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# **SELF-ABNEGATION AND SELF-ASSERTION IN THE POETRY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI**

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## ABSTRACT

In the century since her death, Christina Rossetti has most often been described as a "poet of loss", an orthodox devotional poet who wrote of lost love and self-abnegation. This thesis examines Christina's general and religious poetry to discuss the techniques by which statements of self-abnegation are transformed into sometimes radical statements of self-assertion. Particular attention has been paid to those poems which express an individualistic vision of the self as plural and fragmented. An intertextual model has been adopted to examine the poetry's polyphonic nature; the several co-existing 'voices' and themes within Christina's work (yielding and assertive, orthodox and unconventional, Christian and Gothic), have been traced to reveal a poetry of conflict and complexity.



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"But let patience have her perfect work, that  
ye may be perfect and entire, wanting  
nothing."

*James 1.4*

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then... I contradict myself;  
I am large... I contain multitudes.

*Walt Whitman*

## INTRODUCTION

My dissimilar, even conflicting, epigraphs serve as a useful starting point for an examination of two broad themes in Christina Rossetti's poetry, themes which themselves are conflicting. Like the work of Walt Whitman, which, though much admired by Christina's brothers William and Dante Gabriel, may have been unread by Christina herself, Christina's poetry insists on a personal, subjective, unconventional vision of self. Many of her poems present her self as fragmented, diffuse, a self-conception that modern feminist criticism would recognise and laud. The construction and presentation of this personal conception of self, which does seem radical, is then apparently de-radicalised by poetic attempts to reintegrate the self, thus seeming to move back towards the unitary model approved in patriarchal structure. Moreover, Christina chooses a specifically Christian model in which to frame and by which to justify her longing for reintegration and completion. Contradictory impulses, to conform to an existing model but also to construct and maintain personal, unconventional models, inform Christina's poetry with an intrinsic tension which belies its surface serenity and simplicity.

Winston Weathers writes of Christina Rossetti: "certainly one of the major motifs in her mythic fabric is that of the fragmented self moving or struggling toward harmony and balance" (81). He limits his discussion of this motif to Christina's general poetry, and in particular to her sister poems. In concentrating largely on the resolutions of these poems, that is, the ultimate integration of the parts of the fragmented self, Weathers neglects a full study of what is going on in the state of non-integration. There is no examination of the poet's construction of this state, or how she critiques or valorises it, and there is no evaluation of the significance of the poet's insistence on her own conception of self. Also, because Weathers does not study the motif of fragmentation in the

religious poetry, consideration of the vital component of Christ's model is entirely absent. I agree with Weathers' opening statement, but seek to develop it much further. I intend to demonstrate how Christina's conception of the fragmented self is a recurring theme that is evident not only in the sister poems, and to demonstrate how Christina's view of her self is a radical and subversive view, particularly in the way in which she retains and manipulates a Christian framework to formulate a series of positions of considerable self-assertion.

In my first chapter I shall examine the general poetry, showing how a typical speaker establishes a conception of her self as fragmented and multiple, and how her insistence on her own model leaves her "alone" and outside normal social groups. This aloneness is then poetically transformed into a strength. In my second chapter I will discuss the religious poetry, in which Christina reinforces a reading of self as multiple. In the religious poetry Christ is appropriated as the model of the multifarious self, and the speaker patterns herself after that model, thereby being radical in the most decorous way possible. Christ also provides the model for union, the longing for which is an ever-recurring theme in Christina's work. I intend to demonstrate that this longing for union cannot be merely written off as a standard ingredient of love poetry, or as the outlet of repressed sexual longings, but rather that it is an indication of the underlying and more serious concerns of Christina's poetry, the nature of the self as fragmented, and the possibility of its integration.

While an overt feminist agenda is not evident in the poems, Christina's insistence on her own unconventional models, and her reworking of her biblical sources, places her stance in opposition to, even while within, the generalising patriarchal system. My second chapter will go on to examine how an intertextual reading of Christina's poems supports a political interpretation. Through frequent use of quotation the poetry is imbued with polyphonic voices, implicitly

questioning the concept of phallogocentric origination. I will close my second chapter with an examination of a martyrdom motif in three poems, in which the metaphor of martyrdom is manipulated in a way which permits the speakers to have a form of 'fulfilment' while simultaneously abnegating self in the correct manner.

In my final chapter, I will attend to the problematic nature of the union towards which the poet looks. In particular, I will examine the violence which is intertwined with concerns of union, visible in the techniques of separation in the poems, in the images of walls, doors, waters and other barriers that separate the poet from her "goal", and in the action necessary to overcome those barriers. Following ideas first expressed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and applied by her to Gothic literature, I will argue that the focal point of such poems is not the barrier itself, or the disruption and pain which the existence of the barrier inflicts on the persona, but the violence that is necessary to break the barrier down, the violence that union entails.

The erotic subtext of a consideration of the violence of union can be observed when the parallels between the Gothic unspeakable and Victorian taboos about sensuality (especially female sensuality) are borne in mind. Use of a Gothic "license" to talk around and about proscribed topics permits a muted consideration of female experience; I will examine the ways in which the "unconventional" language of many of Christina's poems can be seen to express a female voice, following some of the ideas of Luce Irigaray.

It is important to note that Christina herself would probably deny any self-assertion, and would emphatically deny being a feminist. Her devout Anglo-Catholic religious beliefs entailed full acceptance of biblical teachings placing

men at the head of the family, the state and the woman.<sup>1</sup> Christina was in fact a self-proclaimed non-feminist, as is evident in an excerpt from her letter to Augusta Webster about the vote:

"Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges? Not arrogating to myself but most earnestly desiring to attain to the character of a humble orthodox Xtian, so it does appear to me; not merely under the Old but also under the New Dispensation. 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: and if not all then a selection must be made and a line drawn.... thus thinking I cannot aim at 'women's rights'." (Mackenzie Bell 111-12)

Sharon Smulders notes that "Rossetti, in fact, was among those who responded to the call for signatures at the end of 'An Appeal against Female Suffrage' [an article in *Nineteenth Century*, June 1889]" (Smulders 585).

It was a combination of devout Anglo-Catholicism, the Victorian social climate and its prescribed role for women, which provided the ideology that pervaded poems such as "A Portrait", which ends with the death of the saintly, self-sacrificing woman:

O lily flower, O gem of priceless worth,  
 O dove with patient voice and patient eyes,  
 O fruitful vine amid a land of dearth,  
 O maid replete with loving purities,  
 Thou bowedst down thy head with friends on earth  
 To raise it with the saints in Paradise. (I 122, ll.23-28)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ephesians 5:23, I Corinthians 11:3. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical references are taken from the King James Version.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout, I have used the Crump variorum edition *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, in three volumes, and my references take the form of volume number followed by page number(s), as "Leaf from leaf Christ knows" (II 193-

Christina's poetry is a woman's poetry that cannot escape the poetic and historical conditions of male discourse. Kathleen Blake notes Christina's "traditional" mind-set, and argues that Christina neither analyses nor critiques, but merely "treats" or "shows" the feminine state of mind and the uniquely female experience of waiting (Blake 4). While I believe that Christina works within traditional models in more subversive ways than this, her poetry has resisted reclamation by feminist criticism. Recently, however, excellent work has been done that goes some way toward doing just that.<sup>3</sup> Predominantly these studies have investigated the way in which Christina has addressed "the woman question" in her general or secular poetry. Given that her anti-female suffrage views were dictated and inculcated by her strict religious standpoint, it could be expected that her religious poetry would contain no radical or controversial feminist views. This may be why a broad-reaching feminist study of the religious poetry is lacking.<sup>4</sup> Despite the strict, hierarchical Christian social order in which she fervently believed, Christina nonetheless espoused a critical opinion within her religious poetry as she did in her secular work, all the more subversive for its surface correctness; it is this critical dimension that I will explore in chapter two.

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94).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Sharon Smulders; Dolores Rosenblum; Betty Flowers; Diane D'Amico, "Fair Margaret of 'Maiden Song'"; Barbara Fass; Marian Shalkhauser.

<sup>4</sup> See Jerome McGann: "...Christina Rossetti's poetry takes up an ideological position which is far more radical than the middle-class feminist positions current in her epoch. The principal factor which enabled her to overleap these positions was her severe Christianity, as a close study of her religious verse would clearly show.... Christina Rossetti's notorious obsession with the theme of the world's vanity lies at the root of her refusal to compromise with her age or to adopt reformist positions. ... Christina Rossetti's *contemptus mundi* is the basis of her critical freedom and poetic illumination." ("New Edition" 254)



I have tried for the most part to analyse Christina's poetry independently of the vast weight of biographical speculation which has been attached to her work. I agree with Mayberry in her view that "Rossetti's poetry is far from entirely context dependent" (2), but I also believe that Christina's work both informs and is informed by her historical situation, in particular by Victorian sexual politics, and consideration of this factor should not be ignored in reading her poems. Consequently, this thesis is not purely a close textual analysis, but contains reference to the circumstances of the Victorian period, and by considering the Victorian context it will reveal the ways in which Christina's poetry both absorbed and rebelled against aspects of the social code.

I refer to Christina's poetry in terms of two broad categories, general and religious, although they are far from distinct; as Jerome McGann says, "almost all of her poetry could be called 'religious'" ("Religious Poetry" 144). All of Christina's poetry adheres to Christian moral codes, but I have found it necessary for the purposes of my discussion to distinguish the overt from the implicit presentation of these codes. To this end I have employed G B Tennyson's definition:

'Religious poetry', then, is the term I shall use for all poetry of faith, poetry about the practices and beliefs of religion, poetry designed to advance a particular religious position, poetry animated by the legends and figures of religious history, and poetry that grows out of worship. Using the term 'religious poetry' in this large designation comprehends devotional poetry and sacred poetry as well as the verse of hymns. (4)

I have avoided the term 'secular', because none of Christina's poetry is entirely free from Christian concerns, and so I have used the term 'general poetry' for the poetry which does not deal explicitly with "the practices and beliefs of religion".



The issue of naming is an ideological question. I refer to the poet simply as "Christina", although the majority of feminist critics employ her full name or just Rossetti. There were after all four Rossettis in the one generation, all of whom were published authors. In an essay on Dante which Christina wrote in 1884, it is clear that she felt the burden of comparison of using her (sur)name:

If formidable for others, it is not least formidable for one of my name, for me, to enter the Dantesque field and say my little say on the Man and on the Poem; for others of my name have been before me in the same field and have wrought permanent and worthy work in attestation of their diligence....<sup>5</sup>

Use of the full "Christina Rossetti" seems to me unwieldy, and the use simply of "Rossetti", while entirely correct, is more commonly applied to Dante Gabriel. I most emphatically do not intend a belittling by bestowing the patronymic on Christina's brother and leaving her only a first name. Indeed, this practice of using a first name only could be seen as a statement of purely female identity and independence, albeit a very mild and unradical statement, of which Christina herself may well have approved.

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<sup>5</sup> Christina Rossetti, "Dante. The Poet Illustrated out of the Poem" 566-67, quoted in Harrison, 147.

CHAPTER ONE: "MY SELF IS THAT ONE ONLY THING I HOLD":  
ISOLATION AND INDEPENDENCE IN THE GENERAL POETRY

Kathleen Hickok notes that "virtually everyone now studying the subject agrees that women's literature has a covert or clandestine quality" (9). The impeccable craftsmanship of Christina's poetry, the strict metrical and syntactic control, enables readers to appreciate the smoothness of the language while possibly failing to observe the tensions which exist beneath, and in part are produced and furthered by, that finely wrought opacity. Christina's poetry is fundamentally a poetry of concealment. Repeatedly she formulates her work in models of contradictions and gaps of meaning, in which radical views often appear as absences, as the inverse of what is explicitly on view on the page. Thus radical and conservative statements, although usually opposite in meaning, coexist in a dialectical interdependence.

Traditionally, Christina has been read as "a poet of loss". Considerable attention has been paid to those features of her poetry that concentrate on acutely-felt absence, of the beloved, of the presence of God, of company, of hope, of the possibility of self-determination. Dolores Rosenblum makes a distinction between Christina on the one hand and Barrett Browning and Dickinson on the other, by claiming the latter two both achieve a measure of self-assertion in their poetry, while "Rossetti... remains true to the aesthetic of pain and destitution" ("Watching, Looking" 35). It is my argument, however, that while self-abnegation may be the most obvious theme of much of Christina's poetry, there are other, even conflicting themes carried on simultaneously, which transform loss into an idiosyncratic, personal vision of strength. This transformation process is contradictory and ongoing, not the simple and finite action which Rosenblum describes when she says "Rossetti paradoxically creates a self by abdicating the self" ("Watching, Looking" 35-36).

In this chapter I intend to analyse various techniques evident in Christina's general poetry by which the two opposites of presence and absence, whether they refer to the condition of physical objects (such as people) or of critical attitudes, are shown to be interdependent. The interdependence of opposing constructions is recognised in the poems either by the blurring of the distinction between them or the creation of a new formulation which encompasses both -- and my argument will show how this formulation indicates the larger significance of the poems, creating options and action even within the confines of the stereotypical position of self-abnegating woman.

W David Shaw recognises the dialectic of interdependent presence and absence in Christina's poetry when he discusses Christina's "grammar of absence", and the techniques by which she "make[s] remote and lost things more intimate than things actually present" (324-25). The dialectic is clearly observable in Christina's numerous dream and ghost poems, in which the language of longing makes those things which are remote or lost the intimate focus of the poem, often making them the imaginative property of the subject. An example of such a poem is "The Ghost's Petition" (I 145-47), in which a woman's longing for her lost husband is so strong that he cannot rest peacefully in his grave, and she literally draws him to her, in so doing neglecting her living sister. By charging absent or forbidden objects with an imaginative force that makes them "more real" than the "real" things, the poems are challenging the rules of possession by making it seem that the speaker can "have" what cannot in fact be had. This challenge to possession extends to a challenge as to the possession of power. If the speaker can "have" a form of what she "writes/makes", then even within stringent constraints of enforced denial she can create a personal vision for herself and of her self. If loss and possession can be established as interdependent, then self-possession can be claimed even in a state of self-abnegation.

The self-possession I propose to uncover and examine in Christina's poetry is the opposite of self-abnegation in that it accepts, not renounces, the self and its desires. Self-possession is awareness; it is constant self-definition. The act of self-definition when carried out by a woman is doubly revolutionary, in that it is refusing to accept another's formulation of self -- in fact refusing a given role -- and in that definition is itself an act of creation. This creative action is often the creating of a new formulation which transcends the limitations of a conventional model by extending the dialectical possibilities of the assigned role; in this way the convention of the lonely woman poet becomes a vision of strength and independence in isolation. Strategies of self-definition and self-possession will be my focus in this chapter.

Analysis of the dialectic of interdependent presence and absence can therefore be applied to concerns of gender politics and selfhood in Christina's poems, though her handling of the interpenetrative conflict is a far more subtle process than merely presenting one formulation and expecting its opposite to be inferred. In some poems a smooth thought progression is periodically interrupted by slip-pages or outbursts, which contradict the apparently prevailing line of thought, before being silenced again; in this way opposing views may interpenetrate each other. In my second chapter I will analyse the "other voices" in the orthodox religious poetry. What a typical speaker makes herself free to express in both the general and the religious poetry is her own profound self-awareness. She insists on her own conception of her self, and my study will concentrate on the construction of that self, fragmentary and diffuse, often contradictory, and seeking a form of self-union that allows her to retain her multifarious nature.

An example of the dialectic of interdependent presence and absence can be found in the poem "Memory" (I 147-8). This poem appears to be about loss, loss so profound that even the name of the lost object has vanished, and "it" is

mourned but never identified. This poem employs memory as the same kind of distancing metaphor as can be found in Christina's dream poems, those poems which relate desire, or debate a woman's role in love, by placing the situation within the confines of a declared 'dream'.<sup>1</sup> Confinement, to subject matter thus framed, is also liberation, in that it enables the poet to discuss matters which are beyond the censorship of rational explanation, while disclaiming conscious responsibility. Like dream-form, memory-form is a form of veiled self-licensing, a way of working around restrictions, and therefore intrinsically subversive.

Also, by using memory the poet has found a safe way of retaining her own personal feelings and her own interpretation, by, paradoxically, declaring them absent and past. The act of writing allows a definite, albeit limited, recreation of events and feelings. An insistence upon one's own autonomy in the mind, to pick and choose one's own material for pondering, constructing, and holding, is a revolutionary effort to choose one's own place.

When we read "Memory", the speaker holds us at a distance. It is not events or emotions that the speaker is dramatising in "Memory", it is her own subjective, intrusive, selective, jealous remembrance and reconstruction of those events or emotions. A poem about memory can thus be read as an expression of the speaker's possession and power. The creation is hers, in both senses; the speaker creates and is created. All the play in such a poem is on subjectivity: the speaker expresses her power in making herself the subject. Therefore "Memory" should be read not merely as a poem of loss, but also as a poem establishing subjectivity and power.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of dream poems include "My Dream", "A Nightmare", "Dream-Love", "Echo", "Dream Land", and many others.

The speaker maintains power by denying the reader meaning, primarily by means of omitting a readily identifiable referent:<sup>2</sup> "I nursed it in my bosom while it lived, / I hid it in my heart when it was dead..." (ll.1-2). While the poem conveys the impression of the poet's internal struggle with repressing feelings, no proper name is given, the word 'love' itself is never named explicitly; all we have is the mysterious pronoun "it", to which we as readers are free to assign our own guessed meaning. The speaker's loss is transformed into the gain of a secret. Cora Kaplan and Jerome McGann have both addressed the secretive aspect of Christina's poetry; McGann says in part that "her work employs the symbol of the personal secret as a sign of the presence of individuality" ("New Edition" 247), and he asserts that individuality and personal integrity "can only be secured by a diplomatic resistance" to conventional behaviours (246). Therefore the maintenance of a secret becomes a subversive act, as it enables the establishment of the poet's individuality, defiantly separate from society's ordering influence (see Kaplan).

The speaker guarding sole possession of her meaning is the very opposite of Romantic lyrical poetry, which pivoted on the reader's identification with the speaker. Any such identification is prevented in "Memory" by the speaker jealously guarding the identity of the referent. She insists on her isolation; the result is not solipsism but rather a statement of self-conscious independence and strength. It is perhaps questionable whether the referent actually still exists for the speaker herself. McGann's view is that the "wholly unidentified referent [is] something unknown and inexplicable both to speaker and reader" ("New Edition" 244). Steven Connor sees the disappearance of a signified in the 'nursery' poems, including "Goblin Market", as pointing to the attractions of

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<sup>2</sup> Christina uses an unidentified object fairly often. Other examples of poems with indefinite objects include "May" (I 51), which begins "I cannot tell you how it was..."; "What?" (III 214-15); and "A Pause of Thought" (I 51-2).



poetic language; he argues it allows "the opportunity to indulge the expressivity of a language emptied of content" (440). He explicitly links the wielding of language to sensual self-gratification.

While the first stanza kills off "it" in two lines: "I nursed it in my bosom while it lived, / I hid it in my heart when it was dead", the poem continues for eight more stanzas; the issue becomes less the identity of the mysterious referent, what "it" was when alive, than what the speaker does with it now it is dead. Whether or not "it" is or was a love for an actual person (as in Packer's interpretation), is subjugated to the issue of poetic treatment. The speaker herself becomes the focus; her psychological processes are brought to our attention; she usurps the position "it" once enjoyed. Now she "nurses in her bosom" not "it" but the poem itself -- she is producing not "it" but her own handiwork -- she gives birth to her own creativity.

The speaker's creation of a position of (self-)possession in "Memory" is not solely an end product. The speaker makes the personal choice of secrecy, and is thereby empowered through unshared and undiffused knowledge, but that independence is also present from the first stanza. Even when "it" was alive and a source of joy to the speaker, she guarded it and kept it to herself: "In joy I sat alone, even so I grieved / Alone and nothing said" (ll.3-4). The words "alone", and, used in the sense of 'no other', "none", are repeated throughout the poem, and take on a much more positive meaning than merely isolated or desolate. The speaker transforms isolation into a statement of strength and self-sufficiency.

Nursing her joy alone, sharing it with no other, the speaker similarly takes sole responsibility for her own grief when she loses "it". Resolute and entirely self-contained, she takes action: "I shut the door to face the naked truth, / I stood

alone -- I faced the truth alone..." (ll.5-6). Line six becomes a twice-affirmed statement of personal independence. The undeniable anguish of the poem as a whole cannot be disregarded; this anguish is very much present in the statement of threatening confrontation: "I stood alone - I faced the truth alone". But an acknowledgment of the self as in peril and pain also reads as self-affirmation, a statement of the ability of the self to face and withstand that peril and pain, which includes exposure and scrutiny, as well as the loss of fellowship with others: "Stripped bare of self-regard or forms or ruth / Till first and last were shown" (ll.7-8). "It" is weighed and found wanting, but equally in the balance is the poet's entirely personal self-construction, and this is found strong, sufficient, and capable of decisive action.

The motif of weighing intangibles in the balance is a biblical one. Christina's almost encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible invested much of her poetry with rich echoes and reworkings of biblical myth, poetry and metaphor. The third stanza of "Memory" adapts a story from the fifth chapter of Daniel, in which a reprobate king is warned by a mysterious hand writing on the wall that God has weighed him in the balance and found him wanting. Christina radically revises the source by giving her speaker the divine right of weighing and passing judgement, and the more than mortal ability to take and use those "perfect balances". Another possible biblical echo can be heard when the speaker says, "silent [I] made my choice" (l.12). Like Jesus, who maintained complete silence when under interrogation (see for example Matthew 27:14, or Luke 23:9), the speaker does not choose to explain or to defend her choice, remaining devoid of consolation as she is of company. The fine balance of keeping silent about her choice and yet giving oppressive feelings release in disciplined poetry emphasises the power of the speaker in her manipulation of language.



The next stanza contains a temporal mobility that I see as a vital component of Christina's complex retention/denial technique. In her numerous poems of renunciation, the act of renouncing, so often repeated, never seems to achieve closure. A closed, complete action is confined to the past perfect tense: "I made the choice", and has no separate or continuing life in the present. Yet continuation is just what Christina displays in "Memory": "None know the choice I made; I make it still". The second part of the sentence qualifies, if not negates, the first. This qualifying clause is in the present tense, and ends with the problematic word "still", which implies not repetition of a finite act, as "again" would, but rather a continuing action, an action which is not confined to the past but goes on, now and into the future. The choice is not fully *made* if it is still *to be made*. Furthermore, if the choosing continues to be a present action, it continues to allow an alternative choice. In the last two lines of the stanza, the speaker says "I have braced my will / Once, chosen for once my part" (ll.15-16), which allows the interpretation that to have chosen "once" does not preclude the possibility of choosing again, and perhaps choosing differently. While never positively made, this choice for the alternative can be endlessly debated in the mind; it is a purely mental gratification, as it is never more than a possibility, but stubborn retention of that possibility is itself a form of gratification, a way of having what one dares not have, or of having it in a form for which, however nebulous it may be, one cannot be reproached.

This same complicated form of partial retention is seen in other poems, not always, as in "Memory", in the continuing choice, but often in the continuation of doubt and grief concerning that choice. (Another way of 'keeping' the renounced love is to maintain hope of a reunion with the lost lover in heaven, in this way avoiding complete and final separation. This is a common technique in Christina's poetry, and visible at the close of Part II of "Memory".) Retaining doubt or grief makes questionable the completeness or full acceptance of that

choice in the speaker's mind. Edna Kotin Charles notes that this 'double-mindedness' was observed and criticised in "The Convent Threshold", by an early critic:

The *Catholic World's* anonymous critic of October 1876, offers [this opinion]: The fact that the speaker finds it painful to renounce this "pleasant sin" makes the poet's religious ardor suspect. Unlike the devotional poems that are committed to the love of God alone, this poem expresses regret for the loss of worldly pleasures. True, the critic says, the "poem contains a strong contrast--and yet how weak a one to the truly spiritual soul!" (Charles 31)

There is clearly tension here between the expected self-denying form of the model within which the poet is working, and an unconventional, self-assertive theme within the poem.

A portrayal of death-in-life is another standard theme in Christina's explorations of mortal desires, and furthers her use of the presence/absence dialectic.<sup>3</sup> While in "Memory" the object of desire is absent in actuality and vitality from the speaker's life, Part I ends with a statement revealing her desire is internally present, in the form of a corpse. To make this point the speaker emphasises position, in that the space that is not/ has not been filled is in fact filled; emptiness and fulfilment, or literal filling, occupy the same territory, so that desire lies "Crushed in my deep heart *where it used to live*" (my emphasis). It is (though crushed) where it once *was*, another example of Christina's characteristic temporal mobility, denying the closure of the past perfect tense by overlaying it with the present tense.

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<sup>3</sup> There are numerous examples; a few include "Life Hidden", "A Pause", "Dead Before Death", and the many ghost poems.

The first part of the poem, which was written in 1857, is thus a finely balanced exposition of the continuing presence of desire, alongside the denial and absence of the object of that desire. If both parts of "Memory" are read as a whole (Part II was written in 1864), the poem achieves a second kind of balance. Even before an examination of the meaning, the second part has certain formal differences from the first. The rhyme scheme has been altered from **abab** to **abba**, with the second and fourth lines shortened, which gives these lines an aphoristic weight and resonance. More deliberate and balanced than the stanzas of Part I, these stanzas express a calm acceptance of memory which balances the anguished, possessive grip of the first part. Self-affirmation is positive rather than desperate.

The isolation of Part I becomes in Part II a sacred refuge, its specialness and privacy triply affirmed: "I have a room whereinto no one enters / Save I myself alone..." (ll.1-2). It can be argued that in this solitary retreat it is the discovery of the independent and untrammelled self which is meant in line four, "There my life centres". Memory itself, while present, is not causative of this centring; it merely provides a convenient positional focus. What the speaker has discovered is a 'room of her own', enabling her to find and acknowledge her centre. The room and the centre are impervious to seasonal changes, to frigidity as to the sensuousness of "lavish summer". Many critics have drawn attention to the failure and disappointment Christina observed in secular love relationships; the decay of promise is often portrayed in her poetry in the guise of natural seasonal change. Thus to describe her strong and serene centre (self-love?) as beyond earthly ephemerality is to acknowledge it as super-natural.

Katherine Mayberry draws attention to the fact that the reconstruction in Part II of a denied love "is the perfect solution for the speaker" (62). The speaker's transformation of that denied love, positioning/imprisoning it in the all-

important room of her own self, is more satisfactory than ever was its untrustworthy natural source. Mayberry goes on to assert that the speaker is in fact drawing the terms of her own fulfilment, as well as her own superiority, not bowing to conventional feminine love-role demands of supplication at the feet of one's master: "Before whose face I no more bow my head / Or bend my knee there..." (ll.31-32). This adoption of the superior position echoes the unconventional use of Biblical imagery in Part I, where the speaker assigns herself God's position as judge and passer of sentence.

While I disagree with Mayberry's evaluation of Part I as "imaginative stasis", and my argument seeks to show that the undeniable anguish of this first part is actually productive of a form of self-determination, I largely agree with her discussion of Part II, and her analysis of its tone of ultimate success. Ultimate end and reward are posited in Part II, though not in Part I, which ends in a portrayed state of continuing decline: "My heart dies inch by inch; the time grows old,/ Grows old in which I grieve" (ll.19-20). The absence of hope in Part I is balanced by its presence in Part II (hope itself being a fundamental example of the presence/absence dialectic, as hope's existence is dependent on the absence of the thing desired): "I... think how it will be in Paradise / When we're together" (ll.34-36).

This last point deserves careful examination, equating as it does final, ultimate fulfilment with essentially Paradisal *union*. But what exactly is this state of union? Union with whom? Or union with what? (We still do not know the referent for "it".) There are numerous examples in Christina's poetry of eventual reconciliation in Heaven with the lover lost on earth. Examples include "One Day" (I 133), "The Convent Threshold" (I 65), and "They put their trust in thee, and were not confounded" (II 278). I intend to argue later in this chapter that the union posited in "Memory" and many other poems may be read as a

longing for the reconciliation and reunion of the disunited, disparate self, as much as a longing for reconciliation with a literal lost lover.

In "Memory", the speaker occupies several conflicting positions. The repetition of the words reporting the act of renunciation is in effect not delaying renunciation but simultaneously allowing and inhibiting it. Renouncing earthly love (or whatever it is that is renounced) becomes not a finite act so much as an ongoing process. In this process the speaker is ever-withdrawing, never fully withdrawn; perhaps it is this lack of closure which fills her with such spiritual disease -- for closure ultimately is the transcendent or ecstatic moment. She misses ecstasy because she's unwilling to let go, to be "out of herself", to entirely abnegate self -- she is trying to reformulate and reconcile and *retain* her self and her desires. This attempt is endless and endlessly incomplete; poems like "Memory" present an unresolvable dialectic of presence and absence, and are endlessly suggestive and rich in tensions. In such poems the speaker may be seen as self-questioning and self-contradictory; the speaker's inner workings are not portrayed as calm, passive and accepting, as some early critics would have it: "Tenderness more true, and resignation more beautiful,... do not find utterances in English poetry".<sup>4</sup>

Resignation's opposite, inner torment, is far more evident in Christina's poetry than most of her earlier critics perceived. "Cried Out with Tears" (II 184-85), published in *Verses* in 1893, shows the inner torment of one who has Blessed Assurance but has no internal/self assurance, who repents but is unrepentant, who believes but doubts, who never achieves but eternally looks towards closure. This looked-for closure again takes the form of union.

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<sup>4</sup> T Hall Caine, in *Academy* August 1881, 152; quoted in Edna Kotin Charles 40.

Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief:  
 Lord, I repent, help mine impenitence:  
 Hide not Thy Face from me, nor spurn me hence,  
 Nor utterly despise me in my grief;  
 Nor say me nay, who worship with the thief  
 Bemoaning my so long lost innocence:--  
 Ah me! my penitence a fresh offence,  
 Too tardy and too tepid and too brief.  
 Lord, must I perish, I who look to Thee?  
 Look Thou upon me, bid me live, not die;  
 Say "Come," say not "Depart," tho' Thou art just:  
 Yea, Lord, be mindful how out of the dust  
 I look to Thee while Thou dost look on me,  
 Thou Face to face with me and Eye to eye.

The words of the first line, "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief", are taken from Mark 9:24, and the poem's sudden enunciation of a paradox is reminiscent of Donne's abrupt and conflicting sonnet openings. The first two lines show the speaker inhabiting two positions simultaneously, and trying to shift all her weight into one camp. In the orthodox Christian system (within which the speaker places herself by means of her opening words), singleness of aim and focus is ordered of her. The variety of positions open to God are emphasised by the repetitive structure of the speaker's appeals: "Hide not... nor spurn... nor despise... nor...". All the speaker can do, however, is implore God to take up a position, of the many He can choose, which is favourable to her. "Hide not Thy Face from me, nor spurn me hence" she cries; providing biblical backup for her pleadings are echoes of King David's cry in Psalm 51: "Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.... Cast me not away from thy presence" (vs 9, 11). Further layering her text with biblical references, in the fifth line the speaker entreats: "Nor say me nay, who worship with the thief", modelling herself after the repentant and forgiven thief on the cross beside Jesus (Luke 23:39-43).



While numerous positions are open to God, and all of them are justifiable and right, there is only the severely constricted, no-alternative way prescribed for the pilgrim. To admit doubt or conflict or a partial success is to concede failure, and yet this incomplete process, this continual series of partial successes, is living. In order to continue endeavouring to achieve the prescribed end, the end itself cannot be achieved; continual survival is dependent on continual failure to achieve the closure of the striving process. Closure, in effect, is death. But if death is the ultimate closure and end of the poet's dilemma, why is there still tension and a desire for life? This desire, thus expressed ("bid me live, not die"), can be seen as the desire for spiritual autonomy, or the desire to have the power to exercise choice. In that case, the union-state with God presaged in the last line is ex-Paradise, a condition possible here on Earth, a self-fulfilment. More exactly, it is the marriage of outward-prescribed action with inward-prescribed personal choice, allowing the continuing life of the self. In fact, the choice is to continue to live and continue to look to God, the process of doing so ever continuing. Living and looking necessitate incomplete union.<sup>5</sup> What the speaker desires is not dissolution in God and the end of desire; what she desires is her desire, on her terms. Incompletion, and the desire which is a result of that lack, means life not death. The poem, then, is a formidable statement of *Lebenslust*, though its assertiveness is well-hidden by the techniques of humility the speaker uses: the biblical models; the self-reproach, "Ah me! my penitence a fresh offence"; and the humility of supplication and of her position, "be mindful how out of the dust".

The above reading is diametrically opposed to Mayberry's. While Mayberry argues that the poem "actually develops the assumption of [the speaker's] unwor-

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<sup>5</sup> Dolores Rosenblum has some pertinent observations on visual metaphors. She argues that "the visual metaphor is central to [Christina's] conception of self as woman and poet, woman and Christian" ("Religious Poetry" 36).

thinness" (120), my reading is that these statements of unworthiness hide the speaker's assertiveness in demanding the position she wants, which, in its approach to equality with God rather than self-dissolution within Him ("Thou Face to face with me and Eye to eye"), demands the licensing of desire and the possibility of self-formulation. At the same time, Mayberry does recognise the potential confrontation of this closing position, presenting the speaker eyeballing God.

"Who Shall Deliver Me?" (I 226-27) is another poem in which ostensible self-loathing and anguish give rise to an assertive statement of self-conception and self-validation. This poem dramatises the search for the reintegration of the fragmented self. As reintegration of a multiple self may provide the key to understanding desired "union" in Christina's poetry, the theme of the fragmented self itself deserves some careful attention. "The divided self" is a popular topic for analyses of Victorians, and Christina has proved no exception. Consider, for example, CM Bowra:

Christina's poetry reveals an almost dual personality. One side of her was Pre-Raphaelite.... another side, grave and serious and intimately bound with her inner life.... The two sides of Christina's nature account for the twofold character of her poetry (246-47, 249; see also Battiscombe and Jones).

Bowra attempts to show how sometimes "both sides" of the self are put into the poetry -- the woman and the saint, the Pre-Raphaelite aesthete with the staunchly religious ascetic -- but he actually valorises ONE self, the 'natural' self, as the real, the single, and the true. He writes that from time to time "all her womanly and human instincts" (258) burst out into impassioned poetry, almost unconsciously, overcoming the controlled self. The passionate poems "reflected her true self" (255). But while Bowra sees Christina longing for release (of "the true self") from the struggle brought on by the constriction of her convictions, I



see her recognising a more complex, disparate self, and longing, however optimistically, for reformulation and reintegration. I believe a more profitable reading may be had from an examination of the nature and the potential reintegration of the divisions observable in Christina's work, rather than from simply taking a binary division as a given.

An initial reading of "Who Shall Deliver Me" shows the speaker contemplating a dual process, removing some part of the self while retaining that 'rational' part which is 'speaking' the poem/appeal. The poem reveals as problematic the question of whether the speaker is renouncing, losing, or seeking a way of continuing to retain all selves.

God strengthen me to bear myself;  
That heaviest weight of all to bear,  
Inalienable weight of care. (ll.1-3)

Expressed here is the awareness that even a painful and problematic self is "inalienable"; it cannot be cast off or put outside the territory of the speaker's self. It remains, and remains a burden. Although the speaker appears to be seeking to remove the burden, it is not the burden itself which is to be loosed, but its burdensomeness. Therefore the poem is really considering the reconciliation of the painfully warring bits of the self, approaching the unified One of the third to last line: "Yet One there is can curb myself".

The second stanza is reminiscent of the opening line of "Memory" ("I have a room where no one enters..."), in its jealous possessiveness of an unimpugnable space in which the self can do battle. Though the battle is obviously internal, it is still phrased as almost preferable to what is excluded:

All others are outside myself;  
I lock my door and bar them out,  
The turmoil, tedium, gad-about. (ll.4-6)

The characteristic barrier of a locked door is evoked in this poem. While I will discuss barrier metaphors and their purpose in more detail in my final chapter, it is helpful to this argument to observe that "Who Shall Deliver Me?" displays the reverse process of "Shut Out", discussed below. In "Shut Out", the speaker is locked out of self-perception by an external agency, whereas here the locking is done *by herself*. Withdrawal from intercourse and society is thus not passive but active. Silence and lack of participation in the "turmoil" of social life is the speaker's active choice, as is avoidance of the required social roles symbolised in the phrase "gad-about". Alone, she addresses the problem of self, and addresses it to herself; when she finds no acceptable solution she formulates and proposes one of her own, that of entire self-sufficiency.

There are at least two *myself*s co-present, which are struggling:

...who shall wall  
*Self* from *myself*, most loathed of all? (ll.8-9)

If *I* could once lay down *myself*... (l.10)

God harden *me* against *myself*... (l.16) (all italics my own)

The answer to the dilemma in the poem is not the removal of one self, which is impossible, nor the repression of one, which on the surface at least is what is being sought here. The answer is reintegration, which means that divergent, disparate selves are brought together but continue to coexist. On one level the poem attempts to attain a unified subjectivity by means of the objectification of self, making self into a parcel-like burden that may be laid down in order to set free a new, revitalised self, as can be seen in the lines:

If I could once lay down myself,  
 And start self-purged upon the race  
 That all must run!... (ll.13-15)

However, the objectification process cannot be completed; there remains a problematic self unseparated from the speaking self. It appears that the form of Paradise sought in "Who Shall Deliver Me?", that is, the state of freedom that the speaker longs for in the final line, is not a freedom from the selves seen in the penultimate stanza as "coward", "arch-traitor", "hollowest friend" and "deadliest foe", but instead a re-seeing of those selves. Freedom would mean a re-evaluation of the facets of self, a realisation that differing does not mean warring, that variety is not necessarily negative. The penultimate stanza explores the paradoxical value of the speaker's variety, which can be both good and bad, as she both apotheosises and condemns herself. She puts herself simultaneously in the roles of Christ and Judas, for the existence of an "arch-traitor" is dependent on the existence of one to be foully betrayed.

We see then that the final stanza can be read in two quite different ways. Following the orthodox Christian model, "One" can be interpreted as God, who embodies in One the Trinity of the Godhead. Therefore the speaker can be seen to be looking to God as the One to bring about the reintegration of her separate selves. On the other hand, however, the stanza could be reinterpreting the idea of One to symbolise a radical earthly paradisaal state, a possibility of perfection that is not heaven. Following this reading, the final line's appeal would really be directed to One-ness, unification, so that the speaker's own selfhood rather than the Godhead is cajoled to remove all impediments blocking that ultimately liberating unity of self, to "Break off the yoke and set me free". In this final line there is no more divided self, but a singly-asserted "me". "Union", then, may be achieved with oneself and by oneself, isolated and independent from others.

Self-definition is prohibited for the female speaker of "Shut Out" (I 56-7). This poem is set outside, not in, an Edenic garden, which is barred to the outcast

woman speaker by a figure insubstantial but definitely male ("The spirit was silent; but he took / Mortar and stone...", ll.17-18). The garden is of the speaker's own conception, which is immaculate of course; there is no company and no impregnating male. Gardens are an often-used metaphor in Christina's poetry, and usually symbolise the inner, private life of the self. The garden in "Shut Out" can be argued to represent the speaker's conception of her self as fecund and creative, passionately her own: "My garden, mine". The fecundity of the piece is underlined in the fertilisation taking place, "From flower to flower the moths and bees" (l.6), and the image of the garden's abundance of nesting birds, "With all its nests".

As already mentioned, the scene of the poem is not actually the garden itself, but a point outside it; the focus of the poem becomes not the forbidden Eden-like place, but its forbidden-ness. The severity of separation is the real issue of the poem, and we are faced with it from the first sentence of the first line.

The door was shut. I looked between  
Its iron bars; and saw it lie,  
My garden, mine.... (ll.1-3)

Importantly, the separation we see is imposed, not a self-locking as in "Who Shall Deliver Me?" Once, access to and ownership of the garden was undenied: "It had been mine, and it was lost" (l.8). Now "iron bars", threatening, overtly phallic images, block access. In "Shut Out" the possessive, demanding ownership we have seen in other poems is again evident; though thwarted, the speaker is insistent in presenting her desires. Despite the temporal closure of the first line, "The door was shut.", the speaker's feelings have not abated, which is shown in the progressive present verbs she uses: "I peering thro'"; "my straining eyes".

As in numerous other poems, the self is strongly identified as a Natural self, expressed in terms of animals, plants, and gardens. Each of these images combines beauty with a sense of originality, untutoredness and spontaneity. The speaker possesses herself of these natural attributes and makes the garden a metaphor for her perception of self. The garden/self permits no imposed order, but is "Pied with all flowers bedewed and green" (l.4). Growing and spreading, the garden is *self-conceived*. For this reason it is threatening to the order of which iron bars are representative, and the woman speaker is "barred" from it. The "shadowless spirit [that] kept the gate" (l.9) has no shadow and therefore can have no flesh, to throw a shadow. Nonetheless it is referred to with masculine pronouns. It/he is the fleshless archetype of the patriarchal order, the antithesis of female spontaneity, creativity and changeableness, as it/he is "Blank and unchanging like the grave" (l.10). Neither does the male spirit answer her entreaties. He will not grant her "some buds to cheer [her] outcast state" (l.12), nor will he speak on her behalf, as she requests:

...bid my home remember me  
Until I come to it again. (ll.15-16)

The patriarchal spirit imposes on the speaker walls, barriers and rules, and by blocking her communication with a perceived facet of her self (she cannot speak to her garden), he imposes an artificial division on her conception of self. Nor does he allow the female the Gaze; in adding further to the barrier, by building a wall with "mortar and stone", he leaves "no loophole great or small". Literally, the phallic spirit fills up the gap. He plays out the mythic role of the patriarchy, responding to the threat of feminine creative disorder and diffuseness by imposing linear, phallic order, thereby 'filling up the hole'. The repression practiced by the masculine spirit on the feminine speaker in "Shut Out" serves as a model for the repression dramatised throughout Christina's poetry. Her speakers battle the weight of societal value judgements as they attempt to main-

tain and validate a conception of a fragmentary, diffuse self in the face of a generalising stricture that valorises the whole, unitary, *real* self.<sup>6</sup>

"So now I sit here quite alone...", says the speaker (l.21). In "Shut Out", as in "Memory" and "Who Shall Deliver Me?", aloneness is both a cause for complaint and a statement of self-sufficiency. Though suffering, the speaker has continued to exist, from the violent separation of the past stanzas to the present tense, "now". She survives, bereft, but paradoxically intact. She is offered a substitute for her garden of self, for her own "delightful land"; it is small and isolated, a picture in miniature of the virtues assigned Victorian womanhood: "A violet bed is budding near, / Wherein a lark has made her nest" (ll.25-26).

Gisela Hönnighausen has written on the Victorian interest in the language of flowers, and her study illuminates the fact that the specific flower names in Christina's poetry would have been fraught with significance for her contemporary readers. The violet, according to the meanings given flowers, represents modesty and submission, and is thus a particularly apt symbol in this poem of repression. Christina had a specific and limited flower vocabulary; another reference to the violet in another poem makes explicit its meek 'femininity': "As violets so be I recluse and sweet" (from "Who hath despised the day of small things?", II 257). The Tractarian doctrine of Analogy, which influenced Christina, should also be taken into account here; Analogy invested natural phenomena with a didactic purpose so that they became symbols relating God's message to mankind. "Shut Out" also attaches symbolic value to the lark, whose nest in the violet bed is an example of fertility ordered into place, outside

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<sup>6</sup> For the starting point of this argument I am indebted to Toril Moi's article "Representation of Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's *Dora*", and in particular her discussion of the opposition between masculine and feminine epistemes.



those walls wherein the speaker could let her imagination run riot. "Good they are", she says of the meek violets and orderly lark's nest, but not as good, as sufficient, as fulfilling as "My garden, mine", which she had owned, unruly.

"The heart knoweth its own bitterness" (III 265-66) addresses the speaker's acute awareness of the fragmented state of her self. Though written on August 27, 1857, the poem was never published in this form during Christina's lifetime; verses one and seven, somewhat altered, were included in *Verses* with the title: "Whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive" (II 267). I intend to study the complete version, which is notable for its beginning, a smooth, almost platitude-like generalisation:

When all the over-work of life  
Is finished once, and fast asleep  
We swerve no more beneath the knife... (II.1-3)

Very soon the pronoun changes to an entirely personal I, and the poem changes into a painful individual plaint, uttering agonised questions. The point of view is entirely subjective, making individual the general question of the first stanza: once the Christian has made it through trials to the end of life, will she finally find satisfaction -- "Then shall we find it is enough?"

The speaker doubts the existence of "enough", of fulfilment, of completion: "I have not found it since my birth" (I.11). The speaker makes her plight more explicit in a description that shows her suffering from splintering and insufficiency, rather than enjoying fulfilment and completion: "...But still have bartered part for part. / I have not held and hugged the whole..." (II.12-13). The speaker, then, is divided: from the mother, since birth; by social and cultural frameworks, "the over-work of life"; and by the role expectations placed on a Devotional Poet, expectations that she will write a poem applicable

to all, that is, "we". By rejecting a collective identification and voicing a personal viewpoint, the speaker is expressing her discontent at the insufficiency and incompleteness of the varied roles thrust upon her. Bartering "part for part" is no answer to her craving, which is to have "held and hugged the whole", that is, to have formulated and maintained a coherent sense of integrated self. The speaker's sense of incompleteness is expressed in the language of economics, in bargaining metaphors:

(I have) paid the old to gain the new;  
 Much have I paid, yet much is due.... (ll.14-15)

The transactions are incomplete, and as a result the self becomes poorer and poorer, until she is "beggared sense and soul" (l.16). This feeling of spiritual poverty or lack reveals the frustration of the speaker's attempts to gain and retain a self that draws in the variations, the self-expenditure in different roles, into one cohesive self.

The third stanza repeats the process of self-reliance born from isolation that we have already observed in "Memory": "I used to dream alone, to plan / Unspoken hopes..." (ll.21-22). Unwilling or unable to have shared her company or her internal workings with others, the speaker approaches a position of utter self-containment and independence: "I will not lean on child of man" (l.24). (An unanswered question is, will she lean on "child of woman", her own text?) Concealed in "The heart knoweth its own bitterness" is the implicit statement that others are insufficient to know or appreciate the speaker's efforts to centre herself.

The fourth stanza takes up and continues the struggle to reformulate the self. In this stanza the speaker, having rejected the company of others, finds it necessary to undertake that struggle in the presence of and after the example of the Divine.



To give, to give, not to receive,  
 I long to pour myself, my soul,  
 Not to keep back or count or leave  
 But king with king to give the whole:  
 I long for one to stir my deep--  
 I have had enough of help and gift--  
 I long for one to search and sift  
 Myself, to take myself and keep. (ll.25-32)

What the speaker is setting up as her goal is a new form of transaction, one which is not incomplete, leaving the self lacking, but rather a transaction that is only possible out of a self sufficient for itself and for every demand. When the interplay of compartmentalised, role-specific selves is no longer necessary, the speaker has achieved (and can give) "the whole". The lack of reciprocity needed in the speaker's one-way gesture "to give" shows a response is no longer necessary to her; her action is sufficient to her autonomous self. As she says, "I have had enough of help and gift--". Help and gift may have been necessary when she was lacking and incomplete; the state she now proposes for herself is wholeness and the power to act independently of another, thus "king with king". Following this argument of self-sufficiency, "one" can be read as approaching the sense of an abstract noun, "one-ness":

I long for *oneness* to stir my deep...  
 I long for *oneness* to search and sift  
 Myself, to take myself and keep. (ll.29, 31-32)

"Keep" is another important word here. Oneness is the product of searching, sifting, taking and keeping. Keeping implies a place where something is, or is to be kept, a central point. This centralised point is referred to again in the next stanza, where the speaker's lacking companions are challenged in specifically topological terms to: "...dig within, / Probe my quick core and sound my depth" (ll.35-36). The speaker sees her companions as both insufficient to comprehend her depths ("You scratch my surface"), and insipid in their

demands on her ("with a puny call"). These demands limit her and prevent her from showing or being her completeness or fullness: "How should I spend my heart on you, / My heart that so outweighs you all?" (ll.39-40). This rhetorical question has become a powerful statement, a rejection not only of any need of others, but a rejection of any social intercourse at all. The insufficiency displayed by the others only highlights the speaker's self-sufficiency.

Union, though desired, is not possible here in this poem, or under these circumstances: "Not in this world". Any form of union with others prevents the union of self the speaker longs for, the state of filled-up lack, the state of having "enough". It is necessary, for now, to "bear", to "wait". The barrier so often seen in Christina's poems is firmly in place in this poem: "Here moans the separating sea" (l.53). The speaker looks forward, not necessarily to a conventional Heaven, but to her own idea of a Paradisal state, where "God shall join and no man part". Paradise is a final union, but as I have argued, the union looked forward to can be seen not simply as that of Christ and bride, but that of self with self. The reintegrated self takes on power and an independence of one-sided economic exchange, and becomes active. The closing line of the poem suggests that the reintegrated self takes on a stature equivalent to that of God, in a statement of reciprocative action reminiscent of that in "Cried Out With Tears": "I full of Christ and Christ of me". Complete, paradisal union of self would also mean a drawing in and validation of the sexual self (the poem is full of erotically charged images), and thus this final line is phrased in language hinting at sexual union. "I full of Christ and Christ of me", with its interpenetrative subtext, could additionally be interpreted as expressing a veiled longing for both masculine and feminine roles, or rather the end of the division between them. Such a removal of gender differences would destroy the final barrier to complete independence; without gender distinctions, the individual would be entirely complete and entirely independent of any other person.

"Autumn", (l 143-45), is another example of a poem that valorises the independent self, by transforming an apparently grieving statement of isolation into a portrait of a self faithful to her own self-conception, and ultimately superior to and independent of any others. The grief remains, but is used productively; the poem emerges from potential stasis to formulate a defiant assertion of self-sufficiency. Angela Leighton calls "Autumn" "Rossetti's 'Lady of Shalott', written, of course, from within rather than from without. Its speaker is trapped on an island strand...." (*Victorian Women*, 150). In "Autumn" we can examine the techniques by which the speaker embraces her trapped state and reinterprets it, transforming it from a definition thrust upon her to her own (self-)possession.

In "Autumn" the multiplicity of the speaker is clearly demonstrated, as varying modes of identity become visible. The speaker (who seems to be a sentient human being that the others in the poem may be able to observe, even if observation only leads to misunderstanding; "Perhaps they say: 'She grieves,/ Uplifted, like a beacon, on her tower'"), simultaneously inhabits and *is* each variation that she speaks/creates. She makes it clear throughout the poem, through her insistent use of possessive pronouns, that she identifies strongly with the 'personal territories' of "my tower", "my river" and "my avenue". These territories are metaphors for facets or regions of her own multifarious, multiply-constructed self.

Firstly, the tower is more than just a habitation that seems somewhat inhospitable: "gusty creaks my tower" (l.62). It is a figure of aspects that are unmistakably personal and applicable to the speaker herself: gust-tossed and storm-embattled, creaky and more than a little weathered, solitary and still. Physically and emotionally distanced from others, the tower/speaker contributes descriptions of:

...the freighted boats which gold and stone  
 And spices bear to sea:  
 Slim, gleaming maidens swell their mellow notes,  
 Love-promising, entreating--  
 Ah! sweet, but fleeting-- (ll.7-11)

A trace of wistfulness is observable here, in the weight of sumptuous, sensual detail with which the maidens and their cargo are described: "the freighted boats which gold and stone / And spices bear...". Mostly predominant over the wistful attraction of the scene is a tone of remoteness, through a knowledge (of the ephemerality of such carnal cargo), which sets the speaker 'above' the unknowing "slim, gleaming maidens" she observes. Wistfulness here indicates both the attraction and the repulsion of 'worldly' aspects of the speaker's self, untrustworthy parts of "her" river. The tower becomes a symbol for self-supportive independence from an outside life, but it is not the single mode of identity in the inner life.

The important symbol of the river is first to be seen in the second line of the poem: "Whilst full my river flows down to the sea". The key to beginning to decipher this image is to balance it against the line preceding it, to which it is bound by the conjunction "whilst", and then to weigh it against the remainder of the stanza.

I dwell alone - I dwell alone, alone,  
 Whilst full my river flows down to the sea,  
 Gilded with flashing boats  
 That bring no friend to me:  
 O love-songs, gurgling from a hundred throats,  
 O love-pangs, let me be. (ll.1-6)

Reading the first two lines as a unit, we can see that despite her thrice-repeated aloneness, the speaker is far from suffering an inward, spiritual deprivation or poverty. Deprived, whether unwillingly or by choice, of outer consolation or

company, within she is "full". Her use of a river image, and its immediate referent of flowing waters, leads us to read a certain urgency and turbulence into her conception of her inner life. Also there is the necessity, imposed on her by the nature of the image she uses, of a goal. Rivers, by their nature, must flow towards the all-embracing sea. Uniformly in her religious poetry, Christina posits as her goal the simple, orthodox end of the search for God. In "Autumn", however, as in other poems we have examined, the simple and the orthodox explanation, 'her goal is God', is insufficient to explain the complexity of Christina's portrayals of her self, fragmented and struggling towards unity. The full river (the various, much-containing self) flows irrevocably "down to the sea", the collection and point of integration of many contributing flows; the sea provides a useful image of all-embracing integration while retaining fluidity, the lack of distinctions, and the possibility of multiplicity. It is evident that the poet is acutely aware of variation, both within one and the same person and between different people.

She sees these others, who seem to be exclusively female, as they are only referred to as "maidens", in an ambivalent light; her portrayal is not entirely favourable, though it includes both humour and a touch of sympathy. The language in which she describes these others, "slim, gleaming", and their appearance on her river, now "gilded with flashing boats", underlines the sharp contrast between them and her portrayal of herself. By using adjectives associated with reflection and the play of light, the maidens are lent an illusory nature, in which only their appearance is described, and that in terms which imply a lack of emotional depth. The speaker's attempts to deny her attraction to these flighty females amount to an attempt to dismiss this aspect of herself, but they are an undeniable, if unwanted, presence on "her" river. Also, by criticising the apparent vacuity of these maidens, Christina is implicitly critiquing the societal convention which, in part, confined women to being mere ornaments, whose

appearance was, indeed, all important -- or, indeed, expressing discomfort with this element in herself. In describing her own position -- "I dwell alone - I dwell alone, alone" -- the speaker uses severe language unornamented by a single unnecessary adjective or adverb, making the others appear quite literally flashy, and underlining, in the incongruity of the boats' appearance on her full, solemn, elemental river, their difference from herself (and trying to deny their appeal).

A touch of humour is evident in the deliberately inelegant verb "gurgle", which is used to patronising effect: "O love-songs, gurgling from a hundred throats"(1.5). The speaker wants none of the conventionally feminine communications or preoccupations of these maidens; in rejecting their communication and their language, she is choosing her own, and thereby insisting on her own construction of self, untainted by the constructions inherent in the linguistic forms of others. She mourns the fact that she is not invincible to the discourse of the society that she rejects but still necessarily surrounds and infiltrates her: "Their songs wake singing echoes in my land--" (1.16).

As a further strategy to separate herself from the maidens she observes, the speaker displays a consciousness of mortality that these flashy ephemeral beings conspicuously lack. The promise of fulfilment in their "love-promising" songs only prefigures fulfilment's opposite and inseparable partner, transience: "sweet, but fleeting". In a world which only the speaker recognises as mortal, the boat's sails which temporarily represent pleasure and indolence to the living become like shrouds over the dead: "Beneath the shivering, snow-white sails" (1.12).

Analogy, according to the Tractarian aesthetic, means the way in which all of nature can be said to express the nature and the truths of God, and to be read-



able.<sup>7</sup> The similarity of this system to the processes going on in "Autumn" is clear. In this poem, all of nature can be read as a series of signs of a deep and sombre message, the transience of pleasure, the inevitability of mortality and decay in the avenue: even "the wind flags and fails", and the boat will be becalmed. The speaker, then, occupies a position of power in relation to those others she observes; she alone can read the signs of nature. She has the power of knowledge, which does not exempt her from having to partake in mortality, as the last four lines testify, but grants her a status distinctly apart from and above the human world she sees. In this sense, isolation from humanity becomes a virtue, not a sign of deprivation, and bestows upon the isolated observer independent status and power -- at the cost of denying social or 'carnal' aspects of her self.

The multifarious speaker takes on another identification in the fourth stanza, with the "solitary swallow". Although here she does not use a possessive pronoun, parallels between the solitary speaker and the bird are made quite clear. Both face trials, are "rough autumn-tempest tost"; neither has recourse to support or sympathy, "With no kind eyes / To watch it while it dies" (ll.22-23); and in both cases this lack of sympathy from outside sources is transformed into an inner strength, rather than a liability: "Ungessed, uncared for, free" (l.24). Both speaker and swallow are "ungessed", that is, they are unknown to the others and thereby entirely independent of any outside-constructed identity. They "guess" themselves; individual and exclusive to each is the highly personal identity construction of each. "Uncared for" is an extension of this independ-

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<sup>7</sup> Mayberry provides this definition of Analogy: "Rightly construed, all natural phenomena were symbols of God and religious truth, God's way of gradually leading men and women to an apprehension of His truth.... This belief in the divine organisation and significance of all things ... the Tractarians referred to as Analogy" (112).



ence from the knowledge and concern of others; the result of these two conditions, both potentially negative, is positive: "free".

"Mine avenue" is also an embodiment of a facet or facets of a natural, untrammelled, creative self, and is a metaphor rich in ambiguity. The positive aspects lie partly in the distinctly favourable light in which the oak trees compare with gilded, flashing boats. The avenue of stately oaks symbolises strength, solidity, naturalness, and, potentially at least, growth and fecundity:

Some rustling leaves and acorns in the breeze;  
Fair fall my fertile trees,  
That rear their goodly heads, and live at ease. (ll.30-32)

"Autumn", however, is the poem's title; the promise of the acorns can only be fulfilled when they fall to the ground and die. Death is inextricable from life, just as the trees are inextricably interwoven with the beautiful strands of a spider's web; beauty cannot be extracted/made separate from mortality, and even nature is deceptive:

Each morn it [the spider] hangs a rainbow strung with dew  
Betwixt boughs green with sap,  
So fair, few creatures guess it is a trap:  
I will not mar the web.... (ll.36-39)

Alongside the promise of life, the sap in the boughs, is the promise of death, the web that is a mortal trap. Both attract the speaker. In the final, poignant semi-stanza, the speaker bemoans, "My trees are not in flower" (l.60), demonstrating the interconnectedness of beauty and mortality, life and death, so that the oak avenue, while still a symbol of life, becomes also a symbol of death. By employing the image of the avenue, the speaker recognises the creative and destructive powers of nature, and thereby the double-sided potential of her natural or instinctive selves -- for both creativity and barrenness.

The next stanza sees the general exit of the "maidens", who, having demonstrated their conventionally feminine lack of steadiness by first falling asleep and then resuming their duties "languid", "float and wane, / Long miles away from me" (ll.50-51). Their movement thus becomes a type of inconstancy, while the speaker remains steadfast. Wind and turbulence carries them away, but the speaker, alone, as she always has been, withstands stormy attack. Her trees shake but her tower is fundamentally unmoved. It is only in the penultimate stanza that the speaker allows herself to question both the possible reactions of those she has been observing and the interpretation she has made for herself. She seems to mock the statement she imagines the maidens to make, that she is some kind of suffering saint: "'She grieves, / Uplifted, like a beacon, on her tower'" (ll.52-53). Yet she goes on to admit the possibility that these revellers are in fact heading for the Promised Land of heaven:

Perhaps they say: "One hour  
More, and we stand,  
Face to face, hand in hand;  
Make haste, O slack gale, to the looked-for land!" (ll.56-59)

Possibly "the looked-for land" is indeed *theirs*, that land where all is and are united, the paradise of union to which the turbulent, multifarious self proposed in this poem so hungrily looks. The river, as we have seen, must flow towards the sea, and yet the uniting sea remains invisible throughout the poem; the end the speaker envisions is never in *her* view. The element of doubt, as to the nature and achievement of the final goal, leads to the poem ending with a highly ambiguous statement. Shorn of fertility, rest and shelter, the speaker shears herself of any ornamental language, and emphasises the monotony of her lot by triply repeating a feminine rhyme.

My trees are not in flower,  
I have no bower,

And gusty creaks my tower,  
And lonesome, very lonesome, is my strand. (ll.60-63)

While severe in language and overwhelmingly negatively phrased, this final semi-stanza reiterates the speaker's aloneness as, finally, the only thing to which she can cling. The sea may indeed be an end, but she remains forever at a distance from it.

"Autumn", like the poems I have discussed above, employs a dialectic of interdependent presence and absence in order to maintain a perspective on pleasure while retaining a distance from it. Angela Leighton writes of "Autumn": "By being out of time with pleasure, she can keep a hungry ear on all its licence. By being out of life itself, ghostly and unknown, she can feel its pulses all the more strongly and waywardly" (*Women Poets* 151). This poem admits the attractions of a languid, sensual existence even while formulating an alternative, valorised existence of self-sufficiency. In a sense there are two opposing arguments which are going on simultaneously in "Autumn", which makes it an appropriate model to illustrate the conflicts hidden in Christina's general poetry. This chapter has examined the techniques by which Christina's poems examine conflicts, clothing assertive statements in abject language, transforming isolation into individual strength, and producing both a personal sense of the integrity of her conception of self, and a vision of eventual reintegration which permits continuing, albeit incomplete and fragmented, existence.

## CHAPTER TWO: "MANY VOICES IN HARMONY": MODELS FOR THE SELF IN THE RELIGIOUS POETRY

In my first chapter I have argued that an awareness of the fragmented nature of self and a desire for its integration is present in Christina's general poetry. It is in the religious poems, however, that the search for union finds crystallisation and its most eloquent, as well as most daring, form of expression. In Christianity Christina found a model that provided the perfect paradigm of unity and of the reintegration process, but that also made reintegration implicitly unattainable. In most of Christina's religious poems, the speakers demonstrate a heightened awareness of their separation from God and from His nature, and deplore the weakness of their attempts to emulate that nature. In "Sursum Corda" (II 311-12), for example, the speaker entreats God to "stoop" to overcome the separation between them. Certainly under normal circumstances the status of the Godhead is beyond the reach of the human attempting to emulate it, yet numerous biblical exhortations to follow Christ, to be Christlike, undercut this negative message and emphasise sameness *alongside* the difference.<sup>1</sup> The biblical model of the Trinity, the separate but united Godhead, is simultaneously an unattainable goal for the mortal and a goal made intimately realisable; the model is urgently commended, with Christ's humanity providing encouragement for the mortal attempting this goal. In many of Christina's religious poems, a process of revaluation is going on, revaluation of a contradictory and multiple self in the light of the 'God example', as well as a manipulation of the difference/sameness to create a fine tension and a truly daring statement of self-worth.

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of biblical exhortation to be Christlike include Romans 8:29, II Corinthians 3:18, II Peter 1:4.

The bible provides a model for the 'longing for union' in scriptural promises and illustrations of the Bride looking forward to Christ returning, her heavenly bridegroom. The biblical quotes and allusions in Christina's religious poetry are predominantly taken from the Song of Solomon, and also from the parable of the virgins in Matthew 25.<sup>2</sup> Examples of poems dealing with this very specific form of yearning include "Advent Sunday" (II 211), and "Who is this...?" (II 282). The latter reads in part:

Lo, the King of kings' daughter, a high princess,  
Going home as bride to her Husband's Throne,  
Virgin queen in perfected loveliness. (II.5-7)

In these biblical poems, union with one's holy beloved results in a state of perfection. Further, it is a return *home*, where the resolution of parent/child or adult/infant roles seems indicated; here, as in other poems such as "Whitsun Tuesday" (II 234) or "Herself a rose, who bore the Rose" (II 238), daughter, bride, mother and sister are interchangeable and coexistent.

In Christ also can be found a paradigm of the complete self, perfected, fully integrated: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...." (Colossians 1:17, 19: RSV). It follows that the speaker's desire to follow scriptural injunctions to be Christ-like,<sup>3</sup> as expressed in "Ascension Eve" (II 231-32) for example, can be seen to contain the desire for reintegration of her own fragmented self.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Blake notes Christina's frequent use of biblically-sourced bride and bridegroom analogies (5-6). Using the observation to support her analysis of the theme of waiting in Christina's work, she notes that "the image of the Bride above all embodies tense, waiting patience, as feminine as it is Christian" (6).

<sup>3</sup> See Romans 8:29, I Peter 2:21.

Lord, Thou art Love, fill us...  
 O Thou the Life of living and of dead,  
 Who givest more the more Thyself hast given,  
 Suffice us as Thy saints Thou hast sufficed;  
 That beautified, replenished, comforted,  
 ...We may pursue Thy steps, Lord Jesus Christ. (II.8-12, 14)

The interwoven nature of these two desires enables the speaker to use Christ as both model (for her to follow, thereby demonstrating her self-abnegation and obedience), and as excuse (for taking a course of action that she chooses for her own ends, thereby demonstrating self-interest and self-will). In this way the speaker can make self-interested manoeuvres from within the Christian, self-denying framework.

In that Christina's religious poems display the selection, framing and reinterpretation of scripture and God's nature, it may be argued that they have in fact 're-created' a new meaning which validates the speaker's choice of action -- as in the line, "I plead Thyself with Thee" ("For Thine Own Sake, O My God", II 151). Here God has to support the speaker's point of view, because she has created a version of God whose nature is in fact like hers -- she has created God in her own image. God himself is objectified in the speaker's search for subjectivity; she creates a version of God by interpreting him as the embodiment of her own, entirely personal aims, and she uses him as a means of expressing what it is she wants:

While I touch Thee I touch my goal,  
 O sweet Jesu. (II 199)

Thus, while attempting to be Christlike is scripturally prescribed and appropriate behaviour, it can also be reformulated to be a double-sided action that is self-willed, self-empowering and subversive, in that the speaker is appropriating the Christ model for her own ends, to authorise her attempt to reintegrate her

disparate self. The orthodox Christian tenet of self-abnegation paradoxically enables the speaker to establish and maintain a personal independence. If, as the speaker repeatedly and devoutly states, Christ is "mine all in all" (II 208; biblical reference: Colossians 3:11), an injunction to take on the nature of Christ can also be read as a licensing to become one's own "all in all", the culmination of wholeness, and the epitome not just of integration and recentralisation, but of self-sufficiency.

The issue of the speaker's manipulation of a pre-existing meaning, and her arguable creation of a new meaning, raises interesting questions, which may be expanded by adopting an intertextual approach. Reading Christina's religious poetry is undoubtedly an intertextual experience.<sup>4</sup> As can be seen in the short analysis above, Christina packs her religious poetry with verses or verse fragments (taken often word for word from the Bible), biblical paraphrases and allusions.<sup>5</sup> Recurrent biblical quotation, which is particularly evident in her poem titles, displays her wide-ranging knowledge of the Bible as well as her reliance on it, partly for felicitous phrasing, or indeed as a source for the titles that so often troubled her, but also for an unimpeachable defence of the moral correctness of the poems themselves. She never strays from the *letter* of the Law,

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<sup>4</sup> Worton and Still provide a brief but comprehensive account of the development and interpretation of intertextual reading. They see the seminal work on intertextuality to be Julia Kristeva's "Bakhtin, le mot, le dialogue et le roman," *Critique* 239 (1967): 438-65, trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Léon S Roudiez as "Word, dialogue and novel" in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Some critical attention has been paid to the intertextual nature of Christina's work. For works concentrating on the Bible as intertext, see Wenger and Jiménez. For a study of the intertextuality of the "Monna Innominata" sequence, see Antony H Harrison, "Intertextuality: Dante, Petrarch, and Christina Rossetti" (Harrison 142-85).



no matter to what end she uses her pious quotes. Each step of her reasoning is supported by solid scriptural reference.

This intertextuality has been criticised by Stuart Curran:

There is little in any of Christina Rossetti's religious poetry that does not ring a very pronounced bell. Her sources are the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.... Even in the early religious verses the reader can sense her later development as a writer of uninspired poetic tracts. The tone is almost unpleasantly pedantic...(289).

What Curran appears to be criticising is Christina's lack of originality; her poetry is "uninspired". Inspiration in its literal sense means 'breathing through', and an appropriate Muse to breathe through a religious poet would be the Holy Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Milton, for example, claimed to be inspired by the Holy Ghost. It is curious, however, that in Christina's poetry there is no recognition of the Holy Spirit functioning as an inspiring Muse; in fact, no Muse, no single source, is present or claimed in her work. An intertextual reading provides a model entirely different from that used by Curran, by suggesting a plurality of voices and thereby problematising that literary tradition which valorised originality and sole authorship. If we dispense with an evaluative model that uses originality as a basis for a value judgement, we can examine Christina's poetry in the light of other models of reading, such as a feminist critical approach.

Using quotations allows the poet to change, or perhaps more correctly, to broaden the focus of the alert reader; Worton and Still suggest "that every quotation is a metaphor which speaks of that which is absent and which engages the

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<sup>6</sup> Harrison makes some interesting comments about the source of inspiration in the "Monna Innominata" sequence (Harrison 170-71). Angela Leighton locates an "angel-muse" in "From House to Home" (*Women Poets* 150).

reader in a speculative activity" (12). Curran, who seems to evaluate Christina's poetry as uninspiring to the reader -- "unpleasantly pedantic" -- as well as uninspired from the poet, overlooks the processes in which intertextuality engages the reader. Through the inclusion of biblical quotation and paraphrase, a plurality of authors now seems to exist in the text. 'Voices' we can trace in the poem include the poet-author of the poem itself, the original writer of the biblical text, and even the 'voice' of God, the ostensible original source for the biblical text itself. The appearance of several authors, which is 'real' because it is 'there in the poem' (present), but which is also a poetic illusion (all authors are clearly absent; we see only a page and some print), draws the reader into a paradox. The reader is further extended by being brought face to face with the problematic issue of the value of originality. Is the most visible author, the author of the poem, becoming empowered in that she is absorbing and taking over a pre-existent meaning, or is she in fact being de-faced, being absorbed and taken over by a meaning that already exists? An intertextual reading recognises the possibility of manipulating the signifying system while remaining within it, a process which does not answer the above question but infinitely defers it.

Consideration of the numerous voices which quotation or paraphrase includes in the text necessarily politicises the reading of gender in Christina's intertextual poems. Worton and Still make the point that an intertextual reading cannot avoid the consideration of sexual hierarchies. The most obvious initial observation to make is that Christina, a woman poet, justifies and supports her work by referring back to, and including, quotes and models from the Bible, the book which centred and justified the contemporaneous patriarchal social system. She places herself under the aegis of a masculine authority, and yet she does so in a way which effectively undercuts the entrenched literary values of a patriarchal system. Quoting intertexts, and thereby endowing the 'new' text with multiple voices, defies the 'phallic' insistence on coherence, on linear and univocal ex-

pression, which is enshrined in the patriarchal handbook, the system which prescribes rules and values. By quoting another work, and it could be any other work, Christina is investing her own produced text with more than one producer; while the quote or paraphrase is integrated into the text in order to be read in a linear fashion, as a piece of work that 'makes sense', it remains that "each quotation is a breach and a trace - and as such demands a non-linear reading" (Worton and Still 11). What this statement means is that Christina is producing a piece of work that, within its surface integration and phallic monologism, is plural and fragmented. The poetic voice is at one and the same time univocal and polyphonic. It conforms to the patriarchal demand of making sense, while simultaneously portraying diffuseness of source, potential reading and meaning, a diffuseness which feminist criticism has identified as feminine.<sup>7</sup>

It is also necessary to query the consequences of a recognition of intertextuality for the concept of selfhood in Christina's poetry. A starting point for this inquiry can be the question of the position of the self in relation to the source of the poem/text. Jonathan Culler has written on the issue of source: "There are no moments of authority and points of origin [in the text] except those which are retrospectively designated as origins and which, therefore, can be shown to derive from the series for which they are constituted as origin" (117).<sup>8</sup> In other words, just as the recognition of extracts of the Bible in Christina's poetry is an act of interpretation on the part of the reader, in which necessarily the Bible is only 'visible' as an intertext *after* the text is read, rather than preceding it as a determinative source, an intertextual reading demands a recognition of the way in which the text does not originate solely with the author. Nor is the author him/herself a single source of meaning.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Montefiore (148) and Irigaray.

<sup>8</sup> For this reference I am indebted to John Frow's essay, "Intertextuality and ontology" (Worton and Still 45-55).

An intertextual reading poses therefore a reversal of the Romantic model of poetic creativity, which posited a poet of more than ordinary perception, who, directly and without mediation, expressed universal truths of experience, being able to speak for 'all men'. An intertextual reading removes the myth of a single source, the poet with his universal sympathies, to reveal numerous and often contradictory 'voices' (and in Christina's poetry individual 'voices' include, but are not exclusively, those of feminist rebellion and dissent). A further way in which an intertextual approach differs from Romantic ideals is that, while originality and the source of inspiration was a fundamental concern for the Romantics (as for Curran), an intertextual model questions the existence of and the value attached to 'originality'. No longer a basic tenet of the quality of poetry, originality has become problematised.

To quote John Frow, the concept of intertextuality "has transformed the unity and self-presence of the text into a structure marked by otherness and repetition" (46-47). Frow sees the intertext-containing text as advertising itself as what it is not; that is, including biblical references demonstrates the fact that this text is not the Bible. This process of negative self-affirmation can be similarly applied to the process of creating a self in a text; subjectivity becomes dependent on adequate objectification of that which is not-I. Intertextuality questions what is real, querying both the apparent real source of the text and the apparent, common sense<sup>9</sup> model of a self creating a text. Intertextuality is thus not aetiologically fixated allusion-chasing, but a technique that foregrounds the process of interpretation. In the sense that an intertextual reading highlights interpretation and questions what is 'known' to be 'real', Frow emphasises that the process by which we can 'know' anything is continuous, an unending chain of

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<sup>9</sup> Catherine Belsey's term.

signification. Ultimately the text cannot be known and is not final, and the self can be read in precisely the same way, through the metaphor of intertextuality.

Using intertextuality to read a text as a metaphor for the self indicates that the self must be marked with the same otherness, fragmentation, and self-consciousness that identifies the text. References to an intertext implicitly ask, not answer, questions within the text; insofar as the reader is compelled to recognise these references as other, and must question the knowability of the source of their otherness, 'gaps' appear in the text, paradoxical marks of the absence of an originary source. A unitary source is absent from a fragmentary, gap-filled, self-questioning text; the self similarly is produced as non-unitary and diffuse, seeking avenues to create a more concrete subjectivity by objectification, but forced to recognise that otherness is an integral part of (her)self. The remaining problem is this: if Christina is positing her self as plural, is she being absorbed by the patriarchal model in her attempts to become single and whole again, or is she absorbing that model herself?

I have elaborated the implications of intertextual reading because it is an extremely useful model for examining Christina's poetry, providing a theoretical framework for my reading of her poetry as recognising and seeking a way of dealing with fragmentation. The same recognition and conflict that I have identified within the content of the poems can be seen also in their formal construction, in the intertextual processes employed to create the texts. What makes Christina's poetic creation and concerns the more radical is the fact that the primary source she uses to express a diffuse voice is the Bible, which enshrines patriarchal values of singularity, of lord, goal and meaning.

While the Bible is not the only source of quotation and allusion that Christina uses, it is the source she uses most often. By skilful manipulation of a biblical

intertext, the desire to reintegrate disparate selves is reframed within the authority of biblical injunction. As the speaker says in "The Name of Jesus" (II 191-92):

Thy will can make us whole,  
I plead Thyself, I plead Thy Name. (II.7-8)

Christ is both the example and the exhorter of wholeness; this kind of pleading is the best defence possible for a desire for reintegration, which is not self-abnegating at all, but self-interested.

There is an enormous power in this doubly (scripturally and self-)authorised adoption of Christ-likeness, which embodies the fundamental paradox of the Christian faith, in which power and status are achieved through and in the act of self-abasement, in which fulfilment comes through and in self-denial. "I followed Thee, my God, I followed Thee" (II 241-3) is a perfect expression of this paradox, of humility coexisting with power. In this poem, the culmination of a sophisticated process of successive identifications is a statement of power that grants the speaker partnership, if not equality, with Christ.<sup>10</sup> The primary persona adopted in the poem is the apostle Peter; the poem is built around a number of biblical references, some specific and some obscure. The poem can also be read as a highly personal statement, in which each stanza contains one or several contradictions, which works through a series of dialectical images to eventually achieve a position that is both entirely humbled and entirely exalted, culminating in the image of the cross. Christ's crucifixion is of course the embodiment of the abasement/glorification dialectic: "If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32).

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<sup>10</sup> W David Shaw recognises in Christina's poetry "an intense desire for identity or reciprocity with God", which he terms "empathising" with Christ (Shaw 326).



The poem refracts aspects of many biblical sources as intertexts. It retells the crucifixion story, from an openly-avowed subjective point of view; it 'takes as read' the story of Peter's denial of Christ; it paraphrases and cobbles together references, quotes and verse fragments from such diverse books as the gospels, the Psalms, Jeremiah, and Ephesians. The reference from Jeremiah predates the poem's 'setting', Christ's death, by some 600 years;<sup>11</sup> Paul wrote the epistle to the Ephesians some 60 years later again.<sup>12</sup> Contemporaneous and non-contemporaneous references, straight-forward quote, adapted quote and paraphrase all create the poem as multiply faceted and multiply authored.

The poem's content problematises the multiplicity observable in its form. In the first stanza, the speaker recognises the multiple facets of Christ, His divinity and His humanity, capitalised and awesome yet personally and intimately known: "Thy Face, my God, my Friend." Numerous possibilities are open to God; therefore, numerous possibilities of action and identity must be permissible also to the Christian who is seeking to "follow" God, to be God-like. Taking this implicit equation as a starting point, the speaker begins an interrogation of his own multiple reactions and mutually *inclusive* contradictions:

Even fleeing from Thee my heart clave to Thee:  
I turned perforce  
Constrained, yea chained by love which maketh free.... (ll.6-8)

In the third stanza the multiplicity of the speaker's character is widened to allow, beside self-condemnation, a statement of self-assertion: "I weak and small / *Yet thy true lover*, mean tho' I must be,..." (ll.12-13, my emphasis).

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<sup>11</sup> "Is there no balm in Gilead?" Jeremiah 8:22; ref. line 41.

<sup>12</sup> "... [I pray that you] may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height [of love]," Ephesians 3:18; ref. lines 24-25.



Further innate variations of the speaker are discussed: the yawning gap between his perception of his own capabilities and his subsequent action; his figurative blindness, "Rebel to light", and his subsequent ability to "see / Love's lovely depth and height" (ll.24-25); his capacity for faith and trust, and his misplaced application thereof, and so on. The whole poem, which uses antithesis so regularly, lends itself well to Theo Dombrowski's analysis of dualism in Christina's poetry. What I see as the most interesting point of this poem, however, is not dualism but rather the patterning which takes place, the formal, repetitive way in which contradictions within the speaker are linked to or demonstrated as being similar to the contradictions inherent in God (which ultimately results in such a close identification between speaker and Christ that they are almost indivisible). Through this patterning process, the existence of a contradictory, disparate self is firmly validated and a position of considerable power is claimed.

Drawing a similarity between the speaker and the Christ of his description is done in various ways. There is a mirroring of action; while the action itself is different, the sentence structure in which it is described is identical, as is the verb:

Alas for me, who bore to think on Thee  
 And yet to lie:  
 While Thou, O Lord, didst bear to look on me.... (ll.36-38)

Similarly, the speaker finds agony and comfort in and from the example of the body of the Lord, simultaneously agonised and comforting:

...in Thee  
 Nailed to Thy palm  
 I find a balm that wrings and comforts me:  
 Balm wrung from Thee by agony,  
 My balm, my only balm. (ll.41-45)

Part of this continuing process of identifying self with the crucified Christ is the succession of identifications made by the speaker with different biblical characters, blurring the distinctions between separate characters and 'voices'. While Peter is the primary persona adopted in this monologue, the speaker also identifies with aspects of the repentant thief beside Jesus, and with the author of the Psalms. There are several points of identification between the primary speaker and the secondary figure of the thief. Both are dry, both thirst; the thief is characterised as thirsting intensely, as dying of "parching drouth", but at the same time "in ecstasy", and this contradictory state is echoed by that of the speaker, described in the next stanza, dry and longing for water, yet weeping incessantly. Both have reached a new spiritual understanding, having moved from positions of scorn or denial to one of strong desire for Christ. Here the speaker recognises the similarity of his emotion to that belonging to the writer of Psalm 42; the psalm's first verse in particular provides an intertext which serves as a 'sanitising' agent for a statement of intense, physically-expressed desire.

Like as the hart the water-brooks I Thee  
 Desire, my hands  
 I stretch to Thee; O kind Lord, pity me:  
 Lord, I have wept, wept bitterly,  
 I driest of dry lands. (ll.56-60)

It is in the penultimate and ultimate stanzas that the identities of speaker and Christ begin to approach closer and closer.<sup>13</sup> The two now together occupy the same position: "Hanging with Thee upon the accursed tree" (l.63). In language unornamented and physical, primary identification consists of bodily suffering: "The nails, the thorns, pierce Thee and me" (l.64). "My God, I claim my part"

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<sup>13</sup> Shaw supports this view; his argument sees the persona progressing from empathy with Christ to a highly developed form of identification that culminates in assimilation of Christ, "with whom she [the persona] now seems merged" (Shaw 327).

is a confident, even daring statement; it is not a question asking for permission, but an assertion of the speaker's rights, the rights implicit in the identity he is constructing for himself. It is clear, however, that no kind of usurpation is happening; the speaker is not 'taking the place' of Christ, he is 'taking his own (rightful) place', alongside Christ. The identification begins to wind up in the last stanza:

Scarce in Thy throne and kingdom; yet with Thee  
 In shame, in loss,  
 In thy forsaking, in Thine agony:  
 Love crucified, behold even me,  
 Me also bear Thy cross. (ll.66-70)

Both the penultimate and the final stanzas continue in one periodic sentence, consisting of clause after clause; images of pain and shame accelerate to a kind of frenzy of self-abnegation and self-abasement which is at the same time a statement of personal power and assertiveness. Even while maintaining the appropriate position of self-abnegation and humility, "scarce in Thy throne and kingdom", still the right to this stature is claimed implicitly, as the reverse side of the coin of claiming joint partnership in Christ's suffering. The speaker is claiming the ultimate right to be with God, to suffer as God suffers: to be like God. In the figure of the crucified Christ the speaker has found the paradigm of contradictoriness, agony and ecstasy, suffering and sublimity; the poem apotheosises this contradictoriness and simultaneously identifies with it. An inter-textual reading also reveals the multiplicity of the text itself; fundamentally, the poem states the potential richness of variation, and it envisions God-like status in the reintegration and continuation of that multiplicity.

When discussing the use of Christ as a model of the unified self, discussion of the Trinity, the Godhead Three-in-One, would appear mandatory. It seems odd, then, that Christina's poetry does not regularly employ the model of the Trinity.

Two references to the Trinity, where Christina does seem to bring it into her work as the ultimate example of homogeneous unity out of various parts, can be found in "Let them rejoice in their beds" (II 286), and in "Martyr's Song" (I 182-84). The second stanza of the former poem ends:

Unto Thee his heart each quiet saint upraises,  
 God the Father, Spirit, Son;  
 Unto Thee his heart, unto Thee his praises,  
 O Lord God, the Three in One. (ll.9-12)

The final stanza of "Martyr's Song" reads:

God the Father we will adore,  
 In Jesus' Name, now and evermore:  
 God the Son we will love and thank  
 In this flood and on the farther bank:  
 God the Holy Ghost we will praise,  
 In Jesus' Name, thro' endless days:  
 God Almighty, God Three in One,  
 God Almighty, God alone. (ll.55-62)

Theo Dombrowski has noticed the relative lack of treatment of the Trinity; in "Dualism in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti" he argues that this lack of treatment is due to the fundamental dualism which Christina saw in the world and reproduced in her poetry. Clearly, the Trinity does not fit a bi-partite, dualistic world-view, and neither does Christina's unique vision of personal multiplicity. Deconstruction has exposed the function of binary oppositions or systems; feminist criticism has criticised the terms of such structures as "political weapons" which actually serve the interests of the dominant group, by positing one term as positive and the other as its inverse, with no characteristics or value of its own (Grosz 106). Christina's poems can thus be seen as disruptive, in that they repeatedly use that dualism noted by Dombrowski as a starting point from which to diverge, to investigate the (subversive) possibility of a middle

ground, a meeting point, or a new formulation which shows A and not-A can in fact be mutually *inclusive*.

This mutuality of contradictions has been identified by Michael Riffaterre as an important aspect of intertextuality. He writes:

... intertextuality enables the text to represent, at one and the same time, the following pairs of opposites...: convention and departures from it, tradition and novelty, sociolect and idiolect, the already said and its negation or transformation (76).

Thus an intertextual reading is an apt way of uncovering the hidden, oblique currents of subversion in those poems which use the Trinity or other models of variety within unity. Dombrowski mentions other models in noting that, while reference to the Holy Trinity is (mostly) absent from Christina's poems, a poem such as "What hath God wrought!" (II 287) shows heaven as a masterpiece of unity.<sup>14</sup>

...One King and one song  
One thunder of manifold voices harmonious and strong,  
One King and one love, and one shout of one worshipping throng. (II.4-6)

Dombrowski makes some worthy points:

It is not often recognised that poetry as clearly poised and firmly controlled as that of Christina Rossetti is troubled by a profound sense of fragmentation.... Indeed, the firm technical control and simple diction which characterise her poetry seem to arise not from equanimity and detachment but from attempts to resolve or control an underlying tension. (70)

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<sup>14</sup> Dombrowski 75. Dombrowski uses William Michael Rossetti's edition, in which the poem is entitled "The Shout of a King" (William Michael Rossetti 211).

However, despite the "fragmentation" Dombrowski observes, he still maintains the dichotomous, "divided self" model of Battiscombe, Packer and others; adopting the title, "Dualism in the Poetry of Christina Rossetti", he limits his study to pairs of poles and opposites. To support his argument he cites numerous examples of 'double' titles, dialogue poems, examples of antithesis, and poems which dramatise two opposing characters. The model I have proposed is much less structured; the self I have proposed, the fragmentation of which causes the poet so much dis-ease and propels her into repeated efforts to integrate, is far more diffuse, and rejects exactly this kind of confining definition. The discussion of "Autumn" in my first chapter is just one example of a poem revealing the many layers of identity that the poetic self adopts, separately and simultaneously. This self cannot be pinned down into one identity, nor into a neat pair of opposites; it is fundamentally various. Dombrowski's discussion of dualism is ultimately insufficient to cope with the more-than-binary fragmentation visible in Christina's poems, the concern with variety and with techniques that express that variety, and the vision of variety reintegrated.

Having said this, there remains the problem of offering another reason why Christina did not make more use of the three-fold nature of the Trinity, in favour of an emphasis on its unity, usually in the single figure of Christ. The Trinity seems to offer the perfect, ready-formed example of homogeneous unity emerging out of various parts, which, even in oneness, maintain their separate identity and function. It is not, however, the example that Christina often chooses. Christina's supreme example of a unity which integrates several parts while maintaining the separate integrity of those parts, comes in "Tune Me, O Lord, into one harmony", (II 255).<sup>15</sup> The poem begins: "Tune me, O Lord,

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<sup>15</sup> Weathers' view is that Christina's primary model for discussing both the fragmented self and its reintegration is that of sisterhood: "The various sisters which appear in her work are the mythic characters in her psychological

into one harmony / With Thee, one full responsive vibrant chord...". The musical metaphor of 'harmony' suggests a counterpart to a melody; a number or variety of tones exist. Putting them together into "one full responsive vibrant chord" does not entail a cancelling of one or more, or of all but one, but rather a recognition of variety and the positing of this variety as a positive value. "Full" implies that all parts have their place and only when all are recognised and placed is fulfilment possible. Being "full" is likewise being "vibrant"; in this poem variety actually *is* life.

Therefore we can read in this slight poem a validation of variety which is still carefully placed in its correct Christian framework, as used for God: "Unto Thy praise all love and melody" (l.3). In another sense, and in keeping with my earlier discussion of "I followed Thee, my God, I followed Thee", "tuning" can be read as the process of becoming like God:

As Thy Heart is to my heart, *unto Thee*  
Tune me, O Lord. (ll.10-11, my emphasis)

This reading posits God as the ultimate model unto which the speaker wishes to be "tuned"; He then must Himself be essentially variable, yet integrated.

"Harmony" as a metaphor for integrated variety is not an isolated motif in Christina's poems. It is evident in "What hath God wrought!" (II 287), in the penultimate line: "One thunder of manifold voices harmonious and strong". Variation on the idea of many tones blending as one can also be seen in "Before the Throne, and before the Lamb" (II 287), which begins: "As the voice of many waters all saints sing as one". Possibly the best example is found in

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drama", and that "the prototypal poem in Christina's myth of the self is, of course, *Goblin Market*" (82).



"After this the Judgement" (I 184-86), which describes the music of heaven thus:

Swelling those Hallelujahs full of rest,  
One, tenfold, hundredfold, with heavenly art,  
Fulfilling north and south and east and west,  
Thousand, ten thousandfold, innumerable,  
All blent in one yet each one manifest;  
Each one distinguished and beloved as well  
As if no second voice in earth or heaven  
Were lifted up.... (ll.14-21)

Each of these poems recognises the possibility of successful integration of variety; each is a validation of the potential richness, not destructive fragmentation, inherent in that variety.

Several of Christina's religious poems have titles that refer to martyrdom. Three of these poems in particular use martyrdom as a metaphor to address, in differing ways, the themes of personal variety, separation, desire and union. Martyrdom means undergoing suffering or death in obedience to one's faith, giving up the rights of self-preservation or life itself, renouncing the claims of an earthly existence in order to achieve translation to the heavenly realm. The poems I will examine, however, express a longing for union with God that in effect configures a reverse translation, a transferral of the heavenly goal to the earthly arena. They express a longing to continue living, albeit in a different and better state. Christina's version of a wish for martyrdom is a wish for self-improvement rather than a wish for self-extinction. Thus between the titles and the contents of these martyrdom poems there is crystallised the dialectic central to Christina's religious poetry: self-abnegation and denial is a path, albeit a tenuous and tortuous one, to a form of fulfilment and self-gratification.

Another way of looking at martyrdom is that while the martyr permits herself to be objectified, to be made an offering or sacrifice, she may retain her subjectivity, because choosing a vocation, even if that vocation is martyrdom, cannot be an entirely passive process; it is an active engagement in life. "Giving one's body to be burnt", as the sun does in "The Martyr", combines activity and passivity, on the one hand *giving*, and on the other *being burnt*; simultaneously acting and acted upon, the martyr keeps the choice by making a choice, even though the nature of the choosing is, paradoxically, to give up the right of choice over her own life.

The first martyr poem I will examine is "The Martyr" (III 107-09), written on May 24, 1846. One of Christina's juvenile poems, it is marked by a certain immaturity of composition: the metrical scheme is overly elaborate and reads rather tritely, the syntax is occasionally ungainly ("Straight the path to Heaven / Through the glowing fire lay her feet before", ll.41-42). Nonetheless, it demonstrates some suggestive ambiguities concerning a martyr's 'retention' of a form of carnality. For instance, the martyr sun's blush is problematic.

All her might was rallied  
To her heart; not pallid  
Was her cheek, but glowing with a glorious red,  
Glorious red and saintly,  
Never paling faintly,  
But still flushing, kindling still, without thought of dread. (ll.13-18)

A flush of blood, timeless symbol of passion and arousal, here is given a contradictory value; the sun's flush is "saintly", a flush of resolve to give up her earthly or carnal life. She is "kindling" in sacrifice and immolation; she is not burning 'in the flames of desire' nor consumed by the urge of self-gratification, though those connotations inform Christina's use of "flushing" and "kindling", and cannot be separated out from them. This instance of a blush that is both

physical and saintly is merely one example of the dual-natured passion that informs so much of Christina's poetry. Sexual desire, or more correctly *eros*, the desire for pleasure, is inseparable from spiritual desire to know God, His reality and mysteries, because they are both passions, and we only have one language of passion. In the sixth stanza the sun is described as "Quickened with a fire / Of sublime desire"(ll.31-32). The reader's focus is directed not to the end of the desire; we are not led to question whether that desire is physical or spiritual; rather, we focus on the nature of the state and condition of desiring. Physical and spiritual desire are frequently indistinguishable (Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting "Beata Beatrix" is a wonderful example of a rendering of ambivalent desire); it is the inseparability of the two forms of passion which has made the Song of Solomon so controversial over the last two millennia. Is it a song of sexual passion or of spiritual longing? The one language of passion means neither aspect can be drawn away from the other.<sup>16</sup>

Though it is claimed that "her flesh has dwindled", the fleshly nature of the martyr sun is still evident in the manner of her anticipation: "...her breath came thickly, / With the longing to see God coming pantingly" (ll.44-45). Her anticipation of final completion is passionate and implicitly sexual. Though the sun is claiming a suitable passion, devoid of earthly contaminants, passion cannot be divorced from its carnal flip-side. Therefore the martyr sun is actually constructing an impeccable form which *retains* some aspect of her sexuality/carnality. In the final stanza she has left behind fear, punishment, and guilt: "Fear is left beneath her, and the chastening rod" (l.51); the passion she has defined is irreproachable and cannot be taken from her.

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<sup>16</sup> For a fascinating discussion of "the unresolvable nexus of our sexual and religious perplexities", see John Maynard, *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion*.

The problematic nature of the passion that animates and motivates her is extended to the variety of readings one could attach to the goal she nears, the "martyrdom". In stanza five, the sun speaks: "'Christ,' she said, 'receive me'"(1.25). She gives herself to Christ, but she is no loser in this deal. Through this martyrdom, this giving away of herself, she keeps herself and gains satisfaction, as we see in the triumphant and sexually ambiguous last line: "Satisfied with hopeful rest, and replete with God". Now she is missing nothing and suffering no lack; she is complete, she is replete. "Replete with God" can be read either as 'replete along with God who is also replete', or 'replete having internalised God'. These two possible interpretations of union differ only in degree; in the former she is united and has achieved partnership-status with God; in the latter she is united having subsumed God into herself.

"Martyr's Song" (I 182-4) was composed on March 20, 1863. This poem considers the nature of heaven, as the place where the saints dwell, where the angels sing, where God in His majesty and power exists. Descriptions of heaven along these lines make up the three longest of the eight stanzas, and yet a primary concern that comes into this consideration of heaven is what must be experienced or endured *first*, in order to experience heaven. The nature of heaven, to be experienced tomorrow, is inseparable from the nature of the earthly experience of today; the two, opposites, are dependent for their sense upon each other. The poem begins: "We meet in joy, tho' we part in sorrow; / We part tonight, but we meet tomorrow." As meeting is dependent on an earlier parting, so heaven, future, is dependent on earth, now, as in a biblical intertext: "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy" (Psalm 126:5). Joy to come is, in this biblical context, dependent on suffering now. The poem's recognition of this interdependence can be interestingly read as a form of validation or even valorisation of present and earthly experience, as being indispensable for a knowledge and appreciation of the world to come. Martyrdom, then, is not the

state of living in this world, but appears to be the state of traversing the liminal state that is the grey area between heaven and earth. It could be a recognition of the fact that heaven and earth are mutually sustaining opposites.

While reading the two lines quoted above we should bear in mind the vision in Christina's poetry of a paradisal state being the state of the reintegrated self, of union regained. That heaven is envisioned as a place of reunion is made clear in these opening two lines, whether "we" is read as signifying numerous individuals or as one individual looking forward to the end of the separation of his various selves. Kathleen Blake has written of Christina that "she says heaven enjoys exemption from variability" (19), which is a recognition that in Christina's poetry, the paradisal goal sought is one of integration, where variety and diffuseness come together.

"Martyr's Song" is also notable for the violent liminal states it prefigures. The nature of the turmoil necessary to be endured in order to make it across to heaven is examined; the three primary intermediary states, or rites of passage, are flood, blood and fire.

Be it flood or blood the path that's trod,  
All the same it leads home to God:  
Be it furnace-fire voluminous,  
One like God's Son will walk with us. (ll.3-6)

As examples to the speaker, the saints now resident in heaven have made it "Home to their home of Heaven-content; / Thro' flood, or blood, or furnace-fire..." (ll.14-15). This process seems to be similar to the reverse of the process of birth, the return to a state of satiation that knows no lack or separation: a return to "the rest that fulfils desire" (l.16).

The third stanza, which talks about the angels, is prettily phrased. It would not appear out of place in a collection of children's religious poetry, and it is entirely and featurelessly conventional. The stanza dealing with Christ is more interesting however, as in Christina's poetry Christ can usually be seen as a type of perfected man, to which imperfect mankind should aspire. Christ as an example of the fully integrated various self has been established in the earlier analysis of "I followed Thee, my God, I followed Thee". In "Martyr's Song", too, He is presented as having several natures and fulfilling numerous roles, the severalness of which are symbolised by the "many crowns" worn by this (one) King:

... As a King with many crowns He stands,  
 And our names are graven upon His hands;  
 As a Priest, with God-uplifted eyes,  
 He offers for us His sacrifice;  
 As the Lamb of God for sinners slain,  
 That we too may live He lives again;  
 As our Champion behold Him stand,  
 Strong to save us, at God's Right Hand. (ll.29-36)

In the following two, shorter stanzas, the speaker prays to be both with Jesus and like him. Desiring to be like Jesus is equivalent to seeking to emulate Jesus' successfully integrated variety, which is symbolised in the three aspects of God (Father, Son and Spirit), to each of whom in turn the speaker appeals. The speaker then proceeds to emphasise the barriers blocking this company with and similarity to the Godhead. These barriers, the Red Sea and the Jordan, are further examples of liminal states, existing between one realm and the next. Both bodies of water, intertexts borrowed from the Old Testament, must be divided and crossed in order to achieve closeness/union with God. This closeness or union, "safety within", is again reminiscent of enclosure or a kind of return to the womb, a reverse birth, in which case the bodies of water could be seen as symbolising the rush of amniotic fluid preceding birth.



Yet one pang searching and sore,  
 And then Heaven for evermore;  
 Yet one moment awful and dark,  
 Then safety within the Veil and the Ark.... (II.49-52)

This stanza ends with a projected intimacy that approaches partner-status, very similar in phrasing to the ending of "Cried Out With Tears", though this time without any differentiating capitals: "Then Christ for ever face to face". The final stanza expresses praise to the Trinity, a celebration of the state and status to which the speaker aspires, many-faceted and integrated. In this poem then, martyrdom can be seen as itself a kind of liminal state, a temporary passage to be endured in order to cross from an imperfect state of incompleteness and unresolved desire, to a place of perfection, the place of God, the place of God-likeness.

A third poem is "A Martyr" (II 159-63), written sometime before 1881, which is both longer and more complex than the two I have just analysed. In this poem for the first time is explicit consideration of martyrdom as a psychological process, that suffering and progress may be "Inner not outer". Our focus is no longer on flood, blood and fire, but on the turmoil of martyrdom enclosed in the mind. The poem expresses the internal battles of a speaker who wants to be integrated, but who doesn't want to pay for union by losing any part of herself. This is an appropriate juncture to express a fundamental disagreement with Gilbert and Gubar's description of Christina's "aesthetic of renunciation" (*Madwoman* 587). They equate a poetry of renunciation with a renunciation of poetry (Blake 20) and are of the view that Christina has 'given up' before she even starts, that renunciation is complete before the poet is able to write. As they write in an analysis of "From House to Home":

What the female poet-speaker must discover... is that for the woman poet only renunciation, even anguish, can be a suitable



source of song. Bruised and tortured, the Christ-like poet of Rossetti's vision drinks the bitterness of self-abnegation, and then sings. (*Madwoman* 572)

This is an inaccurate and inadequate description of Christina's poetry. It underestimates the power of the speakers' protests in their struggles to abnegate self, and entirely neglects their reformulation of the process and rewards of self-denial. Christina's poetry expresses struggle, the partiality and incompleteness of self-abnegation, and the demands of self for fulfilment, not denial, of desire. The poems sing out of the ongoing battle of a desire to live: Christina most emphatically does not "bury herself alive in a coffin of renunciation" (*Madwoman* 575).

"A Martyr" is concerned with precisely this struggle between the attractions of living and dying. The poem dramatises the speaker's effort to follow the example of Jesus' total submission and give up one's own autonomy: "Thy Will I will, Thy desire desire" (l.34),<sup>17</sup> but it is an effort that is interspersed with outbursts that reveal a reluctance to do so. It is through the impassioned concentration in the text upon the very things that the speaker must disregard -- such as frailty, fear, loneliness and pain: "[I] shrink from all the shame / And pangs and desolation of my death, / Wrenched piecemeal or devoured or set on flame" (ll.85-87) -- that these things demonstrably are not disregarded; rather, they are at the forefront of the person's mind. Similarly, temptation is foregrounded precisely in the repeated appeals to God to *save* her from temptation:

Lord, hold me fast, Lord, leave me not alone,  
Thy silly heartless dove that sees the lime

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<sup>17</sup> A clear echo of Jesus' words is here audible: "I seek not my own will, but the will of the Father who has sent me" (John 6:30b); and, even more appropriate for a martyr poem, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Yet almost flutters to the tempting bough:  
 Cover me, hide me, pluck me from this crime.  
 A word, a puff of smoke, would save me now: . . . (ll.51-55)

The entire poem is an exercise in finely-poised tension, an oscillation between two positions. There is conflict between concentration on the pain of one's mortal existence, and envisioning heaven, consideration of which only really enters the poem in the last two lines. Assertions of passive acceptance, "Thy Will I will, I Thy desire desire" (l.34), sit uneasily amongst pleas to God to change the speaker's plight, in language that by the closing lines of the poem has become a string of imperatives:

Let me not in Thine eyes be nothing worth:  
 Behold me where in agony I stand,  
 Behold me no man caring for my soul,  
 And take me to Thee in the far-off land,  
 Shorten the race and lift me to the goal. (ll.141-45)

In the triumph-envisioning last lines, the speaker is creating a role for herself which has shifted from supplicant to something more like partner with Christ ("take me to Thee").

While "A Martyr" seems to be fundamentally about self-abnegation, in which the speaker invests God with the responsibility for and purpose of her existence ("Thee my Life", l.14), the poem still betrays an obsession with self, its demands, and the attractions of earthly existence. By submissively saying, "Thy Will I will, I Thy desire desire" (l.34), the speaker is indicating her willingness to submit her self and her desires to God, but she betrays her reluctance to do so in her admission of her self as unsatisfied and desiring life, not wanting to renounce "My song half sung, its sweetest notes unsung" (l.40). The speaker's attraction to and desire of earthly satisfactions keep breaking through her self-

control, for instance when she mourns her "earthly love", her lost beauty and hopes, and speaks passionately of the sweetness of life:

Alas, alas, mine earthly love, alas,  
 For whom I thought to don the garments white  
 And white wreath of a bride, this rugged pass  
 Hath utterly divorced me from thy care;  
 Yea, I am to thee as a shattered glass  
 Worthless, with no more beauty lodging there...  
 For sweet are sunshine and this upper air,  
 And life and youth are sweet, and give us room  
 For all most sweetest sweetnesses we taste... (ll.104-09, 111-13)

The speaker, looking to renunciation and martyrdom, remains wedded to earthly desirous nature. She seeks to include self-fulfilment alongside her self-abnegation; the lines "On Thee I centre all my self that dies, / And self that dies not with its mortal crust" (ll. 128-29) may be read as an explicit vision of integration, through the agency of God, of the body and the spirit, of physically and spiritually desirous selves. Without integration, the speaker remains constantly traversing the state between abnegation of and insistence on self. Unable to entirely separate out a purely spiritual, abnegating self from a demanding, carnally-minded self, unresolved fragmentation is the speaker's ongoing martyrdom.

Martyrdom as unresolved fragmentation means a state of continuous yearning. An explicit recognition of the self as incomplete, unsatisfied and yearning can be seen in ll.38-42:

And young I am, unsatisfied and young,  
 With memories, hopes, and cravings all unfed,  
 My song half sung, its sweetest notes unsung,  
 All plans cut short, all possibilities,  
 Because my cord of life is soon unstrung.

Death is both craved as an ending of dissatisfaction, and shunned, as satisfaction is still defiantly longed for. The poem's speaker seeks a resolution to the torture of conflicting longings to renounce and to retain her own autonomy.

A source of tension in "A Martyr" is the self-commendation that seems to appear in the speaker's catalogue of miseries. Self-abasement actually becomes a way of recommending herself to God:

Me, Lord, remember who remember Thee,  
And cleave to Thee, and see Thee without sight,<sup>18</sup>  
And choose Thee still in dire extremity... (ll.10-12)

Quite literally in this passage, the speaker is putting herself first. Regular sentence order is rearranged to emphasise the initial "me"; despite the fact that the Lord to whom she appeals features several times in these three lines, the speaker is the veiled subject ("me... who...") of four verbs (remember, cleave, see, choose), and is thus highly active, even in a subordinate position. The speaker is very much in control of her language; in a further passage she succeeds in creating for herself a heroism out of protestations of frailty:

O Lord, I follow, little as I know;  
At this eleventh hour I rise and take  
My life into my hand, and follow so,  
With tears and misgivings and heart-ache;  
Thy feeblest follower, yet Thy follower  
Indomitable for Thine only sake.... (ll.19-24)

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<sup>18</sup> A good example of the speaker 'backing herself' with scripture; she uses in her own favour an allusion to Christ's commendation of those Christians who do not, unlike Thomas, require tangible proof in order to believe: "Jesus saith unto him, 'Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed'" (John 21:29).

Line 24 points to an intertext of Christina's own previous work; "Indomitable in her feebleness" is the penultimate line of "A Study. (A Soul.)" (III 226), composed on February 7, 1854. "A Study. (A Soul.)" is a singular and astonishing statement of women's negative, passive power; the woman-persona described is not actively seeking heaven but is passively withstanding trial till she attains it: "Her face is steadfast toward the shadowy land". In this poem's ending is the sense with which "A Martyr" is implicitly informed:

She stands there patient, nerved with inner might,  
Indomitable in her feebleness,  
Her face and will athirst against the light (ll.12-14).

Here supposed weakness, or what is weakness according to the definition of the prevailing ideology, is (highly subversively) redefined as strength, and the poem ends with a line of ambiguous meaning. If "the light" is the heavenly goal, as it appears to be, the woman "athirst against the light" may be interpreted as desiring the light or as positioning her self in opposition to it. A similar hint of ambiguity informs "A Martyr", in the way in which the speaker manages to abase and validate herself at the same time.

This ambiguity may be emphasised by another possible intertext. Line 126 of "A Martyr" reads: "Look Thou upon me, Lord, for I am vile". This line awakens echoes of Tennyson's "St Simeon Stylites".<sup>19</sup> It will be recalled that Simeon's self-imposed torture and ostentatious self-vilification ultimately reveal his attachment to and dependence upon the world and its adulation, and his desire for greater glorification to come.<sup>20</sup> While the irony of that dramatic

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<sup>19</sup> Tennyson, *In Memoriam, Maud and Other Poems*, 39-43.

<sup>20</sup> No one line in Tennyson's poem bears a close similarity to Christina's; "vile" is a strong word, but Simeon uses stronger language: "Altho' I be the basest of mankind,/ From scalp to sole one slough and crust of sin..." (ll.1-2). The main similarity, I feel, is in the ambiguity which is attached to the goal of

monologue can scarcely be applied to "A Martyr", the similarity of some lines points to a similar tension between self-abnegation and self-interest, in the form of self-commendation.

As the speaker of "A Martyr" continues her meditation, she envisions a whole series of possibilities, imaginative renderings of the form her martyrdom might take, which are both terrible and attractive in their vitality; for example, her contemplation of death by fire is quite glorious in its violence:

Or kindle fire to speed my pilgrimage,  
 Chariot of fire and horses of sheer fire  
 Whirling me home to heaven by one fierce stage?--.... (ll.31-33)

Death by burning is here transformed by the speaker into an ascension almost identical to that of the great prophet Elijah, who was taken up into heaven without having to die (II Kings 2:11).

Yet another tension visible in the poem, though not explicitly acknowledged by the speaker, is a concern at the lack of answer to her appeals. Seeking help, the speaker says: "A word, a puff of smoke, would save me now"; this appeal is repeated three times (ll. 46, 47, 55), and becomes with this weight of repetition an earnest desire for reassurance that there does exist a God to answer, even merely acknowledge, her pleas. When this reassurance doesn't come, the speaker reassures herself, by, again, quoting Scripture: "Howbeit, whom have I, Lord, in heaven but Thee?" (l.48; biblical reference: Psalm 73:25). She herself answers her own rhetorical question: "But who, my God, would save me in the day / Of Thy fierce anger? only Saviour Thou" (ll.56-57).

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each martyr and the tension between the conflicting desires in the poem.

The poem oscillates from this (self-)assurance of salvation to an acute rendering of the speaker's sufferings, her fears, her preoccupation with her parents' pain, her shame as a public spectacle for scorn: "The thousand faces swaying to and fro, / Feasting on me unveiled in helplessness" (ll.69-70), and her utter isolation. Isolation is a common theme in Christina's poetry, and in "A Martyr" receives a common treatment, revaluation. She uses models both biblical (Paul), and natural (blossoms, a dove), to indicate to God His appropriate course of action in her state of isolation, which is to hold her and love her. This love produced out of isolation is a better love than an earthly one; it is above temporality: "...I will love / Thro' life's short fever-fits of heat and cold..." (ll.80-81), yet no sooner is this comforting idea expressed than the speaker tumbles back into envisioned sufferings even more vivid than before.

This pattern of consolation followed by reversion into doubt and turmoil continues throughout the poem. The crisis comes when the speaker recognises a deeply disturbing split in her own subjectivity: "Is this my body cold and stiff and stark...?"; "Am I that very I who laughed in mirth / A while ago, a little little while...?" (ll.118, 121-22). The speaker is in crisis, seeing her self as both subject and object, unable to identify either with her physical body or with a past 'I', the agent of past actions. It is in God that the speaker seeks a solution to her plight, centralisation and, as argued above, integration of her divisions: "On Thee I centre all my self that dies, / And self that dies not..." (ll.128-29).

In these three martyr poems a definition of martyrdom as passive and self-renunciatory undergoes modification. The speakers of these poems reformulate martyrdom to achieve forms which tie the appropriate end, renunciation of life and ultimate union with God, with a more unconventional goal, the retention of some form of carnality, and hence ultimate union and integration of physically



and spiritually desirous selves. In many ways the metaphor of martyrdom is the crystallisation-point of Christina's contradictory and profound goal: self-fulfilment out of a reworked form of self-denial.

In this chapter I have examined this goal in the larger body of Christina's religious poetry. Christina's speakers work within a biblical framework made overtly recognisable by the inclusion of specifically biblical paradigms and numerous biblical intertexts. By using the model of a multifarious Christ a conception of a various and contradictory self is validated, and the many scriptural injunctions to be Christlike are 're-created' to license the speakers' efforts to integrate their selves. Intertextuality serves the purpose of defending and supporting the views expressed within the poems by emphasising their orthodoxy, but my brief examination of intertextuality reveals the subversive multiplicity of views possible through the use of an intertextual model. The poems I have examined make use of this latitude to discuss concerns of personal variety and the attractions of earthly existence, and ultimately they produce a vision of an integrating Paradise that is revolutionary and highly personal, within its orthodox framework.

### CHAPTER THREE: "STIFLING IN MY STRUGGLE": THE VIOLENCE OF UNION AND THE UNSPEAKABLE

In Christina's poetry, the bereft woman's longing for union with her beloved is a recurring motif which carries the more subtle desire for reintegration of the fragmented self. In this chapter I will examine the constructions in the poetry that impede or block the desired reintegration or union. The barrier symbols in Christina's poetry fit the prevailing Christian discourse of that poetry but are also recognisable as Gothic elements. Use of symbols such as the door or gate, the wall, and the turbulent sea highlights what could be called a Gothic strand of Christianity, and Christina uses this strand to emphasise issues of separation and violence within orthodox Christian belief. This chapter will examine these Gothic Christian symbols and the violence which accompanies them, and investigate the ways in which Gothic conventions and Christian practice interrelate or interpenetrate in Christina's work. The doctrine of Soul Sleep, which Jerome McGann describes as an extremely important feature of her religious writing ("Religious Poetry"), is translated in the poetry into the Gothic equivalent of the *between*, which I propose to examine in some detail below.

In this chapter I will discuss Christina's poetry using several terms which, though closely linked, should be carefully differentiated. I see the "liminal state" specifically as a state in which change takes place, or is about to take place. The liminal state could describe the condition of a child that is in the process of being born. There is a passage of time during which the child is neither a fetus, in utero, nor a baby, an independent being in the world. The child's 'position' is that it has no position; it is being moved. This state of not being but becoming is a liminal state.

The *between*, however, is static, with no sense of the anticipated end which I see as an intrinsic feature of the liminal state. I will use the term *between* to indicate a territory that, paradoxically, is not a territory. *Between* is a preposition and cannot accurately be used as a noun, to indicate a place. This transgressive usage invests the word with a contradictory quality, appropriate for that which it is describing, something that only exists in terms of what it is not. The *between* corresponds to neither pole of a binary opposition, is neither here nor there, but is the indeterminate territory that exists at the boundary point at which the difference between the distinct territories of here and there becomes blurred. It is the non-territory that serves to distinguish between two territories.

The threshold is a refinement of the *between*, providing a focus for an amorphous state. The threshold is the metaphorical embodiment of the boundary line between two territories, but it is more a symbolisation of the point rather than the state. A threshold evokes anticipation, invites action, indicates the existence of another territory; it is not itself a territory. Thresholds in Christina's poetry undergo a further permutation to become what can be termed crisis barriers. Crisis barriers generally are specific images of physical preventative measures, such as locked doors or high walls; they mark the boundary between two states in the same way as a threshold does, but they are intrinsically threatening. Unlike a threshold, crisis barriers do not merely indicate a demarcation line, but are designed to enforce it, and any attempt to move through them into the other territory precipitates violence of some kind -- hence crisis barrier.

Analysis of Christina's poetry reveals numerous examples of symbols which act as crisis barriers. The small range of frequently-repeated symbols includes the door or gate, the wall, and the separating sea. All are culled from orthodox Christian imagery, and generally Christina makes the biblical antecedents of these symbols clear with recognisable quotations or paraphrases. However, a

second intertext is at work beside and within the intertext of the Bible, that of the symbolism, paraphernalia and terminology of the Gothic. The reader is reminded of the biblically-sourced meaning with which the poems' symbols are invested, but the same symbols of door or wall awaken persistent Gothic accompaniments of repression or fear, drawing attention to the violence that underlies these symbols and to the potential crises which those symbols can catalyse.

The door or gate simultaneously represents the means both of admitting and of denying entry, and thus combines aspects of release and denial. Further, if the door stands between the territory within and the territory without, then the door in itself constitutes a territory *between*, neither here nor there. The *between* must be crossed by violence, which equates to the door being pounded or broken down. An example can be found in "The eleventh hour" (III 29-31), in which "One stands knocking at a gate" and must beat on it "with a knock unceasing / And a cry increasing" for most of the poem, before the door yields and the supplicant can enter paradise. Another example is "Despised and Rejected" (I 178-80) in which, curiously, it is Christ whom the speaker locks out, and Christ who, paying the cost of the violent attempt to break through the barrier, draws "on my door / The mark of blood for evermore" (II.57-8).

A gate is a standard biblical symbol for the difficult entrance into heaven, as in Matthew 7:13-14: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction... because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it". There are several biblical references to Christ as being himself a door or means of access, such as John 10:7 and 9: "Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep.... I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved." However, insofar as Jesus controls access to God and to

heaven,<sup>1</sup> he can deny as well as allow the Christian access. Christ contains the conflation of acceptance and denial; he is both Redeemer and Judge. His double nature is translated into the double nature of a door, a gate, or any means of access. This double nature is recognised specifically in "Echo" (I 46), and obliquely elsewhere in Christina's poetry. For instance, the possibility that the door will remain closed is implicitly acknowledged in the slightly desperate, self-affirming faith proclaimed in poems such as "When my heart is vexed I will complain" (II 303-04):

Who knocketh at His door  
He welcomes evermore:  
Kneel down before  
That ever-open door.... (II.15-18).

A similar implicit acknowledgment exists in the apology and the appeal in "Feast of the Presentation" (II 236), which ends with the expectant but humble lines: "...give me grace to wait / A bruised reed bowed low before Thy gate". Poems that deal with doors are either restating or implicitly answering the unasked question contained in the biblical promise: "Behold I stand at the door and knock". Interest is generated by the possibilities of vastly differing actions: opening and entry? or closure and denial?

"Shut Out" (I 56-7) provides the primary example of the wall being used with a Gothic intertext intruding, making the wall an image of cruelty and prevention of access; in this poem the wall is not breached and the violence the subject could unleash remains subtextual, while the violence directed against her, symbolised in the wall, is explicit. In "From House to Home" (I 82-88), the speaker describes her dreams of earthly fulfilment using the metaphor of an edifice of several walls, "a pleasure place within my soul". This edifice serves

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<sup>1</sup> See John 14:6, Romans 5:2, Ephesians 2:18.

as a barrier between her and eventual heavenly fulfilment -- "[it] lured me from the goal" -- and therefore this house, the embodiment of separation, must be violently and mercilessly torn down in order that the new home, heaven, can be gained:

Yea, therefore as a flint I set my face,  
To pluck down, to build up again the whole--  
But in a distant place. (II.206-8)

Even when the dividing wall is not physically broken down, violent action is necessary to surmount it, as in "The end is not yet" (II 309), in which to get "home" one must "leap the wall". Only when the dividing walls have been breached, in liberating, life-giving violence, can walls take on the other "heavenly" part of their nature, which is security and defence, and those walls can be part of heaven. In "Our heaven must be within ourselves" (II 315), it is clear that walls have changed their function from walls which divide to walls which secure.

So faith shall build the boundary wall,  
And hope shall plant the secret bower,  
That both may show magnificent  
With gem and flower. (II.5-8)

In "Lord, grant us eyes to see" (II 184), the heavenly wall described in Revelation and adapted by the speaker is so transfigured that it is composed of the saints and includes Jesus himself:

Inbuild us where Jerusalem is built  
With walls of jasper and with streets of gold,  
And Thou Thyself, Lord Christ, for Corner Stone. (II.12-14)

Thus the two intertexts working in the poetry reveal the paradoxical nature of the mechanical means of division: just as doors and walls can bar the supplicant

from entry into the desired state, so can they provide entry and security. A shift from one side of their nature to the other can only be accomplished by means of a form of violent action.

Water imagery flows or drips throughout Christina's poetry. Angela Leighton has noted Christina's use of the "scene of willows and water" as figuring "a displacement of experience beyond the limits of what can be known or remembered.... Such a scene is, indeed, full of 'voices under'...." (*Women Poets* 144). Christina's use of more general sea imagery, to express a usually wild and always uncharted threatening *between*, is more widespread. Various sea poems illustrate the association of turbulence and fluidity with concerns of identity and the nature of the self.

"Luscious and Sorrowful" (II 93) speaks of heaven as the final attainment and the end of variability: "In the land of home together, past death and sea; / No more change or death, no more / Salt sea-shore" (ll.6-8). The sixth sonnet of the "Later Life" sequence (II 138-50) begins with a recognition of incompleteness: "We lack, yet cannot fix upon the lack", and then goes on to associate the troublesome lack felt in life with the nature of that life, which is likened to a "salt stormy sea". That salt stormy sea must be overcome to end the painful lack: the speaker encourages her fellow sufferers to join her "launching with hardier hearts across the main". The speaker must cast herself into the breach; the breach itself must be breached, before changeable instability, felt as lack, can be overcome. In "His Banner over me was Love" (II 272), the sea is used to symbolise all the uncertainty, disruption and pain of an earthly existence, and therefore heaven is portrayed as sea-less:

Here incessant tides stir up the main,  
Stormy miry depths aloft are hurled:



There is no more sea, or storm, or stain,  
In that world (II.8-11).

The speakers of these and other poems are faced with the threat of diffuseness and changeableness that water symbolises. The same diffuseness that speakers insist upon as a component of their own individual selves is inherently threatening; however radical this speaker may seem in her insistence that the nature of her self be recognised, she is a daughter of the patriarchy and her legacy combines an awareness of lack in her divided state with the inherited belief that a stable united self is necessary and necessarily *better*. Any radical concept, such as awareness of the fragmentation of self, is liberating and at the same time deeply threatening; any destruction of structure can produce insecurity just as it can release freedom. The speaker reflects this conflict by forming a parallel between the fragmentation she observes in her own self and the threat of the turbulent sea. In "Lord, I am here" (II 194-95), the speaker envisions a scenario in which she must endure and traverse turbulent waters -- "a wide insatiate sea" -- if she is to attain her goal of union, "the haven where [she] wouldst be" (l.15).

Conversely, it should be argued that insistence on the recognition of a purely personal conception of fragmentary, diffuse self is, however overlaid and ingrained with patriarchal value judgements, the beginning of a forward-moving process of valorisation. This process continues toward an insistence that the fragmentary self be appreciated, and begins to assert the value and attractiveness of that unconventional self. Hence it is not surprising that in addition to fear of the sea, a conflicting attraction to the sea and its turbulence also appears in Christina's poetry. This attraction can be seen in poems where the image of the sea 'slips' and becomes associated with pleasure and fulfilment. "A Song of Flight" (II 170) is notable for giving the sea a distinctly contradictory double significance. While the poem ends with pious abnegation of two staples of earthly existence, "And home lies beyond the stars and the sea", the sea is also a

compelling figure of the attractions and vibrancy of life: the first stanza describes the sun playing, "Athirst to bathe in the uttermost sea". Another example can be found in "When my heart is vexed I will complain" (II 303-04), which contemplates the joys that Christ can grant Christians in heaven:

[He] can give thee dancing heart and shining face,  
And lips filled full of grace,  
And pleasures as the rivers and the sea. (II.12-14)

The sea is similarly linked to pleasure, though pleasure with a more pronounced sexual subtext, in "Let them rejoice in their beds" (III 213), which expresses a longing for "...consummation that shall be, / Of fulness as the unfathomed sea" (II.15-16). Conflict, threat and pleasure are all intermingled in Christina's use of sea imagery.

Furthermore, if water can be seen as reminiscent of amniotic fluid, watery passages can be associated with the liminal state preceding childbirth. Thus associated with the travail of childbirth, water again proves a useful metaphor for a profound change of states, and one peculiarly apposite to women. In "Whither the Tribes go up, even the Tribes of the Lord" (II 298), Christina describes the crossing of the perilous *between* as an act very physical and violent, and combining imagery of childbirth and of crossing water:

One night, no more, of pain that turns to pleasure,  
One night, no more, of weeping weeping sore;...  
Our sails are set to cross the tossing river,...  
We toil awhile, but then we rest for ever.... (II.5-6, 13, 15)

Luce Irigaray has identified fluidity as characteristic of female meaning and sexual identity; Jan Montefiore paraphrases and quotes Irigaray's ideas in *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*: "...the association between femaleness and liquidity which can seem shapelessness, the fluidity of women's identity, and the need to

accept the changeable movements of liquids as appropriate metaphors for female discourse: 'Woman never speaks evenly. What she utters is flowing, fluctuating. Deceptive.... And you cannot hear her, except by losing the "right" and "literal" meaning'" (Montefiore 150).<sup>2</sup> We can see in the light of this theory that Christina's use of sea imagery is not confined to providing a model of a liminal state; it also demonstrates a practice that can be identified as an attempt to express a female perspective, in a way that is slightly different from the insistence upon fragmentation I have identified in the preceding chapters, and yet complementary. Associating fragmentation and fluidity with the self, as Christina's poetry does, is startlingly modern, in that it demonstrates the limits of representation possible in inherited, masculine-ruled language, and reveals an attempt to find and use a language to represent more nearly a female self. Christina uses metaphors that express an alternative and valid reality, not conforming to phallic-based judgements of a "right and literal" meaning.

Each of the symbols discussed above emphasise separation and violence. In Christina's concentration on the psychological implications of the separated self and the state of separation, and in the high incidence of violence as necessary to achieve re-union, we can see a marked resemblance to Gothic conventions, as described by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. I will now examine in more detail the correlation between Christina's poetry and Gothic conventions, the correlation of the Gothic elements of blood and violence with the Christian model of salvation through sacrifice, the usefulness of the Gothic model for women writers to attempt an articulation of female experience, and, ultimately, the problematic violence of union.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The passage Montefiore cites is from Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977) 116-17. The translation is Montefiore's own.

<sup>3</sup> Kelly Stephens uses "the Gothic nexus of sex, repression, selfhood and the

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Sedgwick posits as characteristic of Gothic texts a spatial model of a self that is "massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally have access" (12). She emphasises the "proper, natural, necessary" definition of the connection that binds the two, the self and that which is beyond it. She gives a range of conventional Gothic possibilities to illustrate the separation and connectedness, such as the lover parted from the beloved, or the prisoner removed from his outside life and even from air itself, by being buried alive. The separation that is so notable a feature of Christina's poetry clearly conforms to the Gothic standard requirements, though the separation to which I wish to draw attention is not the obvious, interpersonal separation existing in, for example, "Maude Clare", but rather the separateness suffered by and within the individual self. The self is "massively blocked off" from its desired state of reintegration or unity, which is seen to be "proper, natural, necessary". This prevention causes suffering and conflict.

Sedgwick goes on to identify "the most characteristic energies of the Gothic novel" (13) not as the suffering and conflict which exist in the state of being separated, but as the attempts to end separation and achieve reintegration, and to that end the violence that accompanies the breaching of the separating barrier. The energies of poems such as "Advent" and "The eleventh hour" can be described as expressing the "active violence" that is "almost always reserved for liminal moments, for the instant of moving out of... the dungeon" (22). The action of crossing, parting or destroying the barrier between two territories is the determining action of the Gothic text, towards which the text is directed. It is immaterial whether or not the determining action actually takes place in the text or is merely anticipated. Angela Leighton states: "... in many of [Christina's] poems, missing the goal is precisely the point. The twilight

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divine" (54) to discuss the boundary emblem in "The Convent Threshold".

thresholds to which her imagination is drawn are places of disorientation and delay. They open up a vague and obsessional dreamland in which consciousness seems suspended between heaven and earth, remembering and forgetting" (*Women Poets* 159).

Jerome McGann has also drawn attention to another kind of liminal state in Christina's poetry, less a between-territory than a between-time, which he aligns with the millenarian and Anabaptist doctrine of Soul Sleep. Soul Sleep describes the period of the soul between death and the resurrection of the righteous as a waiting time, a kind of spiritual limbo. McGann calls this doctrine "the single most important enabling principle in Rossetti's religious poetry" ("Religious Poetry" 135); it is clear that in Christina's poems, death itself was only another version of her indeterminate *between*: "the time of being dead is itself a secret between-time, not a conclusion" (Leighton, *Women Poets* 159). Of signal interest to Christina is what happens beyond the readily demarcated and documented states of life or experience, in the territory that is uncharted, beyond the demands of earthly time, entirely subjective and unshared, a place, finally, where the imagination is released from all requirements of expected temporal form.

As McGann's specifically religious interpretation of liminal states in Christina's poetry shows, a recognition that many of the concerns in Christina's poetry are typically Gothic by no means contradicts the deeply religious nature of those concerns. Christianity and Gothicism have many traits in common, not merely the most obvious similarity, awareness of the supernatural. Both have a highly personal focus, concentrating on the involvement of the individual with the supernatural; both place great significance on the dream and the vision; both have concerns of debt, guilt and retribution; both posit an intrinsically moral world where good and evil are easily identifiable, sharply differentiated, and to

whom value is conventionally accorded. The model of the quest is as readily identifiable in Gothic literature as in the Bible; Juliann Fleenor has noted that the quest model provides the Gothic heroine with a deceptive patriarchal absolute (10-11).<sup>4</sup>

Another instance of the two intertexts interpenetrating in the poetry occurs in the use of blood imagery. The necessity of death and spilled blood to cancel separation and effect reintegration, almost ubiquitous in Gothic literature, is one of the founding principles of the Judaic system. In the Old Testament, the blood of the Passover lamb, daubed on the doorposts, saved the sons of the Jews being slain by the Angel of Death. The High Priest was required to offer blood sacrifices to God once a year, to atone for the sins of the Jewish people,<sup>5</sup> and cancel the separation that sin imposed between God and His people. In the New Testament, Jesus (the Lamb of God) provided in himself a sacrificial lamb, himself shedding the blood that was necessary for salvation, and thereby making reconciliation with God possible for all time. Hebrews 9:22 reads, "And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission." In both the Gothic and the biblical traditions, shed blood becomes a sacrament that inextricably binds death with salvation and life.

An example of a poem in which blood achieves a sacramental significance is "The Convent Threshold" (I 61-65). In this poem blood is both the symbol of separation -- "there's blood between us, love, my love... and blood's a bar I cannot pass" -- and the means for the erasure of that separation, for after a night of struggle, marked by "frozen blood... on the sill", the decision is made which will mean redemption and, ultimately, reintegration: "we shall meet as once we

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted for this reference to Kelly Stephens.

<sup>5</sup> See Exodus 30:10.



met / And love with old familiar love". The required action seems to be shed blood (at the threshold, marking the boundary point of division), and be saved (unified). Blood can further be understood as a symbol for sexuality, which returns (in Gothic literature) as the repressed (in Christianity). Sexual threat is a recurrent motif in Gothic literature, and John Maynard, in discussing religious sacrificial ritual, notes the "connection between sexual experience, the limits of human culture and control, and the experience of blood and death in sacrifice" (10). Christianity and the Gothic are linked in their attempts to comprehend, and impose some kind of order on, that which goes beyond the limits of human culture and control, the incomprehensible and uncontrollable facets of the human psyche.

Order prevails in the Christian tradition, in which Christ paid the ultimate price to redeem the world from its wrongdoing, providing in himself on the cross both the price and the means of reconciliation with God. Christina's poetry often moves from orthodox devotional poetry to a more pronouncedly Gothic mode as her focus 'slips' from the cross as a bridge ending separation, to an impassioned concentration on the separation mechanism itself. This slipped focus occurs in "Good Friday" (I 186-87), which begins:

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? (ll.1-4)

Another envisioning of Christ's sufferings, which is even more profoundly felt as it encounters the peculiarly Gothic barrier of the unspeakable, occurs in "A Martyr" (II 159-63):

As once in Thine unutterable eclipse  
 The sun and moon grew dark for sympathy,



And earth cowered quaking underneath the drips  
Of Thy slow Blood priceless exceedingly.... (ll.133-36)

In this example, the Gothic "unutterable" translates to the problem of trying to express a transcendent experience or appreciation of God within the limits of available language.

A closer examination of the Gothic feature of the unspeakable leads into consideration of what it is that goes "beyond" the rules of representation in language. In my second chapter I demonstrated how an intertextual model of analysis reveals in Christina's work a subversive plurality of voices, which, as it 'goes beyond' accepted rules of masculine-controlled discourse, may be seen to articulate a female experience which is 'outside' that discourse that privileges coherence and unitary meaning. A Gothic model may be applied to Christina's poetry in a similar way, to observe the ways in which this model too can reveal attempts at an articulation of the 'unspeakable'. The unspeakable can be argued to translate to female sexuality.

The peculiar appositeness of the Gothic genre for women writers has been observed by numerous feminist critics, including Ellen Moers, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Juliann Fleenor, and Susan Wolstenholme. These and other critics have observed that "because the Gothic genre was distinguished by its free use of imagination, female novelists found it to be a particularly adaptable model for covertly exploring sexual politics" (Winter 12). Critics have studied female authors' use of the Gothic genre to articulate a woman's position as subjugated beneath patriarchal tyranny, their techniques of appropriation and reapplication of Gothic standard elements such as the gaze, as well as their use of the genre to work out a personal anxiety of influence (Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, 221-34; Wolstenholme 18-25). Christina was undoubtedly influenced

by Gothic literature; she read Maturin's novels as a young girl and wrote several early poems based on these works (Battiscombe 21, 41). The Gothic characteristics readily identifiable in many of Christina's poems allow the possibility, even within the ever-accompanying Christian framework, of unconventional or radical statements.

The secrets which are standard in a Gothic text can be reevaluated in the context of gender politics. These secrets resemble women insofar as they are themselves most often hidden under, buried beneath, secreted behind or otherwise concealed and confined in controlling edifices; occasionally they explicitly take female form in the shape of mysterious veiled women. These woman-secrets, which are closely linked to the term "unspeakable", can be seen as 'standing in the gap' for the articulation of female experience, or even female sexuality.<sup>6</sup> The Gothic model provides a subversive narrative strategy that manages a paradoxical form of articulation of the unspeakable, simply by speaking of it as something impossible to be spoken; that allows shocking topics or, for a female author, shocking self-expression, to be undertaken beneath the 'veil' of ostensible self-effacement (the story "was a hideous nightmare", or has the purpose of moral betterment of its readers, à la Radcliffe). The text in effect utters the unutterable, itself animates the monstrous; as Wolstenholme writes, "the woman writer share[s] an anomalous status with the Gothic text she produce[s]" (15). Wolstenholme takes the example of Anne Radcliffe to argue that women writers of Gothic texts are subverting an already subversive genre "by allowing a space for a woman-coded position" (16), that is, a textual space in which woman-spoken woman-experience could be considered.

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<sup>6</sup> Wolstenholme specifically links the unspeakable to the pre-linguistic bond with the mother. See, for example, 33.

In "The Convent Threshold", the element of the unspeakable translates to female sexuality, though reference to it is figuratively veiled: "You sinned with me a pleasant sin" -- and this female sexuality is then literally veiled in a nun's habit, and enclosed, made hidden and secret, in a convent. The unutterable, here as in other examples, marks the enormous difficulty of translating (female) experience or feeling into language -- made even more difficult for a woman writer given the severe restrictions of Victorian society. As Elaine Showalter writes, "while Victorian prudery prevented men as well as women from expressing themselves, it operated much more oppressively on women, because all experience that was uniquely feminine was considered unprintable" (343). The concentration of the Gothic genre on the unspeakable helps explain why female writers often chose this genre within which to frame their various novelistic or poetic attempts to escape imprisonment into articulation of unspeakable/unprintable female experience. The secrets to be uncovered in Gothic literature can be aligned with David Trotter's argument: "The purpose of the liminal phase in a rite of passage, for example, is clearly to suspend the schematism imposed on individuals by social structure... in so far as language and thought articulate that schematism, they also must be suspended" (37).

Sedgwick has demonstrated that the Gothic barrier can be recognised as being composed of the unspeakable,<sup>7</sup> but in her discussion of that which is unspeakable, she does not make the link between language and sexuality, the biggest unspoken, which therefore, returning though repressed, informed so much of Victorian literature. An unspeakable barrier disrupts the flow of language, suspending or evading the formal rules of structure. In addition to this, a barrier which

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<sup>7</sup> Sedgwick limits her definition of the unspeakable to the intrinsically horrific, having to do, for instance, with guilt or shame or enforced secrecy. See 14-18.

marks an absence paradoxically provides a presence; the recognisably prudish facade contains within itself the suggestion of forbidden sexual knowledge.

In Christina's poetry a form of an uttering of the unutterable is observable as uniting the figure of the barrier with the language of a passionate materiality and sensuality. The nature of the barrier separating the self from fulfilment/reintegration is frequently described in physical terms, whether clothed in the form of a metaphor like "the salt seashore" or the language of the elements. In "Goblin Market", that which effects separation between Lizzie and Laura<sup>8</sup> is fruit which is described in language rightly famous for its sensuality:

Apples and quinces,  
Lemons and oranges,  
Plump unpecked cherries,  
Melons and raspberries,  
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,  
Swart-headed mulberries,  
Wild free-born cranberries.... (ll.5-11)

Present in many such poems is what Sedgwick terms "a kind of despair about any direct use of language" (14). The poems reveal an awareness of what must not be spoken and what cannot be spoken; they also reveal a recognition of the inadequacy of language to truly describe the *between* states which can only be presented veiled in metaphor as door, wall and sea. Presentations of *between* states can be argued to express not a direct acknowledgment or discussion of sexuality, which for Victorian women was so circumscribed as to be nearly impossible, but a consideration of the space *between* what could be said and that which was unmentionable. That consideration often utilises the language of sensual materiality, as I have argued above, but the indeterminate territory of

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<sup>8</sup> Winston Weathers sees Laura and Lizzie as representative of the divided self.

unspeakable fears and desires is also rendered by the language of the elements, of physical conditions, as in "Martyrs' Song" (I 182-84):

Be it flood or blood the path that's trod,  
All the same it leads home to God:  
Be it furnace-fire voluminous.... (ll.3-5)

On occasion, the thresholds so often visible in Christina's poetry are more specifically linked to considerations of sexuality, as in "The Convent Threshold". In this supreme example of the intertwining of Christian and Gothic themes, a woman struggles to give up her earthly love (which has contaminated her so that her "lily feet are soiled with... scarlet mud"), and become a nun, but ultimately the choice is unmakeable because the solution it offers is nonsensical; it is seeking to remove the pain of a split self by forcibly identifying with just one portion of that split self, instead of seeking the fulfilling answer of healing the division. The poem expresses an unconscious awareness of the necessity of reconciliation in its inability to entirely take the decisive step and choose the one part; the poem exists eternally on the threshold that provides its title. Angela Leighton notes the "emotional paradox" of the work ("Because men..." 116), and quotes Christina's contemporary, Alice Meynell, who called "The Convent Threshold" "a song of penitence for love that yet praises love more fervently than would a chorus hymeneal".<sup>9</sup> Leighton sees the poet as straddling a line that enforces division between opposites, opposites which, however, appear indivisible from one another, just as 'transgressive' Gothic and 'correct' biblical intertexts conflict yet continuously interpenetrate in the poetry. This opposition/mutual dependency then throws emphasis onto the mysterious stress region, less a region than an unfixed boundary, that is the *between*.

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<sup>9</sup> Alice Meynell, "Christina Rossetti," *The New Review* NS, 12 (1895): 203. Cited in Leighton, "Because men...", 116.

In "The Convent Threshold" boundary lines are an integral part of the poem, and visible not only in the title.

...When this morning broke,  
My face was pinched, my hair was grey,  
And frozen blood was on the sill  
Where stifling in my struggle I lay. (ll.133-36)

To the childbirth images of blood, struggle and lying(-in) is added the element of ice, which raises the "sill" that marks the boundary-struggle to an elemental level. The boundary between dream and real is blurred, which is profoundly characteristic of the Gothic mode; with the premature aging of the speaker we are plunged into the land of fairy-tale.

The apparent inconsistency or "emotional paradox" of "The Convent Threshold", in which the final reconciliation-of-lovers-in-heaven seems to contradict the overt renunciation of earthly care message throughout the poem, is evidence for my contention that the real, even if unacknowledged, goal of the speaker is to achieve union. The struggle, the blood, the ice prefigure the longed-for end, which is union. In the state of union the two no longer straddle a boundary or threshold of endless tension, but "stand safe within the door" (l.143); the woman is no longer kept separate or hidden: "you shall lift the veil" (l.144). This reintegration can be read on two levels: the explicit level of the lovers ("There we shall meet as once we met / And love with old familiar love"; ll.147-48), but also a level that employs lovers' union as a metaphor for the integration of the individual, fragmented self. Leighton writes of "The Convent Threshold": "...the threshold of the convent seems to be a threshold of the self, marking a split of consciousness which echoes the moral divisions of the age. If the place of the Romantic imagination is that of a border-line between the known and the unknown, the border-line of the Victorian female imagination is



the same, but fraught with social and sexual anxieties" ("Because men..." 118-19).

Christina's religious poems are often similar to "The Convent Threshold" in that while they usually end in an orthodox self-reminder of her assurance of salvation, and of the ultimate goodness of God, very often these endings sit uneasily with the main context of the poems, whose primary focus has been on the problem, on the allurements of earthly existence, on the poet's feelings of doubt or unworthiness. Many critics have commented on the awkwardness of the 'tacked-on' endings, noting that the poems' prime focus is on the trial itself. The trial is that which separates the speaker from knowledge of the presence and benevolence of God. It may be doubt, fear, feelings of unworthiness; whatever its nature, it functions as a barrier to the self as Sedgwick has described: "[the self] is massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access" (12), which in a Christian sense can be seen to be Blessed Assurance.

I have already noted examples in Christina's poetry of the two characteristics of violence observed by Sedgwick: firstly, it characterises the *between* state of separation; secondly, it is a mark of passage, a necessary trial to be undergone before a state of individual separateness can be escaped, a rite to be undergone in order to cross from one realm (fragmentation), through the indeterminate and threatening *between* (the liminal state), aiming for the other side (wholeness). Sedgwick identifies the determining violence of the Gothic text as this second kind of violence, the act of breaking down the edifices of separation. I see in addition a third aspect of violence in Christina's poetry; it is associated with the actual attainment of the desired state of reintegrated oneness. However, because the poems' existence depends on the attainment of fulfilment not having taken place, many of the poems exist in a state of anticipatory tension, prefiguring a



violence yet to come. While the violence inherent in liminal states is sometimes directly experienced (as in "The Convent Threshold"), there are many examples in which violence is anticipated. "Advent" (II 212) asks the question of earth: "When will fire break up her screen? / When will life burst thro' her mould?" (ll.8-9). In "Sunday Before Advent" (II 247), the righteous "stand in the balance trembling", waiting for the cataclysmic moment of reunion when "Heaven flings wide its gates to great and small, / The end of all things is at hand" (ll.10-11). "For All" (II 279) dramatises a waiting state in which the righteous look towards its end: "Waiting till earth and ocean be rended, / Waiting for call of the trumpet blast..." (ll.8-9). Violence in these poems is attached to the actual event of reaching the territory on the other side, having crossed the *between*. The violence of passage often merely prefigures the violence of the act of union itself.

As has been observed earlier in this thesis, Christina's poetry never departs from the framework of Christian orthodoxy. She does however create unconventional, occasionally radical reformulations of Christian practice. The observable Gothicism of many of her poems does not contradict Christian belief; in fact, the symbols she uses almost always have recognisable biblical forerunners. The two intertexts interpenetrate to imbue the symbols with added significance to the issues of conflict which recur throughout Christina's poetry. Particular themes highlighted in this intertextual double-play are those of separation and reunion, and those issues are expanded to encompass violence and to express inexpressible sensuality, as well as forming a textual space in which female experience might be considered. In order to address such unorthodox topics Christina explores the *between* and the Gothic unspeakable (which again have theological antecedents, in the doctrine of Soul Sleep), and the problematic issue of translating the Divine into language. Problematic issues are not confined to Christina's religious poetry; crisis boundaries exist across the spectrum of

Christina's poetry. It appears incontrovertible that her poetry is indeed a poetry of concealment, that beneath its surface control, it contemplates and acts out conflict and crisis.

## CONCLUSION

For the latter part of this century, Christina Rossetti's poetry has been undervalued and largely ignored, save for a very few regularly anthologised pieces. Of the critical attention which has been paid Christina, a large percentage has described her as a "poet of loss" who sings simply and uniformly of renunciation. To a large extent, her poetry does not fit the criteria of modernist criticism, criteria such as complexity, irony, and moral ambiguity, and the very simplicity and serenity that made her very popular with Victorian audiences have left twentieth century readers largely dismissive. Now, however, feminist criticism has begun to recognise the currents of dissatisfaction and dissent "concealed" beneath the seemingly correct surfaces of women's writing, and in this thesis I have adopted this approach to examine "covert or clandestine" layers of meaning in Christina's poetry.

What is really covert or clandestine in Christina's poetry is the presentation of experience, individual and unconventional, which is never boldly endorsed with the feminist conviction of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, but neither is simply "shown". Personal perceptions of the nature and desires of the self are revealed and maintained as valid and valuable, despite their unconventionality. Even in the absence of protest or polemic, present in the poetry is a subtle but stubborn insistence on the presentation and eventually the acceptance of non-traditional models. My argument has uncovered in the poems a conception of self as fragmentary, neither single nor necessarily coherent, physically and spiritually desirous, and longing for union and reintegration of its many facets. This thesis examines how the poems develop and present unconventional models of self and self-expression not by displacing old models, but by placing conventional and unconventional alongside each other; in particular my second chapter examines the way in which highly personal statements are made in and through highly

correct and devoted religious poetry. This examination fits the growing trend in reading women writers that Hickok describes as acknowledging "both their need and their strategies for 'simultaneously conforming to and subverting' patriarchal literature and cultural standards" (Hickok 8).

This thesis, then, addresses the issue of unconventional and occasionally radical preoccupations and statements within the poetically and theologically correct parameters of Christina's work. Christina was, as Jerome McGann has written, "a morally committed artist" ("New Edition" 242), who expressed, particularly but not exclusively in her religious poetry, a strictly orthodox but nonetheless passionately sincere Christian morality. This overtly Christian moral agenda has been little to the public taste in recent decades, but in this thesis I have argued the value and relevance of poems which use a biblically-based structure to convey often unorthodox and startling statements about the nature of self. Obedience and self-abnegation are demanded of a Christian; I have shown that these prescribed modes of behaviour have been transformed in the poems to allow statements of self-determination, culminating in the predicted assumption of equal status with God, such as that envisioned in "I followed Thee, my God, I followed Thee" (II 241-43) or in "The Thread of Life" (II 122-23), which reads in part:

Therefore myself is that one only thing  
 I hold....  
 And this myself as king unto my King  
 I give, to Him Who gave Himself for me (3: ll.1-2, 9-10).

In my first chapter I examined the techniques by which the poems transform isolation into independence and demonstrate the inextricability of presence from absence, thereby establishing the possibility of a dialectical formulation in which contradictions may coexist and interpenetrate. In the poems I have examined,

the speakers maintain, indeed, insist upon, a personal sense of identity and strength in the model of a multi-faceted self.

In my second chapter I employed an intertextual reading to examine the religious-poetry, which uncovered within "opaque, univocal" poetic statements of faith a plurality of voices, a plurality that allows room for an unconventional conception of self as multiple while still maintaining simultaneous and co-existing conventions of form, scriptural support, and Christian paradigms. In order to fulfil a desire for self-expression in an appropriately self-effacing manner, Christina's speakers make their message the extension of explication of various biblical models (Peter, Christ himself), and teachings (be Christlike, give up your life). This technique demonstrates an obedience to scriptural prescriptions while imbuing the text with many voices, and thereby allowing the coexistence of several different positions. Self-abnegation is thus extended to include its opposite, self-will; the same effect is produced by the deployment of the metaphor of martyrdom, which can be seen to posit the possibility of simultaneously giving up and maintaining various selves. In Christina's poetry, self-abnegation is transformed from a limiting to an empowering technique.

The third chapter of this thesis has used both Gothic and Christian models as interpretative 'lenses' through which to focus on the violence that is always present in some form at the end of projected union. I have paid particular attention to images in the poetry of thresholds and crisis barriers -- walls, locked doors, bodies of water -- and endeavoured to show the significance of those barriers and violent separations as resisting the speaker's process of self-assertion, and therefore as symbolising the constriction/restriction of patriarchal role definitions. This discussion has been undertaken with some reference to feminist criticism, which allows the argument that the destruction of these barriers in the poetry acts as a metaphor for a textual process. The violent disruption of textual

and ideological form allows a textual space or gap in which, I have argued, the "unspeakable" of desire and female sexuality may be considered.

Dolores Rosenblum addresses the issue of fragmentation in Christina's poetry and claims that Christina Rossetti actually "achieves... integration and community" ("Watching, Looking" 49). I have argued, however, that the longed-for integration of the multiply faceted self is never fully achieved. Despite an exterior often smooth and serene, the poetry serves as a kind of motion-indicator, registering discontent and the dynamising urge towards the destruction of barriers to reintegration, which provides the incipient violence underlying so much of Christina's poetry. Thus Christina's poems undercut their surface placidity on two levels; not only do they conceal the desire for self-definition and self-expression, but they are in addition neither content nor static. Whether the goal is stated explicitly as reunion with God and loved ones in heaven, or implicitly as reintegration of the fragmentary self, or in natural terms as fruit to come after a time of suffering and barrenness, Christina's poetry is always in process, always forward looking, always contemplating disruptions and alternatives to the order within which she worked, but beyond which her vision soared.

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