presence already known: "Because the birthday of my life / Is come, my love is come to me" (Crump, I, 36). Yet it is much more typical of Rossetti to write from the stance of one who waits for the joy to come. She waits in her "humble nest" with folded wings "of silver and of gold," wings Divine Love has given her; but only when Christ comes to call her home, at His Second Coming, will she unfold them:

> Wings folded close, yet ready to unfold
> When Thou shalt say, "Winter is past and gone:"
> When Thou shalt say, "Spouse, sister, love and dove,
> Come hither, sit with Me upon My Throne."
> (Crump, II, 234)

If we overlook the importance of eschatology in Rossetti's work and try to evaluate a poem simply according to how closely it mirrors one by Herbert, we can easily see how she might be given a lesser place than Herbert in the hierarchy of religious poets: she might appear to be too passive in her faith as she sits in her "humble nest"; she might seem too distant from God as she waits in this world, "weep[ing] because the night is long" (Crump, "Advent," I, 70). Take for example Mahood's interpretation of Rossetti's "Sweet Death," an interpretation based upon seeing Rossetti's poem as her attempt to imitate Herbert's "Life." Mahood maintains that Rossetti's lyric is "not so purely a religious lyric as 'Life'" because she finds that it lacks the "theocentric acceptance of both life and death" expressed in not only "Life," but all of the *Temple*.[50]

"Sweet Death" begins with a simple statement: "The sweetest blossoms die." The poet-speaker then explains that she arrived at such a conclusion by observing "how on the graves the flowers / Shed their fresh leaves in showers." In the second stanza, she moves from the beauty of the flowers to their youth: "The youngest blossoms die." But in dying, she notes, they "nourish the rich earth." This thought leads her from focusing on the brevity of life to considering death, death that also passes quickly:

> 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. (Crump, I, 74-75)

In the third stanza, she accepts human mortality: "And youth and beauty die. / So be it." After death, however, she will have the "company of saints and angels," implying that death is sweet for it leads to God, "our Rest and Ease." The poem then concludes with a question: knowing we shall rest in God after death, "Why should we shrink from our full harvest? why / Prefer to glean with Ruth?"

Evaluating the success or failure of this poem by comparing it to "Life," Mahood points to the similarity between Herbert's withering flowers and Rossetti's young blossoms:

> "Sweet Death" attempts an analogy on the lines of that made in Herbert's poem: as the transient beauty of flowers is turned by a natural process to a lasting verdure, so the fading youth and beauty of human life are transmuted to an eternal happiness. But from the opening of the poem this analogy is confused by the churchyard setting which turns the comparison into an identification; the poet wishes not so much to be everlasting *like* grass, but to return to earth and *be* grass.[51]

Mahood finds Rossetti's emblematic use of grass particularly inappropriate: "but somehow grass does not make a good analogy with saints and angels."[52] Mahood sees in the image of grass "something rather passive and negative" and concludes that Rossetti recognized the "devotional nature of 'Life' and strove to reproduce it" but failed, and produced instead a "death-wish."[53]

Certainly the two poems have distinctively different tones, especially in the concluding lines. In Herbert we find acceptance without question:

> I follow straight without complaints or grief,
> Since if my sent be good, I care not if
> It be as short as yours. (p. 94)

The final question of "Sweet Death" suggests some regret that one must leave this earthly life, the world of sweet flowers: "Why should we shrink from our full harvest? why / Prefer to glean with Ruth?" The poem thus ends with emphasis on a conflict not yet fully resolved. Such a conclusion need not be interpreted as proof of morbidity, however, nor as failure to achieve Herbert's devotional stance. In the first place, the assumption upon which this judgment is based, that in writing "Sweet Death" Rossetti was primarily attempting to copy Herbert, is questionable. Although she may well be echoing him in her use of withering flowers as a sign of mortality and in her use of the word "sweet" (in "Life" the "withering flowers" serve as "time's gentle admonition" to "sweetly" convey "death's sad taste"), such echoes need not appear as Rossetti's attempt to view mortal life from exactly the same perspective as Herbert. We can better interpret what Rossetti is attempting, and what she accomplishes, if we see "Sweet Death" in the context of her own devotional work.

To begin with, it is helpful to examine what Rossetti says elsewhere about the emblematic significance of grass. In *Called to Be Saints*, associating grass with the Feast of All Saints, she writes, "Most precious of all their [grasses'] charms to us seems their inexhaustible verdure. . . ." Their beauty is widely varied, for there are so many different kinds: "the very 'corn of wheat' [an emblem of Christ] is itself the most noble member of the common family."[54] From this passage, we see that for Rossetti grass does not always suggest death, decay, and oblivion. In *Seek and Find*, she lists not only the scriptural passages in which grass is emblematic of the "vanity of man's life," but also those passages in which it represents "a flourishing human fertility indicative of spiritual vitality."[55] Furthermore, in *The Face of the Deep*, she includes a poem that describes a lesson the grass has taught her. Thinking of her "last breathless bed and shroud," she glances down at the grass:

> That grass spake comfort; weak it was and low.
> Yet strong enough and high enough to bend
> In homage at a message from the sky:
> As the grass did and prospered, so will I:

Tho' knowing little, doing what I know;
And strong in patient weakness till the end.[56]

In this poem, the grass serves to represent the humble and patient attitude a soul should have as it waits for the end of time. The grass does not symbolize death-like forgetfulness, and there is nothing of morbidity here. In fact, we find the reverse: when the speaker dwells on the morbid aspects of death, the "breathless bed and shroud," the grass speaks "comfort," tempering such morbid thoughts.

Returning to "Sweet Death," we find that the image of grass functions similarly: it offers hope.

All colours turn to green;
The bright hues vanish, and the odours fly,
The grass hath lasting worth.

If we read these lines next to a passage from *The Face of the Deep*, in which Rossetti describes the emblematic significance of the color green, the hope expressed becomes all the more apparent: "Green seems the colour both of hope and of rest: of hope because of sweet ever-renewed spring verdure; of rest because of the refreshing repose green affords to strained sight. Completed hope, completed rest, are celestial, not terrestrial. '. . . Look up and sing / In hope of promised spring.'"[57] The green grass is a sign of hope, a prefiguring of the spiritual spring to come when Christ will call his chosen home to the New Jerusalem. Again, Rossetti emphasizes the fact that all cannot be complete, all is not known, until the end of time. For Rossetti, the Second Coming reinterprets all earthly events.

When we examine the position Rossetti selected for "Sweet Death" in her first published collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, its place in her apocalyptic vision of life becomes clearer. "Sweet Death" is number eight in a series of sixteen poems which she designated as devotional; thus the speaker's hesitation to embrace without regret the promises of the resurrection appears as merely part of a larger vision, and a vision that, seen in its complete form, ends in hope.

Although there is not space to examine all sixteen poems, looking just at the first and last in the series indicates a progressive movement toward reconciliation with God. (In fact, "Up-Hill" which is placed last in the secular section just preceding these devotional poems even serves as a transitional piece, preparing the reader for the spiritual journey which follows.)[58] The first poem in the section, "The Love of Christ Which Passeth Knowledge" is Christ's call to the soul to rise up and follow:

Nailed to the racking cross, than bed of down
More dear, whereon to stretch Myself and sleep:
So did I win a kingdom,—share my Crown;
A harvest,—come and reap. (Crump, I, 67)

The last of these sixteen poems, and the one that concludes the whole volume, is titled "Amen," and it is the soul's answer. Having struggled with doubt, the soul now trusts in God and looks forward, in a tone of complete acceptance, to the garden of paradise:

It suffices. What suffices?
All suffices reckoned rightly:
Spring shall bloom where now the ice is,
Roses make the bramble sightly,
And the quickening sun shine brightly,
And the latter wind blow lightly,
And my garden teem with spices. (Crump, I, 90-91)

In order to appreciate fully the religious hope expressed in these lines, we need to recognize the allusion to the Song of Songs 4:16: "Awake, O north wind; and come, thou south; blow upon my garden that the spices thereof may flow out. Let my beloved come into his garden and eat his pleasant fruit." Therefore, in "Amen," the speaker is the bride of Christ who certainly does not "prefer to glean with Ruth," but rather looks forward to the "full harvest."

iv

Rossetti typically arranged poems to increase their thematic significance; it is, perhaps, a technique her reading of Herbert's *Temple* encouraged her to try.[59] Thus we return to the question of Herbert's influence on Rossetti and the issues of rhetorical echoing and matters of form with which we began. Thus far, the evidence indicates that Herbert's strongest influence upon Rossetti was in matters of poetic form. In her reading of Herbert she found, while still a young poet, rhetorical devices that could be employed to give shape to spiritual content. Yet the connection between the two poets seems to end there, for a close reading indicates significant variations both in content and the cultural contexts of their devotional work. It is not that Rossetti and Herbert are speaking to different gods; rather, they offer us different experiences, equally valid and equally powerful, of a similar faith. They address the same God from different perspectives with regard to time and eternity. In Rossetti's poetry we are most likely to hear the voice of a bride who

anticipates knowing Christ's embrace, and in Herbert we hear the guest who has already known Love's hospitality.

However, it will not do to see Rossetti as representing a feminine voice that complements Herbert's masculine one, especially if by using the adjective "feminine" we intend to suggest a passivity that is both powerless and lifeless. For a vision that shows us the potential of each soul to become the bride of Christ is not powerless: "Behold her! [the city of the New Jerusalem as Christ's bride] yes, also, and behold thyself, O thou called to be a saint. Her perfections are thy birthright; thou art what she was, what she is thou mayest become."[60] Nor is it lifeless:

> Alight with Cherubin, afire with Seraphin,
> Lily for pureness, rose for charities,
> With joy won and with joy evermore to win,
> The King's Daughter is.
> ("She Shall Be Brought Unto the King,"
> Crump, II, 282)

And the act of expressing that vision in both poetry and prose is certainly not passive.

Herbert would most likely have made a better reader of Rossetti's poetry than we in the twentieth century have shown ourselves to be. Since he and Rossetti employ many similar rhetorical strategies, it is likely that he would have appreciated her poetic skill, recognizing the "brain work" in the "sweet melodies." Moreover, he would have allowed her the power of her faith. He too, after all, expected that the sweetest life was yet to come; the soul would chiefly live only after this world turned to coal. Herbert would have recognized the significance of the apocalyptic vision in Rossetti's verse; he would have seen more than shadows and fading flowers that cast no seed. As the recently begun revaluation of Rossetti's poetry continues, we need to do the same: we need to hear in her religious poetry the voice of a skillful poet shaping words to embody that apocalyptic vision.

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Notes

[1] See J. R. Dennett, "Miss Rossetti's Poems," *The Nation* 3 (July 19, 1866), 48; and Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life* (London: Constable, 1981), p. 80.

[2] See Molly Maureen Mahood, "Two Anglican Poets," in *Poetry and Humanism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1950), pp. 22-53.

[3] Oliver Elton, *A Survey of English Literature, 1780-1880* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), p. 22.

[4] For a brief comparison of Rossetti's "Wrestling" to the poems of Herbert, see Lionel Stevenson, *The Pre-Raphaelite Poets* (1972; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), pp. 118-19. For a brief comparison of Rossetti's "Escape to the Mountain" to poems of Herbert, see Lona Mosk Packer, *Christina Rossetti* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1963), p. 314.

[5] Mahood, pp. 34-35.

[6] There are four significant articles on Rossetti's religious poetry: John O. Waller, "Christ's Second Coming: Christina Rossetti and the Premillennialist William Dodsworth," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 73 (1969), 465-82; David Kent, "W. M. Rossetti and the Editing of Christina Rossetti's Religious Poetry," *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* 1 (May, 1978), 18-26; David Kent, "Sequence and Meaning in Christina Rossetti's *Verses* (1893)," *Victorian Poetry* 17 (1979), 259-64; Jerome J. McGann, "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (September, 1983), 127-43. I should like to thank Professor Kent for very generously sending me a copy of his essay on Herbert and Rossetti, "'By thought, word, and deed': George Herbert and Christina Rossetti" (forthcoming in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987]). Although I agree with much of what Professor Kent says, I have tried to take a somewhat different approach to this topic than he.

[7] Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1898), p. 187.

[8] Arthur Symons, *Studies in Two Literatures* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), p. 139.

[9] George Saintsbury, *Short History of English Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 1900), p. 415.

[10] A. Hamilton Thompson, in *Cambridge History of English Literature* 13 (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1917), 154-53.

[11] Kathleen Conyngham Green, "Christina Georgina Rossetti: A Study and Some Comparisons," *Cornhill Magazine* 69 (December, 1930), 665.

[12] James Noble, "Christina Rossetti," *Literary Opinion* (December 1891), p. 157.

[13] Green, p. 664.

[14] William Robertson Nicoll, "Christina Rossetti," *Bookman* 7 (March 1898), 74-75.

[15] Majorie A. Bald, *Women-Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1923), p. 274.

[16] T. S. Eliot, "George Herbert," *Spectator* 148 (March 12, 1932), 361, quoted in *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 335.

[17] For Victorian evaluations of Herbert that are critical of his use of metaphysical conceits, see "George Herbert" in *Cyclopaedia in English Literature*, ed. Robert Chambers (Edinburgh, 1844), I, 131-33, quoted in *George Herbert: The Critical Heritage*, p. 182. See also "George Herbert" in *Library of the World's Best Literature*, 13 (New York: R. S. Peale & J. A. Hill, 1897), 7253. For examples of modern praise of such poetic devices, see Douglas Bush, *English Literature in the Early Seventeenth Century, 1600-1660* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1945), p. 139; Herbert Grierson and J. C. Smith, *A Critical History of English Poetry* (New York: Oxford, 1946), p. 164; and for examples of contemporary praise, see Sidney Gottlieb, "George Herbert" in *Critical Survey of Poetry* 3 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Salem Press, 1982), 1299; Heather A. R. Asals, *Equivocal Predication: George Herbert's Way to God* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981); and Richard Strier, *Love Known: Theology and Experience in George Herbert's Poetry* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983).

[18] John Heath-Stubbs, "Christina Rossetti," in *Great Writers of English Literature* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), p. 839.

[19] Stevenson, p. 88.

[20] Margaret Sawtell, *Christina Rossetti: Her Life and Religion* (London: A. R. Mowbray, 1955), p. 120.

[21] See Joseph E. Duncan, *The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969) for a more detailed analysis of the process leading up to this, as Duncan phrases it, "complete right-about face" in literary criticism (p. 119). See also McGann's article "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti" (pp. 128-33) for a discussion of the reasons that Rossetti's poetry disappeared from critical view after the 1930s. McGann sees the rise of the "New Criticism" as having played a significant role in Rossetti's loss of stature.

[22] Stuart Curran, "The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti," *Victorian Poetry* 9 (1971), 298.

[23] "Poetesses," *The Saturday Review* (May 23, 1868), p. 678.

[24] Edmund Gosse, *Critical Kit-Kats* (1913; rpt. St. Clair Shores, MI: Scholarly Press, 1971), p. 136.

[25] Paul Elmer More, "Christina Rossetti," *Atlantic Monthly* 94 (December 1904), 818. For other assessments of Rossetti and Browning that stress Rossetti's "femininity" and Browning's "feigned masculinity," see Arthur Waugh, *Reticence in Literature* (London: J. G. Wilson, 1915); and Elizabeth Luther Cary, *The Rossettis* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), p. 251. Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti seems to be suggesting that he too considered Barrett Browning's voice to be

inappropriately masculine in his warning to his sister to avoid a tone of "falsetto muscularity" found in the "Barrett-Browning style." See his letter of December 3, 1875, in *Family Letters and a Memoir of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (1895; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1970), p. 323.

[26] Anthony Low, "Metaphysical Poets and Devotional Poets," in *George Herbert and the Seventeenth-Century Poets*, ed. Mario A. DiCeasare (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 221. Low writes, "One quality often associated with these poets [the Metaphysicals] is strength or directness, what some seventeenth-century writers called 'masculine expression.'"

[27] Bush, p. 139.

[28] George Sampson, *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 346.

[29] Mahood, pp. 27-28.

[30] Christine Louis Komperda, "The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti," Diss. Lehigh University 1980, p. 85.

[31] Patrides, p. 23.

[32] Gosse, p. 162.

[33] William Sharp, "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti," *Atlantic Monthly* 75 (June 1895), 736.

[34] F. L. Lucas, *Ten Victorian Poets* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1940), p. 137.

[35] *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1936), p. 531.

[36] Lucas, p. 123.

[37] Frances Winwar, *Poor Splendid Wings: The Rossettis and Their Circle* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1933), p. 311.

[38] George Herbert, "A Priest to the Temple or, The Country Parson," in *The Works of George Herbert*, ed. F. E. Hutchinson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1941), p. 236. All quotations from the works of Herbert will be taken from this edition and cited in the text by page number.

[39] Christina Rossetti, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1883), pp. 91-92.

[40] G. B. Tennyson, *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 202-03.

[41] I should like to thank the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for providing me with this information.

[42] Battiscombe, p. 22.

[43] *Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, ed., William Michael Rossetti (London: Macmillan, 1904), p. 465. Quotations from Rossetti's poetry taken from this edition will be noted in the text by PW and page number. However, I shall be using the *Poetical Works* only for those poems not included in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, ed. R. W. Crump, 3 vols. planned (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979-), Vols. 1-2. Quotations from the first two volumes of Crump's edition will be noted in the text by Crump, with volume and page number.

[44] For information on the works of Herbert owned by the Rossetti family, see Mahood, p. 309, note 11. In this note, Mahood informs us that the Rossetti family owned a copy of the two-volume Pickering edition of Herbert's works and that "both volumes bear her [Christina Rossetti's] signature, and the first the date '5th December 1848': her eighteenth birthday. Both are also inscribed, with a different pen, 'to her dear Mother, Frances M. L. Rossetti. 8th September 1855.'" Since Christina Rossetti lived with her mother until her mother's death, we can reasonably conclude that even if the poems of Herbert were passed from daughter to mother, as these inscriptions suggest, the books were still available to Christina Rossetti.

[45] Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1892), p. 226.

[46] For evidence of the importance Rossetti placed upon humility see her devotional work *Seek and Find: A Double Series of Short Studies of the Benedicite* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1879), pp. 160-61; and *The Face of the Deep*, p. 502.

[47] Rossetti's title "Charity" and the concluding stanza in which Faith and Hope are mentioned suggest that she is alluding to Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, chapter 13, which concludes, "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity." Rossetti's later work indicates her familiarity with Renaissance numerology (see for example *Face of the Deep*, p. 18 and p. 482, where she considers both three and seven symbols of "completeness"); therefore she may well intend the three-stanza length of "Charity" to reflect these three Pauline virtues.

[48] See for example, the following comment in *Victorian Poetry*, eds. E. K. Brown and J. O. Bailey (New York: The Ronald Press, 1962), p. 528: "Her poetry in diction, stanza form, mood and substance is as timeless as lyric poetry can be. Much of it might be supposed to have been written by a contemporary of George Herbert rather than by a contemporary of Dante Rossetti." For an extended discussion of the echoes of Herbert's rhetorical strategies in Rossetti's poetry, see Kent's article "'By thought, word, and deed': George Herbert and Christina Rossetti" cited above.

[49] Mary Paynter, "'Sinne and Love': Thematic Patterns in George Herbert's Lyrics," *Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973), 87.

[50] Mahood, pp. 35-36.

[51] Mahood, p. 36.

[52] Mahood, p. 37.

[53] Mahood, pp. 36-37. See also p. 49 where Mahood concludes after discussing "Sweet Death" and comparing it to other Rossetti lyrics, "Thus the predominance, to the point of an obsession, of the death-wish prevents Christina Rossetti from being a great religious poet."

[54] Christina Rossetti, *Called to Be Saints: The Minor Festivals Devotionally Studied* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1881), pp. 517-18.

[55] Christina Rossetti, *Seek and Find*, pp. 97-98.

[56] Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 316. Echoes of Blake's "The Clod and the Pebble" and "The Book of Thel" (esp. ll. 18-31) can be heard in this poem. These Blakean echoes serve to remind us of the dangers of seeing Rossetti merely as a direct literary descendant of Herbert: such an interpretation overlooks the significance of other literary influences, especially Rossetti's Romantic precursors.

[57] Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*, pp. 152-53. Rossetti's interpretation of the green grass points to another factor which should be considered when assessing her status as a religious poet: nineteenth-century typological practice. Rossetti's religious assertions and biblical allusions are often indirect and deliberately elided whereas Herbert employs them more directly. This difference between the two poets may well result, at least in part, from the different approaches to typology between nineteenth-and seventeenth-century England.

[58] For further evidence that Rossetti intended "Up-Hill" to be read as part of a sequence, see Eugene J. Brzenk, "'Up-Hill' and 'Down' by Christina Rossetti," *Victorian Poetry* 10 (1972), 367-71. Brzenk points to the fact that Rossetti placed "Up-Hill" and "Amor Mundi" side by side in her collection of *Poems* in 1876.

[59] For a discussion of how Herbert's *Temple* may have influenced the organization of Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, see Conrad Festa's dissertation "Studies in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems*," Diss. University of South Carolina 1969.

[60] Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep*, p. 481.