

Discovering the Self through Solidarity in Christina Rossetti's Devotional Verses

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Despite the resurgence of critical interest in Christina Rossetti's writings in recent decades, it would still be true to say that her devotional verses have gained comparatively less critical attention, and have often been treated as lesser poetry, than her non-religious poems such as *The Goblin Market* (1859).¹⁾ This viewpoint is partly owing to the idea that Christina Rossetti's devotional poems convey less ardor, and are passive, not responding directly to the feminist issues or religious doubts of the age. Her earlier works, especially *The Goblin Market*, have been viewed as being more in sympathy with feminist issues by scholars of gynocriticism whereas her later works have been disregarded for their apparently obedient approval of patriarchal Christianity. Yet, an alternative view may be glimpsed by revisionist critic Dinah Roe's argument that this tendency has neglected Rossetti's attempt for "unfettered self-expression" and that Rossetti's "making conflict into art is not a miserable act, but a redemptive one" (5). It has also been the contention of Mary Arseneau that the Rossetti's religious conviction as inscribed in her works was a motivation for her assertion of literary independence (8). In light of these recent studies, my essay attempts to view Christina Rossetti's religious poems as active responses to the doubt of the age which were also a means of discovering the self.

Even before the publication of Darwin's theories of evolution, British Christians' "crisis of faith" was triggered by "Higher Criticism" initiated by German scholars: a scholarly movement which concentrated on closely examining the historical basis of Scripture (Sanders 217). This tendency to look at the Scripture from a critical point of view utilizing what was perceived to be a scientific

1) Critics such as Mary Arseneau have offered religious readings of *The Goblin Market*.

method, challenged peoples' minds regarding the credibility and authority of the Bible, and subsequently to Christian doctrine as a whole. Here, Darwin's *The Origin of Species* added an "intellectual excuse" to abandon or question their faith (Sanders 217). As a result, many Victorians found it hard to believe in the existence of a benevolent God who cares and intervenes in human affairs. By closely examining Christina Rossetti's devotional verses, this essay aims to demonstrate how they share and actively respond to the doubt of the age, sometimes exhibiting startling resistance and discontentment. As J. R. Watson has asserted, Christina Rossetti's religious verses are significant for "bravely [confronting] [human] anguish and sorrow" (458). The frankness and sincerity of displaying and sharing doubt is the starting point of privileging human emotion. Particularly inspired by the incarnational theology of God being in solidarity with and 'feeling with' humans, Rossetti's poems stress the importance of empathy: relational, reciprocal, and shared emotional experience. Thus, she suggests divine and human solidarity as a means of retaining faith and enduring the hardships of life.

Christina Rossetti explores both the joy and danger of solidarity in her poems: being united with God (and with people through faith) brings mutual understanding and results in an enlarged experience. On the other hand, solidarity with others can result in a sacrifice of the self. Gilbert and Gubar read Rossetti's *Maude* and *Goblin Market* as portraying the desire of the Victorian woman artist to affirm both her sexual desire and her genius as an artist. They argue that, in Rossetti's works, this desire has to be finally renounced: the redemptive role of the woman artist is inevitably self-sacrificial. However, there is a way of reading Rossetti's religious verses as demonstrating a non-sacrificial way of realizing the self: this is to understand Rossetti as dealing with the dilemma of solidarity by creating an infusion of unity and individuality in her poems. By closely examining each poem, it is possible to notice that the individuality of the self is strengthened and invigorated through solidarity. Rossetti carefully restructures the self through relationships of solidarity with God and fellow humans, and, I argue, this practice makes it possible to view her devotional poems as self-celebratory.

Keeping in mind the Victorian stereotype of women as the self-renouncing

'Angel in the House', this self-celebratory aspect of Rossetti's verse is particularly striking. Critics have pointed out how Victorian texts traditionally read as antifeminist can, in fact, be read as privileging women, for its obvious suppositions on women. For instance, Auerbach has offered a way of reading Ruskin's "Of Kings' Treasuries" and "Of Queens' Gardens" as feminist texts, instead of anti-feminist ones. She suggests that, in describing the roles of men and women according to Victorian gender ideology, Ruskin unknowingly admits the male fear of women's generalizing power in contrast with the immobilized condition of contemporary men, who he sees as lacking in agency: women have the power to control their surroundings (the domestic home), whereas men are "engulfed with fragments of his [chaotic outside] world" (59). Ruskin seems to have trouble in compromising his acknowledgment of women's overruling power and their roles as subdued wife; hence the unsatisfactory argument: "But how, you will ask, is the idea of this guiding function of the woman reconcilable with a true wifely subjection? Simply in that it is a *guiding*, not a determining function" (116). Melnyk also discusses Ruskin's fear of the "guiding" women shown in his severe criticism of women who engage in theological writing. She understands Ruskin's view of women theologians as a reaction of horror for their sense of superiority over men and the glorification of their position as women (xii-xiii). Rossetti's devotional verses can be understood as clearly displaying a liberating function as the theological works of women writers do. In her devotional poems, Christina Rossetti makes use of the Victorian male-oriented notion of woman as possessing redemptive power, but in her own way: her redemption is possible not through self-sacrifice but rather by strengthening individuality by being true to one's feelings, through mutual understanding based on equality without subjugation of one person over another.

The poem "The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness" directly addresses the topic of empathy even in its title because it discusses whether or not one's emotions can be shared with others. The title is from a passage in Proverbs which reads: "The heart knoweth its own bitterness; and a stranger doth not intermeddle with its joys" (14:10). In the poem, the speaker discusses her frustration and discontentment concerning God's insufficient act of intervention

despite her “craving heart” (10) and “restless will” (18):

How can we say ‘enough’ on earth—
 ‘Enough’ with such a craving heart?
 I have not found it since my birth,
 But still have bartered part for part.
 I have not held and hugged the whole,
 But paid the old to gain the new:
 Much have I paid, yet much is due,
 Till I am beggared sense and soul. (9-16)

The speaker conveys her sense of total loss—“beggared”—for pouring out herself and not receiving a satisfactory relationship with God in return. The line “I have not held and hugged the whole” (13) uses the ‘h’ sound repeatedly, creating a series of hollow sounds, to convey a sense of emptiness. This argument is startling because of its frankness in confessing the fruitlessness of her devotion, suggesting that she may have doubts about faith. However, she summarizes her doubts with the lines: “Of all my past this is the sum— / I will not lean on child of man” (23-24). Resolving to hold disbelief with Christ, it is meaningful that she uses the term “child of man” because of its evident stress on the human and vulnerable aspect of Christ. The speaker’s main argument that God does not know or care about her distress (hence “the heart knoweth *its own* bitterness”) is undermined by the allusion to the incarnation: God becoming human precisely to “know its bitterness.”

Complaining about the too subtle ways of God, the speaker asks Him for a more powerful engagement with her life:

You scratch my surface with your pin,
 You stroke me smooth with hushing breath:—
 Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,
 Probe my quick core and sound my depth.
 You call me with a puny call,
 You talk, you smile, you nothing do:
 How should I spend my heart on you,
 My heart that so outweighs you all? (33-40)

The strong, harsh sounds of this stanza make vivid the speaker's frustrated and eager mind with the use of trochee ("Probe my quick core. . .") building up to the urgency and ardor of the speaker. It can be inferred from these lines that what the speaker asks for is for God to truly know her "heart"—profound, passionate, and embittered—through a violent act to "sound [her] depth." By reversing the biblical metaphor of humans as the vessels of God, the speaker grumbles that God's vessels are "much too strait" to hold her heart (41-42).

What the speaker asks for is not merely sympathy, but solidarity: to *do* something instead of merely "talk and smile." This becomes more evident in lines 47-48: "When friend shall no more envy friend / Nor vex his friend at un-awares." What the speaker longs for is the state when two identities become one? unity; the two know each other so fully that it is impossible to vex the friend unawares, or envy him, for the one sees the other as oneself. Though the poem ends with the hope of being wholly united with God in the after-world ("I full of Christ and Christ of me"; 56), the speaker is unable to resolve her discontentment in the current world of "hope deferred" where the heart only breaks and cannot be satisfied with the full 'enough.'

Rossetti's "Good Friday" is also concerned with this problem of empathy or solidarity. In contrast to "The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness," however, here, the speaker finds *her* heart not adequate in empathetic feeling for Christ on the cross:

Am I a stone, and not a sheep,
 That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
 To number drop by drop Thy Blood's slow loss,
 And yet not weep?

Not so those women loved
 Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;
 Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly;
 Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the Sun and Moon
 Which hid their faces in a starless sky,
 A horror of great darkness at broad noon—
 I, only I.

Yet give not o'er;
 But seek Thy sheep, true Shepherd of the flock;
 Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
 And smite a rock.

This work can also be seen as a poem of doubt in that it confesses the speaker's unmoved heart concerning the passion of Christ. She finds it hard to feel genuinely for Christ, not to mention to imagine herself participating in the holy scene. Rather than being a sheep of God, she labels herself as a "stone": cold, hard, and unmoved. Nevertheless, the speaker wishes to empathize with Christ and be able to "weep" for him, and, therefore, the poem similarly emphasizes the importance of the heart feeling for another and participating in painful experience. Unlike the speaker, "those women loved" lamented "with exceeding grief"; Peter, despite his denial of being a disciple of Christ, "[wept] bitterly"; even the crucified thief was "moved"; and the Sun and Moon also reacted to the Crucifixion by "great darkness at broad noon." But the speaker, unmoved by the scene, feels isolated and not connected to the solidarity of the universe feeling sorrow in unity. The short simple line "I, only I" underscores the intense loneliness of the speaker.

Yet, in this poem, hope for connection is suggested through the speaker's belief in the transforming power of God. This hope to escape the unhappy state of isolation is also hinted through the change in stanza form: in the transition to stanza 3, the indention and rhyme scheme changes from a closed pattern (a-b-b-a) to an open one (a-b-a-b). In the last stanza the speaker seeks a remedy; despite her apathy, she clings to God's compassionate promise to seek out his lost sheep ("Yet give not o'er; / But seek Thy sheep"). Moreover, to God's mighty power which is capable of making water spring out from rock ("turn and look once more / And smite a rock"). In this last stanza, "sheep" (which the speaker could not become in the first stanza) becomes synonymous with "rock" (which was identified with the speaker), making the distinction almost meaningless. Thus, the problem of isolation with which the speaker was concerned disappears within the transformative power of God. It does not matter that the speaker's mind is "stone" instead of "sheep," for when it is

smitten by God, it will spring forth plentiful water. Water can be translated into the tears which the speaker was yearning for, and, moreover, into life-giving water which transforms the identity of the speaker's (and possibly others') being. Although her desire still not fulfilled, the speaker becomes aware of the hope of being unified with Christ and, furthermore, of entering into solidarity with other beings, transcending time and space through participation in the memorial of Good Friday.

"Dost Thou Not Care" further addresses the problem of sharing experience and emotion with God. This poem shows the process by which doubt may find resolution: through communication between the speaker and God. The speaker expresses her distress stemming from doubts about her faith; she explains that the state of loving and not loving God at the same time "breaks [her] heart" (1). She finds it hard to imagine that a God, who is full of glory and residing in the heaven above, cares for her down in this world. This belief of the speaker represents Victorian doubt supposing an indifferent God who does not intervene in human lives:

'I love and love not: Lord, it breaks my heart
 To love and not to love.
 Thou veiled within Thy glory, gone apart
 Into Thy shrine which is above,
 Dost thou not love me, Lord, or care
 For this mine ill?'—
 'I love thee here or there,
 I will accept thy broken heart—lie still.' (1-8)

The poem reads with difficulty because of its uneven almost chaotic meter. As if to reflect the speaker's confusion in experiencing doubt, the length, number of syllables, and stress varies from line to line, forming a feeling of anxiety and dissatisfaction. Because of its too frequent use of spondees, trochees, and pyrrhics, it would be difficult to identify the poem's major metre without the lines representing God's voice, which are consistently iambic, portraying God as constant and unwavering. God responds to the speaker's accusations by asserting that his love transcends time and space: "I love thee here and there." Although He does not dwell on earth with the speaker, His love does not

change, and He embraces the speaker's "broken heart" torn between love and half-heartedness. God claims that he would accept the speaker's heart and experience as it is, including all her doubts.

This unconditional love by God is shown in the second stanza as well. The speaker mourns her state "worn with pain" (12) and claims that God has gone "out of sight" and successively "out of heart" (13). But God suggests a counter-argument that he is, indeed, "watching" the speaker as she is (hence not out of sight, nor out of heart) and that he will accept the speaker's "fainting heart" as well. However, in the third stanza the speaker is still not convinced about God's participation in her life or the redemptive power of his intervention:

'Lie still, be strong, to-day: but, Lord, to-morrow,
 What of to-morrow, Lord?
 Shall there be rest from toil, be truce from sorrow,
 Be living green upon the sward,
 Now but a barren grave to me,
 Be joy for sorrow?'—
 'Did I not die for thee?
 Do I not live for thee? Leave me to-morrow.' (17-24)

As a response to God's request to "lie still" and "be strong"—deeds of perseverance and patience—the speaker seeks assurance of hope for future peace and redemption. Here, however, God's response is different from the ones in the former stanzas; instead of assuring the speaker with his love, and promising His acceptance of her as she is, this time he subverts the agent and the direction of acceptance. By reminding her of his death and resurrection, he now asks *her* to embrace his experience as it is (as he done in the preceding stanzas); and he also asks *her* to entrust her future to him, rather than him accepting it through his all-embracing love; the matter of agency is overturned. Through a subtle change in form, God's words invite the speaker to a more active participation in their relationship as a means to solve her doubt and anxiety.

The third stanza's form is also noteworthy. Four lines in this stanza (lines 17, 19, 22, 24) have an extra syllable compared to the corresponding lines in the preceding stanzas, suggesting over-fullness; the process of communication

between the speaker and God has created an overflow that will last into the future as well as the present. The rhyme scheme of the same four lines with extra syllables is peculiar because of its use of exact same words: “to-morrow,” “sorrow,” “sorrow,” “to-morrow.” This suggests that the speaker has reached a certain kind of settlement with God, at least in part finding peace out of the anxiety and chaos shown throughout the poem. Thus, Christina Rossetti’s poems draw subtle lines between merging the self with God and stressing the self and its individuality. The rhyme scheme merging into one underlines unity but also points to the loss of individual self; however, God’s final question and proposal works to create space for the speaker’s own will.

The seemingly simple poem “Love came down at Christmas” deals with the issue of agency and reciprocity. In stanzas 1 and 2, it is quite evident that “Love” refers to Christ; however in the third stanza, divine action and human worship, God’s will and human will intermingle within the word “Love”:

Love shall be our token,
 Love shall be yours and love be mine,
 Love to God and to all men,
 Love for plea and gift and sign. (9-12)

Seeking a “sacred sign” in worshiping God, the poet sets forth “love” as its token. “Love” here can signify both Christ and human devotion, and can work in both directions. This poem also goes further in including love between fellow human beings (‘to all men’); particularly in suggesting that love between humans goes hand-in-hand with love for God: ‘Love to God and all men.’ Taking this into account the poem becomes even more complicated: “yours” in line 10 is also ambiguous whether it signifies God or the reader (as a fellow human).

However, this fusing of divine and human will, and devotion toward God and love toward men, does not weaken one side or sacrifice one over the other. The repeated use of the conjunction “and,” and juxtaposing identical sentence structures without omitting unnecessary words (despite the extra syllable each in lines 10 and 11) show the poet’s privileging of human will and love together. Instead of writing “love mine” and “to men” or “all men,” the poet fully articulates “love be mine” (10) and “to all men” (11), despite an extra syllable

compared to the former stanzas. This can be interpreted as meaning that, by adding human love to God's divine love, it forms a synergy and makes abundant love that can produce an overflow for others. The final line summarizes the mutual relationship between God and men: "Plea," "gift," and "sign" are all things that can be given both ways, in a kind of reciprocal 'exchange.' In other words, the subject of "plea," "gift," and "sign" can be either men or God: people offer their pleas to God through their prayers but God also gives plea to humans entreating them for their love; gift and sign likewise can be given by either God or humans. Thus, the poem carefully obscures the conventional idea of words such as "Love," "sign," "token," and reverses the stereotypical idea of agency in the relationship of God and men. This process of making ambiguous and intermingling does not sacrifice each identity but ironically makes clearer each individuality, and gives fuller meaning to each.

Individuality is not lost, even in the poems like "Faint Yet Pursuing" and "Heaven Overarches," which highlight the importance of solidarity in overcoming the wearisome life and retaining faith. In the second part of "Faint Yet Pursuing," the speaker addresses "quickenened souls" (15) to press her onward. She asks them to endow her with the "sequent will" (20) to follow with a "sequent heart" (21) in order to "follow all who follow on to Love" (22). The succession of jingling sounds of line 22 makes vivid the train of souls following one after another indistinguishably; the almost dull repetition of phrases such as "press onward," "press upward," and "Up out of" makes the reader suspect the desirability of the speaker's quest. However, the final three lines seem to suddenly endow the speaker with life:

I watch you, my beloved, out of sight;—
Sight fails me, and my heart is watching still:
My heart fails, yet I follow on to know. (28)

These lines can be read in light of "Dost Thou Not Care?," which I have discussed earlier. In this poem the speaker complains to God of being "out of sight and out of heart" (13). Now in contrast, the speaker is able to hold on to her faith regardless of her imperfect sight and heart. If we keep the former poem in mind, the speaker of this latter poem can be conceived not as an

insignificant one among numerous souls on pilgrimage, but as an individual who has undergone doubt and moved onwards with the help of God's solidarity and also men's.

The poem "Heaven Overarches" can be read similarly as connecting distinct human beings as well as bonding humans with God. In this poem completely disparate things are presented together: "earth and sea" (1), "gardens and graves" (8), "day break and the shadows" (10), and "you and me" (3, 7) but heaven is shown to "overarch" these disparate things. These set of opposite things are, in fact, closely connected; for example, shadows are produced only in daylight; "gardens" and "graves" not only alliterate but can literally border each other side by side:

Heaven overarches you and me,
 And all earth's gardens and her graves.
 Look up with me, until we see
 The day break and the shadows flee.
 What though to-night wrecks you and me
 If so to-morrow saves? (7-12)

To whom the pronoun "you" refers to remains with double possibility. It could indicate a fellow human being, or God, who was depicted as "friend" in earlier poems. The use of pronouns is also interesting; the speaker uses "we" once but, at other times, refers to "you and me." This can be understood as meaning that the speaker has become one with the other, without losing her individual identity. The excessive use of spondees in this poem delivers the mood of confidence, tranquility, and self-possessiveness of the speaker ("*Heaven overarches you and me*"). Thus this short and simple poem sums up Christina Rossetti's task of obscuring boundaries to create abundance and make distinct the individual.

As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, by reading Rossetti's religious verse, one can discover a woman poet struggling with daring doubt, tough perseverance, and subverting ideas; not a woman tamed and quieted by patriarchal Christianity. In her poems, individual self and the notion of solidarity are subtly placed together. Self is not sacrificed into annihilation in the relation-

ship with God and humankind; the solidarity that exists among them helps the individual self to search for the full meanings of her emotions and experiences, subsequently to discover her distinct identity. In this procedure, the poet uses the technique of obscuring the boundaries of familiar indications, such as biblical metaphors. Making the existing notions vague, the speaker carries on the task of restructuring its own identity and the relationships surrounding her. The series of devotional verses of Christina Rossetti examined in this paper can thus be read as an active quest to subjectively identify and restructure the self within Christianity and society during an age of doubt.

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ABSTRACT

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This essay is dedicated to close reading a few of Christina Rossetti's religious verses, which occupy the major part of her oeuvre, yet were neglected or criticized as lesser poetry. Through this reading I argue that, unlike the critical censure of being obedient and uninteresting, Rossetti's religious poems display a voice full of remarkable ardor and disquieting self-recognition. As an active response to the doubt of the age, Rossetti seriously deals with the problem of faith. Boldly expressing her resistance and discontentment, she struggles with the theme of sympathy: God feeling with people, vice versa, and people feeling with people. Her religious works should be viewed as an ongoing process of constructing the solidarity between herself and God, and moreover, among people. In this process, however, the self is not sacrificed, but rather newly recognized and even celebrated. Through form and content, Rossetti's religious verses explore the value of reciprocity in the relationship between God and people. Thus in Rossetti's poems, solidarity ironically works as a means to discovering and strengthening the self.

Key Words Christina Rossetti, religious verse, self, self-recognition, solidarity

