Christina Rossetti and Religion

George Norton examines Rossetti's faith in the context of the Christian movements of her time, to unpick the complexities of a poet who seems both supremely dutiful and self-sacrificing and strongly resistant to convention.

I must pull down my palace that I built,
Dig up the pleasure gardens of my soul;
Must change my laughter to sad tears for guilt,
My freedom to control.

This is the eighteen-year old Christina Rossetti writing about the renunciations required by her religious belief. Christian faith was fundamental to her life, and, though you wouldn't necessarily know this from the selection of her poems made by A Level examiners, to her work. According to her biographer, Frances Thomas, Rossetti's was a religion

of an old-fashioned rigidity that turned life into a bitter and constant struggle for spiritual perfection, that elevated Duty and Renunciation above all, that circumscribed and directed her daily ways.

Any form of 'display' or self-assertion was frowned on and believers were encouraged in what Rossetti's brother, William, called 'an awful sense of unworthiness'.

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Self-sacrifice and Self-denial

Rossetti's Christianity didn't seem to make her very happy. Her faith was partly responsible for the nervous breakdown she suffered in her teens; it cut her off from others (William Rossetti referred to it as 'isolated devoteeism') and three marriage proposals foundered on religious differences. Frances Thomas notes that

> *For all her constant talk of religion, Christina very seldom spoke of its joys.*

In order to 'Dig up the pleasure gardens' of her soul, Rossetti gave up going to the theatre because, Thomas tells us, she believed theatrical people were immoral; she stopped playing chess because she mistrusted her desire to win. She never placed another book on top of the Bible, would step over pieces of paper in the street in case they bore Jesus's name, and pasted strips of paper over the racier lines in her copy of Swinburne's poems.

Strange though such self-denial may seem to secular twenty-first century readers, it's important to remember that nineteenth century Britain remained an emphatically religious place. The census of 1851 showed that, of the population of 18 million, more than half attended a place of Christian worship on a regular basis (a figure considered at the time to be worrying small but huge compared average weekly church attendances of 980,000 in 2014); between 1851 and 1875, 2,438 churches were built and there was an increase in the number of clergy of nearly 10,000 between 1841 and 1875. As the historian Richard Evans

has shown, you could find chained bibles on railway stations if you fancied a bit of spiritual nourishment before your journey, and, feeding a similar urge, sermons were regularly printed and could become bestsellers.

The Oxford Movement and Tractarianism

However, attitudes towards religious faith and the established church were far from settled. The church that Christina Rossetti attended in London – Christ Church in Albany Street – was influenced by the high Anglican Oxford Movement headed by Edward Pusey, John Keble, and John Henry Newman. So-called because its most prominent figures were all associated with Oxford University, it was sharply critical of the shortcomings of the contemporary church, arguing against what it saw as its increased secularisation. Instead, Oxford Movement theologians emphasised the Church of England's links with Catholicism, looking back to the church before the Reformation, and insisting on the reinstatement of weekly communion preceded by confession, elaborate vestments for the clergy, candles, incense and a sung liturgy – what my vicar dad calls the smells and bells of high church worship.

Often known as Tractarians because they disseminated their ideas through the publication of pamphlets called tracts, their intellectually elitist version of Christian worship was in resolute opposition to non-conformist Evangelicals whose approach was simpler: an absence of ritual, an emphasis on the Bible, and a relationship with God founded on feeling rather than thought. Rossetti's poem, 'Good Friday', first published in a book of Tractarian poetry,

can be read as an implicit critique of Evangelical emotionalism, endorsing, through a complex set of Biblical intertexts, the stoic speaker's restraint. These religious schisms weren't abstruse or marginal; they were right at the heart of the Victorian national conversation.

Despair Now, Hope in the Hereafter

Like most Victorians, Rossetti had a strong belief in the after-life, seeing life's struggles on earth as preparation for reward in heaven. Such certainty can be alienating to modern readers and 'Up-hill', in her time her most quoted, popular and frequently anthologised poem, presents exactly this problem to the secular reader. Its catechistic structure, with unambiguously affirmative answers to each of the speaker's questions, austere, simple language, and the shift to a more conventionally iambic metre in the final stanza, all reassure the reader that, although the road of life is long, hard (it winds 'up-hill all the way') and painful (those arriving are 'travel-sore and weak'), heaven is guaranteed as there are 'beds for all who come'.

Even when Rossetti's speakers seem on the verge of despair, they have confidence that ultimately Christ will intervene. (That said, it's important to differentiate between Rossetti's devotional and non-devotional poetry – a poem like 'From the Antique' is entirely nihilistic, the speaker's desire to 'be nothing at all in all the world' entirely unmediated by hope of spiritual salvation.) In 'A Better Resurrection', for example, the speaker offers a grim picture of personal desolation, expressed through characteristic Rossetti imagery of the seasons:

My life is like a faded leaf,
My harvest dwindled to a husk:
Truly my life is void and brief
And tedious in the barren dusk;
My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see

But she still has faith that

Rise it shall the sap of spring;
O Jesus, rise in me.

A life may be moribund but it can be revived by the love of Jesus Christ and it's interesting that the language Rossetti uses here has detectable sexual connotations, almost as if Christ becomes the speaker's lover.

The Physical and the Spiritual

If 'A Better Resurrection' fuses spiritual and physical love, 'Twice' offers a contrast between the two. In this, it is similar to 'Soeur Louise de Miséricorde 1674' but, where 'Soeur Louise' is ambivalent about the speaker's embrace of devotional rather than physical pleasures, 'Twice' seems more clearly to privilege commitment to the divine over the vicissitudes of human relationships. Although both male figures (the earthly lover and God) judge the speaker by scanning her heart, God does so 'Both within and without', implying that the 'critical eye' of the lover focuses only on the exterior. Where the lover's unkind judgement moves the speaker to lose joy in the world ('I have not often

smiled/Since then'), God's kindness inspires her to live and re-engage with her sense of self ('I, for Thou callest such'). William Rossetti described his sister's faith as total and unquestioning:

> *Her attitude of mind was 'I believe because I am told to believe […]. My faith is faith; it is not evolved out of argumentation, nor does it seek the aid of that.'*

Certainly, 'Twice' seems to inscribe the paradox at the heart of Christian belief: one becomes free only by submitting to God.

However, the poem's final lines seem to raise at least the possibility of dissent:

> *Smile Thou and I shall sing*
> *But shall not question much.*

Faith, Doubt and Gender

If questioning of faith is to be found in Rossetti's poetry, the best place to look is those poems which explore the relationship between religion and gender. Many critics see Rossetti's lack of sympathy for the emerging struggle for women's rights as partly explained by her religious beliefs. Writing to Augusta Webster who had solicited her support for women's suffrage, she asks:

> *Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties and privileges? […] The fact of the Priesthood being exclusively man's leaves me in no doubt that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes.*

However, her poetry tells a slightly different story, one that betrays a frustration with the patriarchal nature of the church and its condescending attitudes to women's spiritual strength. 'Shut Out', for example, can be understood as the Eden story told from Eve's point of view. Excluded from her 'delightful land', the speaker is now 'shut out' by a male 'shadowless spirit' who remains silent while he takes

> *Mortar and stone to build a wall;*
> *He left no loophole great or small*
> *Through which my straining eyes might look:*

This oppressive figure refuses any dialogue with the speaker ('He answered not'); the wall he builds (literally and figuratively man-made) seems to function as a symbol of women's exclusion, one with which there can be no negotiation.

'Goblin Market' and Women

The critic Diane D'Amico shows how 'Goblin Market' suggests something very similar. She sees the poem as

subversive, not for any latent sexual content, but because

Rossetti indicates that the self-sacrificing love Victorian women were to embody should not be seen as angelic but as Christlike; in other words, she indicates that women were capable of a higher level of spiritual existence and action than that of ministering angel in the home.

By way of illustration, here's the moment when Lizzie is assaulted by the goblins:

> *White and golden Lizzie stood,*
> *Like a lily in a flood, –*
> *Like a rock of blue-veined stone*
> *Lashed by tides obstreperously, –*
> *Like a beacon left alone*
> *In a hoary roaring sea,*
> *Sending up a golden fire, –*
> *Like a fruit-crowned orange-tree*
> *White with blossoms honey-sweet*
> *Sore beset by wasp and bee, –*
> *Like a royal virgin town*
> *Topped with gilded dome and spire*
> *Close beleaguered by a fleet*
> *Mad to tear her standard down.*

D'Amico points out that the list of similes 'can all be read within the context of Christian symbolism' but I've always been struck by how many of them are phallic (the lily with its protruding stamen, 'a rock of blue-veined stone', 'a beacon', the orange-tree, the gilded spires in the town) while the goblins are evoked through images of water which is often associated in the poem with female sexuality. These images inscribe Lizzie's appropriation of a spiritually-powerful male role; she suffers as Christ suffers –

directly and personally, not vicariously. It's as if Rossetti is insisting, just as Jane Eyre insists to Rochester,

> *'I have as much soul as you […] it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal – as we are!'*

Difficult to Embrace?

We live in doubtful times and the conventional pieties which characterise poems such as 'Up-hill' are difficult to embrace. As another biographer, Jan Marsh, puts it,

> *The virtual disappearance of such belief in the after-life causes today's readers some difficulty with Christina's verse in this mode. Though lack of belief is not seen as an obstacle to the appreciation of seventeenth-century literature, Victorian expressions of faith are felt to represent foolish adherence to ideas that were on the eve of extinction.*

However, Rossetti's insistence on gender equality in spiritual matters and her departure from the association of women (in D'Amico's phrase)

> *with angels, who purify the home through gentleness and patient endurance*

give us a different perspective. After all, writing poetry in the first place was a challenge to the church's dominant version of womanhood, to the stultifying demands of duty and denial, and the unyielding disapproval of display.

Further Reading

- D'Amico, D.: Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender and Time (Louisiana State University Press)
- Thomas, F.: Christina Rossetti: A Biography (Virago)