SYMBOL AND REALITY IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S *GOBLIN MARKET*

By Lona Mosk Packer

I

IN COMMON WITH other such enduring works of art as *The Faery Queen*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* has many levels of meaning. At the narrative level it offers a charming and delicate fairy tale to delight a child—if a somewhat precocious one. At the symbolic and allegorical level, it conveys certain Christian ethical assumptions. At the psychological level, it suggests emotional experience universally valid.

Unlike Christina's other long autobiographical poems, notably *Convent Threshold*, *From House to Home*, and *Prince's Progress*, this poem, acknowledged her masterpiece, has no hero.[1] No fiery intellectual such as we find in *Convent Threshold*, no poet-lover similar to the one who first shares and then shatters the speaker's earthly paradise in *From House to Home*, no tardy and loitering Prince failing to make hymeneal progress graces this work. It can hardly be said to have a heroine, for the sisters, Laura and Lizzie, between them share the narrative interest. Golden-haired, ivory-skinned, "like two blossoms on one stem," they seem but different aspects of the same maiden. They may in fact be regarded as Christina Rossetti's version of sacred and profane love. For once in her poetry, she presents love in large, abstract, general terms. But although the individual contours are lacking, no poem of Christina's is more clearly based upon personal experience.

Despite the fact that William Michael Rossetti, Christina's brother and editor, remembered that he had often heard her say she did not mean anything profound by this fairy tale and it was not to be taken as a moral apologue, he himself admitted finding "the incidents . . . suggestive," and in his comments about the poem encouraged an interpretation at a deeper level than that of a fairy tale fantasy (*Works*, p. 459, n.). Although modern critics have been inclined to drop the whole matter of meaning and to regard the poem as a Pre-Raphaelite masterpiece which combines a realistic use of detail with the vague symbolism and religiosity of a *Blessed Damozel*, in interpreting the poem it would seem more fruitful to pay attention to William Rossetti's various hints and admissions, particularly since Christina herself, for reasons of her own, apparently wished to discourage explication. Indeed these very reasons are what give the poem its organizing principle.

Once *Goblin Market* is read as the complex, rich, and meaningful work it actually is, the prevalent critical view that the poem has the bright, clear, obvious pigmentation and the lightly woven surface texture of a Pre-Raphaelite painting will no longer be tenable. An analysis of the poem in the light of the emotional facts in Christina's life will reveal that the symbolism, vague and suggestive as it may appear, actually has the same underlying contact with reality that her other poems display. Ford Madox Ford once remarked that although love among the Pre-Raphaelites was a romantic and glamorous affair of generalizations, Christina alone regarded it concretely and individually.[2]

II

The story is simple. Two lovely sisters are tempted by the little goblin merchants who haunt the glens and woods and toward evening allure unwary maidens with fruit, rich, glowing, delicious to the taste. Lizzie resists; Laura succumbs to temptation. Once the victim has tasted the fruit, she is tormented by a wild craving for a second taste, but this the goblin merchants never grant. Fearing for Laura's life, Lizzie braves the seductions of the goblins, exposing herself to their tempting wares, so that she may secure the "fiery antidote" to save her sister's life. The antidote is the fruit itself. The goblins taunt, tease, maul, and torment Lizzie, but she stands firm amidst the turmoil. At length she triumphs, and with the rich juices smeared over her face, she runs home to let Laura kiss and suck them off her cheeks and chin. A second taste gratifies Laura's longing. She is saved, and the poem concludes with the well-known tribute to a sister.

Temptation, both in its human and its theological sense, is the thematic core of *Goblin Market*. Even more than in Christina's *Convent*

[1] References in my text to *Goblin Market* and other of Christina Rossetti's poems are from *The Poetical Works*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (London, 1904)—hereafter cited as *Works*. The parenthetical date "(B. 1882)" means 'before 1882,' William Rossetti's method of dating Christina's poems before her *Pageant* volume of 1881 was published.

[2] *Memories and Impressions* (New York, 1911), pp. 69 ff.

Threshold, which Alice Meynell described as "a song of penitence for love that yet praises love more fervently than would a chorus hymeneal," *Goblin Market* celebrates by condemning sensuous passion. Seldom in nineteenth-century poetry, even in the verse of Christina's brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti and of Swinburne, has the lure of the senses been so convincingly portrayed. Indirection is Christina's method, and its subtlety and delicacy can be appreciated only when *Goblin Market* is compared to poems as frankly and openly sensuous as Rossetti's *Eden Bower* and *Troy Town*, or Swinburne's *Dolores*. The symbolism in which Christina veils her own tribute to Eros is all the more persuasive in that it is rooted in both the legendry of pagan German romanticism and the morality of the Christian tradition.

To Mackenzie Bell, Christina's first biographer, William Rossetti admitted that the main subject of the poem was the problem of temptation. Despite Christina's denial of some "profound or ulterior meaning . . ." he said, "one can discern that it implies at any rate this much —that to succumb to a temptation makes one a victim to that same temptation . . ."[3]

The problem itself was one which throughout her literary life attracted Christina. In *Three Enemies*, a poem of 1851, she treated the subject according to the traditional conception of Christian orthodoxy, dramatizing her theme much as Herbert did in *The Quip*. The World, the Flesh, and the Devil are portrayed as the conventional three-pronged fork of temptation. Other poems exploring the same subject are *Two Pursuits* (1849), *The World* (1854), *Amor Mundi* (1865), and *Sister Louise de la Miséricorde* (B. 1882).

Frequent allusions to the problem crop up in her prose works as well as in her verse. In *Annus Domini* (London, 1874), p. 103, she acknowledges as major temptations the seduction of the flesh and the allurements of the world, but for the devil she substitutes angry rebellion, a form of temptation to which, as she admitted upon more than one occasion, she herself was peculiarly susceptible.[4] In *Time Flies* (London, 1885), p. 184, she portrays temptation figuratively as Satan's sieve. In theological language which nevertheless suggests an accepted insight of modern psychology, she writes: "For he can never . . . destroy us, unless we first make a covenant with death . . . Meanwhile he is doing us an actual service by bringing to the surface what already lurks within. However tormenting and humiliating declared leprosy may be, it is less desperate than suppressed leprosy." From these and other statements, it can be seen that Christina wrote about sensual temptation not as one academically interested in a theological question, but as one who had herself crossed Dante's flaming path of arrowy fire, the last barrier to *Paradiso*.

Temptation in *Goblin Market* is symbolized by the fruit, the great traditional symbol of sin and temptation in the Bible. Clearly the fruit sold by the goblin merchants, those "bloom-down-cheeked peaches," the "rare pears," and "bright fire-like barberries," the iced melons, and the sun-ripened citrons from the South, of which the taste brings decay and death, are the forbidden fruit of Scripture. They belong to the order of fruit which tempted Eve, and which in Revelation (xviii.14) appears as "the fruit that thy soul lusteth after." In Christina's poem Laura even asks Lizzie if she has tasted "For my sake the fruit forbidden?"

Fruit also appears as the symbolic inducement to sin in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. In this work, one of Christina's early favorites, the plucking of the forbidden fruit is dramatized and symbolized in the famous pear tree incident. As a young lad, Augustine with his comrades steals the ripe pears from the farmer's tree. For Augustine, this irresponsible act of a mischievous boy represents the first free choice of the evil will.

Although in *Goblin Market* the powerful lure of love is primarily represented by the traditional symbol of fruit, it is also symbolized by the goblin men of Teutonic fairy lore, the elves, dwarfs, and little men that B. Ifor Evans thought Christina found ready-made in Keightley's collection of fairy tales and in William Allingham's poem *The Fairies*.[5] But one hardly needs to go back either to Keightley or to Allingham for the little merchant men. In 1840, when Christina was ten years old, Dr. Adolf Heimann, a family friend, offered to teach the four Rossetti children German in exchange for Italian lessons from the elder Rossetti, at that time professor of Italian

[3] Mackenzie Bell, *Christina Rossetti: A Biographical and Critical Study* (London, 1898), p. 207.

[4] See *Symbols* (1849) and *An Old World Thicket* (B. 1882). To William Sharp Christina admitted that she was "the ill-tempered one in the family" (William Sharp, "Some Reminiscences of Christina Rossetti," *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXV [June 1895], 740). And to William Rossetti's wife Lucy she wrote in 1883, "It is such a triumph for ME to attain to philosophic calm, that, even if that subdued temper is applied by me without common sense, 'color che sanno' may still congratulate me on some sort of improvement! Ask William, who knew me in my early story days: he could a tale unfold—" (*Family Letters of Christina Rossetti*, ed. W. M. Rossetti, New York, 1908, p. 138—hereafter cited as *Family Letters*).

[5] "The Sources of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market,' " *MLR*, XXVIII, ii (April 1933), 157–158.

at King's College, London. With her brothers, Dante Gabriel and William, and her sister Maria, Christina studied German with Dr. Heimann for three years. Her first simple reading assignment in that language was *Sagen und Mährchen*, the popular collection of folk and fairy lore in which the customary Teutonic dwarf makes a frequent appearance.[6]

What distinguishes Christina's little men from the conventional figure of the dwarf is their partial resemblance to animals:

> One had a cat's face,
> One whisked a tail,
> One tramped at a rat's pace,
> One crawled like a snail,
> One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
> One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

In *From House to Home*, which Christina wrote only six months before *Goblin Market*, such small animals form part of the speaker's earthly paradise:

> My trees were full of songs and flowers and fruit;
> Their branches spread a city to the air
> And mice lodged in their root.
>
> My heath lay farther off, where lizards lived
> In strange metallic mail, just spied and gone;
> Like darted lightnings here and there perceived
> But nowhere dwelt upon.
>
> Frogs and fat toads were there to hop or plod
> And propagate in peace, an uncouth crew,
> Where velvet-headed rushes rustling nod
> And spill the morning dew.
>
> All caterpillars throve beneath my rule,
> With snails and slugs in corners out of sight;
> I never marred the curious sudden stool
> That perfects in a night.
>
> Safe in his excavated gallery
> The burrowing mole groped on from year to year;
> No harmless hedgehog curled because of me
> His prickly back for fear.

This innocent Eden strikes one as a child's rather than an adult's conception of the earthly paradise, and in fact probably originated in Christina's childhood memories of Holmer Green, her grandfather's country cottage in Buckinghamshire where until she was nine she was accustomed to spend her summers. Its grounds, she said, were her "familiar haunt" and "inexhaustible delight." To Edmund Gosse she confided once, "If any one thing schooled me in the direction of poetry, it was perhaps the delightful idle liberty to prowl all alone about my grandfather's cottage-grounds some thirty miles from London . . ."[7] To the end of her life she remembered and described the effect that Holmer Green had had upon her "youthful imagination."

As a child, then, she could have found the originals both of the fruit and the animal-faced goblins in her grandfather's cottage grounds. Undoubtedly she first saw in the orchards surrounding Holmer Green those "sun-red apples," nectarines, peaches, and ripe plums, which she initially idealized in an early poem (*The Dead City*, 1847), and later glorified in *Goblin Market*. From William's reminiscences of the common childhood shared by the four Rossettis as well as from Christina's own random recollections in *Time Flies*, we can be sure that she had ample opportunity to observe directly the frogs, toads, snails, mice, cats, rabbits, squirrels, and pigeons that invariably make up her earthly paradise.[8] Such animal images grafted upon the imaginary German dwarfs and elves of *Sagen und Mährchen* could have resulted in the poetic conception of the goblin merchants.

The question then arises, if she was so partial to these small animals dear to her childhood, why in *Goblin Market* did she portray them in such sinister guise, as the agents of evil and the vendors of temptation?

For the purposes of the poem itself, no contradiction exists. The joys of the earthly paradise must be renounced, if one is to achieve spiritual redemption. The lusciousness of the forbidden fruit and the charm of the little animal-faced goblins are but different aspects of nature, the core of which is sexual passion. "Nature worshipped under divers aspects," Christina wrote in *Letter and Spirit* (London, 1883), "exacts under each aspect her victims; or rather, man's consciousness of guilt invests her with a punitive

[6] *Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Family Letters with a Memoir*, ed. W. M. Rossetti (London, 1895), I, 87—hereafter cited as *DGRFL*.

[7] Gosse, *Critical Kitkats* (New York, 1896), p. 140.

[8] W. M. Rossetti, *Some Reminiscences* (New York, 1906), I, 5; *DGRFL*, I, 79; Christina Rossetti, *Time Flies* (London, 1885), pp. 45, 128, 137, et passim. The wombat was a much later addition to the earthly paradise. It was in 1858 that Christina and William discovered this exotic little creature at the Zoological Gardens, and in 1862 that Christina made the pencil drawing of it that William used to illustrate her *Family Letters* (opposite p. 45). "In or about 1858," William writes in *Some Reminiscences*, "we two were in the Zoological Gardens, and our steps led us towards a certain enclosure hitherto unknown to us, and little scrutinized by most visitors. Christina, who had as good an eye for a 'beast' as Dante Gabriel, caught sight of 'phascolomys ursinus' a second before myself, and exclaimed, 'O look at that delightful object!' " (I, 285–286). Shortly afterwards, Dante Gabriel was shown the delightful object which later occupied a conspicuous position in his celebrated Tudor House menagerie.

energy backed by a will to punish greater than he can bear" (p. 74).

But if she recognized and acknowledged the dangerous potentialities inherent in sexual love, she did not puritanically condemn it as such. At the conclusion of *Goblin Market* both sisters, Laura as well as Lizzie, are portrayed as happily married women with children of their own, to whom they relate the old tale. By such a traditionally "happy ending," Christina seems to be implying that neither the fruit nor the animals are in themselves harmful, although in the poem one is the object and the other the agent of temptation; it is only "man's consciousness of guilt"—that is, the Christian concept of guilt incurred through sin embedded in the evil will—which charges them with a dangerous and punitive malignity. In short, man is his own destroyer.

Christina was explicit on this point, that is, man's capacity for self-destruction, in *The Face of the Deep* (London, 1892). In this, the last of her devotional prose works, she wrote:

> There is a mystery of evil which I suppose no man during his tenure of mortal life will ever fathom. But there is a second mystery of evil . . . . I pursuing my my own evil from point to point find that it leads me not outward amid a host of foes laid against me, but inward within myself: it is not mine enemy that doeth me this dishonour, neither is it mine adversary that magnifieth himself against me: it is I, it is not another, not primarily any other; it is I who undo, defile, deface myself. True, I am summoned to wrestle on my own scale against principalities, powers, rulers of the darkness of this world, spiritual wickedness in high places; but none of these can crush me unless I simultaneously undermine my own citadel. . . . Nothing outside myself can destroy me by main force and in my own despite. (pp. 489–490)

How well this philosophy is illustrated in *Goblin Market* appears in Christina's conception of the two sisters. Both are equally tempted. One resists. The other succumbs. Laura is destroyed by her own weakness, not by goblin fruit. Even the taste of goblin fruit which the little men force upon Lizzie's lips does not corrupt her whose strength is formidable enough to put the goblins themselves to rout.

III

The poem opens with the sisters exposed at dusk to the cries of the goblins. Hearing them, Lizzie "veiled her blushes." The two sisters crouch close together "with tingling cheeks and finger tips." Obviously these girls understand the call; their antennae feel love in the air. So certain is it what the goblins mean that

> Lizzie covered up her eyes,
> Covered close lest they should look.

Laura, however, takes a covetous peep at the goblin men and their "evil gifts." In the *Purgatorio* of the *Commedia*, it may be recalled, Virgil advises Dante to keep guard "with the curb tight over the eyes" when coming to the great fire.

Ready and eager for love, Laura stretches out her gleaming neck, looks and listens. She attracts her own temptation. And then as the goblin merchants, sniffing a victim, turn and troop "backwards up the mossy glen," Laura assists in her own undoing. She does this primarily by means of her imagination. Elsewhere Christina said that "the seduction of imaginative emotion" was frequently an inducement to sin (*Letter and Spirit*, p. 101). And again: "How shall a heart preserve its purity if once the rein be given to imagination; if vivid pictures be conjured up, and stormy or melting emotions indulged?" (*Face of the Deep*, p. 339).

Perceiving that Laura, through the instrumentality of her imagination, is ready for love, one of the little men "began to weave a crown." In Christina's system of symbolism the crown and the feast represent love's fulfillment. "Only they had lost a crown," she wrote in describing the separation of lovers in the lyric *One Day*. And in *Three Stages* the invitation to love is rejected in the words

> I cannot crown my head
> With royal purple blossoms for the feast,

a combination of the two symbols. Poems in which the feast symbol similarly appears are *At Home*, *Shadow of Dorothea*, *From House to Home*, *A Peal of Bells*, *Friends*, *I Commend You*, *Laughing Life Cries at the Feast*, and others.

As might be expected, the feast symbol runs throughout *Goblin Market*. After Laura's fall, Lizzie is invited by the goblins to "sit down and feast with us," obviously an invitation to erotic pleasure. Later she is told by them that "our feast is but beginning." After Lizzie has risked her own peace of mind to bring Laura the antidote, its first effect is to make Laura "loathe the feast." Furthermore, the sensuous joys of love, for which Laura pays with the products of her own body, a curl and a tear, are described as a lustful feasting on the fruit:

> Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red.
> Sweeter than honey from the rock,
> Stronger than man-rejoicing wine,
> Clearer than water flowed that juice;
> She never tasted such before,

How should it cloy with length of use?
She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She sucked until her lips were sore;
Then flung the emptied rinds away.[9]

But satiety does not come with repletion. After the feasting, Laura complains to Lizzie that "I ate and ate my fill, / Yet my mouth waters still," a common lover's complaint.

Retribution follows swiftly as Laura begins to suffer and starve from the lack of the exhilarating food upon which she has fed so sweetly. "Like a leaping flame," she goes again with Lizzie to the goblin-haunted glen, alert for the sound of the "sugar-baited words." In lines which recall Christina's *Listening* of October 1854, Laura is shown "Listening ever, but not catching the customary cry."[10]

That there may be no doubt about what the symbolic fruit is intended to represent, Christina describes its effect upon another girl victim:

She thought of Jeannie in her grave,
Who should have been a bride;
But who for joys brides hope to have
Fell sick and died.

In this stanza, again the distinction we have already observed is drawn between the two sorts of love, that which is domestic and legitimate, and the other, which is outlawed.

Elsewhere in the poem love itself is stigmatized as the carrier of death. In a piece of 1847 Christina had already characterized love as "a poison-cup," and in a lyric of 1853 as

A poisoned fount to take from,
But oh how sweet the stream!

And so we are not surprised to find in *Goblin Market* the little merchant men's wares described similarly:

Their fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood.

Now we begin to understand why, for Laura, the fulfillment of love is followed by the passionate and rebellious anguish of love frustrated. Denied sight and sound of the goblins, perishing for another taste of their deadly fruit, Laura pines and sickens. Like the heroines of *From House to Home* and *Convent Threshold*, who likewise suffer from the deprivation of love, Laura

Then sat up in a passionate yearning,
And gnashed her teeth for baulked desire, and wept
As if her heart would break.

In *From House to Home* (19 Nov. 1858) "baulked desire" is also the cause of weeping and the gnashing of teeth:

O love, I knew that I should meet my love,
Should find my love no more.

'My love no more,' I muttered, stunned with pain:
I shed no tear, I wrung no passionate hand,
Till something whispered: 'You shall meet again,
Meet in a distant land.'

Then with a cry like famine I arose,
I lit my candle, searched from room to room,
Searched up and down; a war of winds that froze
Swept through the blank of gloom.

I searched day after day, night after night;
Scant change there came to me of night or day:
'No more,' I wailed, 'No more:' and trimmed my light,
And gnashed, but did not pray.

And in *Convent Threshold* (9 July 1858) the novice who has sent away her lover spends the kind of wakeful, feverish nights familar to Laura:

For all night long I dreamed of you:
I woke and prayed against my will,
Then slept to dream of you again,
At length I rose and knelt and prayed.
I cannot write the words I said,
My words were slow, my tears were few;
But through the dark my silence spoke
Like thunder. 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.

IV

"No woman," observed C. M. Bowra in discussing another poem of Christina's, "could write with this terrible directness if she did not to some degree know the experience which she describes."[11] Indeed, it is difficult to believe that an emotive effect so powerful as that evoked in these poems could be the result of the imaginative fantasy of an untried woman who has put together her ideas about love from observation and books.

And yet a Christina Rossetti experienced in the passion of love, and understanding the bereaved torment of one who has been deprived of love, is totally unlike the conventional portrait which has

[9] Cf. *At Home* (*Works*, p. 339). In this lyric Christina similarly used the feast symbolism to express sensuous joy:

Feasting beneath green orange boughs;
From hand to hand they pushed the wine,
They sucked the pulp of plum and peach . . .

[10] Cf.:

She listened like a cushat dove
That listens to its mate alone:
She listened like a cushat dove
That loves but only one.

[11] *The Romantic Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), p. 263. The poem referred to is *Twice*.

come down to us. This legendary figure of the saintly recluse is the subject of Ellen A. Proctor's *A Brief Memoir of Christina Rossetti* (London, 1895). Miss Proctor's Christina "never realised evil." Living a sheltered and retired life like that of a nun, commented Miss Proctor, Christina was guarded carefully from all contact with evil.

Christina herself granted that "some innocent souls there are who from cradle to grave remain as it were veiled and cloistered from knowledge of evil," but clearly she did not consider herself one of their number. Like Milton in the *Areopagitica* she could not praise such a fugitive and cloistered virtue: "For most persons contact with evil and consequently knowledge of evil being unavoidable . . . they must achieve a more difficult sanctity, touching pitch yet continuing clean, enduring evil communications yet without corruption . . ." (*The Face of the Deep*, p. 399). How difficult she knew this to be is evident from another statement in the same work: "Evil knowledge acquired in one wilful moment of curiosity may harass and haunt us to the end of our time" (p. 19). One recognizes here an apt description of Laura's predicament.

It is Lizzie who must achieve the "more difficult sanctity," who must gain a knowledge of evil and still remain pure. And so she must sally out to seek her adversary on that field "which is not without dust and heat." Fearing for Laura's life, she goes back to the glen at dusk in order to obtain the "fiery antidote." She dares the elfin men; she seduces the seducers. But she finds out what her creator undoubtedly knew from actual experience, that nature balked and frustrated takes a terrible revenge. The goblins scratch and grunt and snarl at Lizzie. They lash her with their tails, they claw and hustle her, they

> Twitched out her hair by the roots,
> Stamped upon her tender feet,
> Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
> Against her mouth to make her eat.

But Lizzie, by now no longer a youngling in the contemplation of evil, wears out the little evil people by her resistance. Disregarding her aches and bruises, the love-juices smeared triumphantly over her face, lodging in her dimples and streaking her neck, Lizzie runs home rejoicing to give the antidote to Laura:

> Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices
> Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,
> Goblin pulp and goblin dew.
> Eat me, drink me, love me.

she cries exultantly.

When Laura tastes again love's juices, this time vicariously from the face of Lizzie, her human redeemer, she reacts violently to the antidote:

> Her lips began to scorch,
> That juice was wormwood to her tongue.

Like the woman in the dream vision of *From House to Home* who, deprived of love, was likewise forced to drain the bitter and loathsome cup, Laura "gorges on bitterness without a name."

A passage from *The Face of the Deep* throws additional light upon Laura's condition: "the knowledge of foulness welcomed, entertained, gloated over, breeds in us foulness like itself; it acts like blood poison which, infused from without, turns the man himself, or the woman herself, to a death-struck mass of corruption" (pp. 97–98). The reference to blood poison provides the clue. If we recall that Christina had already compared the effect of the honey-tasting goblin fruit to "poison in the blood," and that elsewhere she used the figures of the poisoned fount and the poison-cup to describe love, we will have no difficulty in identifying the corrupting and death-bringing "foulness." The source of Laura's malady now becomes increasingly comprehensible.

Laura's extreme torment of repentance brought on by the antidote which, paradoxically, is no more than love itself, at last reaches the pitch of the unendurable and results in her loss of consciousness, the swoon of the speaker in *From House to Home*. Lizzie, a human angel, watches by Laura's bedside during her perilous crisis of soul, just as superhuman agents watch by the swooner of *From House to Home*.

At this point one of Christina Rossetti's leading concepts begins to emerge: the paradox of love as both destroyer and redeemer. Nowhere is this concept dramatized with more striking originality and imaginative power than in *Goblin Market;* but what distinguishes this long narrative poem from the many short lyrics expressing the same idea is that here human rather than divine love is the agent of redemption. Despite its bizarre features, Lizzie's is nonetheless a sacrifice. Her love brings Laura back from spiritual death; and in her traffic with the goblins she hazards the kind of human suffering that results from an insatiable craving of the unsatisfied appetite, Laura's own affliction.

The conception of love as both destructive and redemptive is not an original one, nor was it original with Christina. But like Dante, from

whom she probably derived it, she uses fire symbolism to reinforce it. In the *Commedia* fire imagery expresses both carnal and divine love. When Dante and Virgil arrive at the seventh circle of Purgatory, they see those spirits who, having indulged their lusts on earth, must thereafter plunge into and burn in the great fire. But the higher Dante mounts in paradise, the more clearly he perceives that divine love is also fire. In *Goblin Market* fire symbolism performs the same function, that of emphasizing through imagery the concept of the paradoxical nature of love. As we have seen, Laura is "most like a leaping flame" in her wild longing for love. And when it is denied her,

> She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
> To swift decay and burn
> Her fire away.

And Lizzie, white and golden, standing firmly in the midst of the goblins' cruel attack, is figuratively

> Like a beacon left alone
> In a hoary roaring sea
> Sending up a golden fire.

V

It would be a mistake to identify Christina herself with either Laura or Lizzie. And yet one senses that she uses both her heroines to express her own attitude toward the moral question she raises in the poem. If at times the reader is inclined to read into Lizzie Christina's own integrity and firmness of character, he should remember that Lizzie has been identified with Maria Rossetti, Christina's older sister. She even dedicated the poem to her sister M. F. R., and she concluded it with the significant tribute,

> 'For there is no friend like a sister
> In calm or stormy weather;
> To cheer one on the tedious way,
> To fetch one if one goes astray,
> To lift one if one totters down,
> To strengthen whilst one stands.'

William did not doubt that Christina had some good reason for her dedication, "but what it was I know not." Yet when Mackenzie Bell questioned him closely on this point, William was more explicit: "I don't remember that there was at that time any personal circumstances of a marked kind," he said, "but I certainly think (with you) that the lines at the close, 'There is nothing like a sister,' etc., indicate *something:* apparently C. considered herself to be chargeable with some sort of spiritual backsliding, against which Maria's influence had been exerted beneficially." As usual when writing of his family, William hints and suggests that he knows more than he is revealing.[12]

Violet Hunt, a writer who professed to know a great deal about the personal affairs of the Rossettis, wrote in her *Wife of Rossetti* (London, 1932) that there was a "well-kept secret" in Christina's life, and that this secret, which Miss Hunt asserted Christina could not stay away from in her verse, was one that concerned the poet's emotional life:

> Maria did not, like Lizzie to save Laura, hold converse and traffic with goblin men on the hillside and eat their delicious deadly fruits. But for a week of nights the kind, sonsy creature crouched on the mat by the house door and saved her sister from the horrors of an elopement with a man who belonged to another. (p. xiii)

This man Miss Hunt identified as James Collinson, the Pre-Raphaelite painter to whom Christina became engaged when she was eighteen and whom she refused to marry two years later. "For Collinson, when she threw him over . . ." continued Miss Hunt, "consoled himself"; but apparently inadequately, for according to this writer, some nine years later he returned, a married man, to ask Christina to elope with him. Despite the fact that this absurd story has gained credence with some writers, one need not consider it seriously, so wildly does it veer away from probability.[13]

And yet I believe that Miss Hunt had a clue to the central situation, mistaken as she was about the circumstantial details. Elsewhere I have set forth my view that Christina was at no time in love with Collinson; and that was why

[12] Bell, p. 231. In William's preface to his edition of Gabriel's family letters, he commented upon the fact that he was accused of concealing relevant information about his brother. His answer to this charge is significant in indicating the position he took, not only as Gabriel's but also as Christina's editor and biographer. He said, " . . . I have told what I choose to tell and left untold what I do not choose to tell: if you want more, be pleased to consult some other informant" (I, xli). In his preface to his own *Some Reminiscences*, he likewise admitted frankly that "it does not follow that I know nothing beyond which I write. In some cases I do know a good deal more; but to cast a slur here or violate a confidence there would make me contemptible to myself" (I, xi). Janet Troxell in *Three Rossettis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1937) produced what she considered incontrovertible "evidence that William was suppressing something about Christina" (p. 202).

[13] Marya Zaturenska (*Christina Rossetti*, New York, 1949, pp. 59–60) and Margaret Sawtell (*Christina Rossetti*, London, 1955, pp. 54–55) are the writers in question. For a refutation of Violet Hunt's allegation see Helen Rossetti Angeli, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London, 1949), pp. 6, n., and 272.

in 1850 she broke her engagement to him.[14] I have also produced evidence to the effect that in 1859, when she wrote *Goblin Market*, she could not have been enamored of Charles Bagot Cayley, the second man she is supposed to have loved. Cayley was the scholarly recluse who began to court her between 1862 and 1864, who proposed in September 1866, but whom she refused to marry, conceivably for the same reason she had rejected Collinson some sixteen years earlier.

But I have suggested above that Christina was not inexperienced in the passion of love. Assuming, then, that her love poetry was not written in an emotional vacuum, as the frenzied and erotic fantasies of a love-starved spinster, but that it was rooted in emotional reality directly experienced, the conclusion emerges that she loved someone other than Collinson or Cayley.

I have identified this man as William Bell Scott, painter and poet, intimate friend of Christina's brothers, a man, said William Rossetti, whom she "viewed with great predilection" ("Memoir," *Works*, p. lviii). She met Scott in 1847, when she was seventeen, presumably loved him all her life, and addressed a poem to him in 1882 when she was in her fifties. That Scott was married gives some support to Miss Hunt's theory; but that he ever asked Christina to elope with him is extremely unlikely.

At this point we might return to William's statement to Mackenzie Bell which raises the question: Were there actually any "personal circumstances of a marked kind" in 1858–59 that might have inspired or at least influenced the genesis of *Goblin Market?* If so, what were they? And what part did Maria Rossetti play in what William has called Christina's "hushed life-drama"?

In order to answer these questions, at least in part, we will first need to learn a little about Scott, his personality and his emotional commitments; and second, to understand Christina's relationship with him prior to the writing of *Goblin Market*.

VI

Not only was Scott married, although he is said never to have consummated his marriage with Letitia Norquoy, but he was also in the habit of forming intimate friendships with women. Two of these relationships were known to Scott's contemporaries and acknowledged by him in his autobiography.[15] Both are important for their effect upon Christina's life and poetry.

The first, Scott's friendship with Lady Pauline Trevelyan of Wallington Hall, the friend of Ruskin and Swinburne, began in the autumn of 1854 and continued until her death in 1866. About 1857, however, Scott appears to have cooled off somewhat, and from then on we hear less of Lady Trevelyan in his autobiography. The second woman in Scott's life was Alice Boyd of Penkill Castle, Ayrshire, Scotland, whom he met in 1859 and with whom he formed a permanent alliance similar to the union of Mary Ann Evans and George Henry Lewes.[16]

Scott's interest in Christina apparently reached its peak in June 1858, just after his friendship with Lady Trevelyan had become less ardent. At their first meeting in the winter of 1847–48, Christina and Scott made a memorable impression upon one another. Scott's description of Christina as a young girl has been frequently quoted. Calling upon Dante Gabriel who was not at home, Scott introduced himself to the elder Rossetti and Christina, who was standing by the window in front of a high narrow reading-desk, writing poetry. She was "a slight girl with a serious regular profile, dark against the pallid wintry light without." For Scott she was by far "the most interesting of the two inmates." He particularly admired the "formal and graceful curtsey" she made upon his entrance (*Notes*, I, 247–248).

Scott evidently produced an equally favorable effect upon her. Both William Rossetti and Holman Hunt agree Scott was a handsome and interesting-looking man. William reports that upon first meeting him the Rossettis, "female as well as male took very warmly indeed to Mr. Scott," and found him "not only attractive, but even fascinating." For the phrase, "female as well as male," William's daughter, Helen Rossetti Angeli, substitutes the less discreet phrase, "From Gabriele the elder to Christina." All reports agree that Christina was the only female Rossetti present at Scott's introduction to the family.[17] She, then, and not her mother or older

[14] See my unpub. diss. (Univ. of Calif., L. A., 1957), "Beauty for Ashes: A Biographical Study of Christina Rossetti's Poetry." Unless otherwise stated, the following material in my text is derived from this source.

[15] *Autobiographical Notes*, ed. W. Minto, 2 vols. (London, 1892)—hereafter cited as *Notes*. My information about Scott is drawn from this work.

[16] In Scott's youth he and Lewes were intimate friends (*Notes*, I, 129–134).

[17] *DGRFL*, I, 114–115; *Some Remin.*, I, 131; Holman W. Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* (London, 1905), I, 230; Helen Rossetti Angeli, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti*, p. 151. Ford Madox Brown once remarked that women in general and his own wife in particular were "enchanted" by Scott (W. M. Rossetti, *Ruskin: Rossetti: Preraphaelitism*, London, 1900, p. 39).

sister, found Scott attractive and fascinating.

One cannot say how soon this initial attraction developed into a more intimate friendship. Probably it remained dormant during Christina's engagement to Collinson in 1848–50, started up again in 1851, reached a preliminary crisis of feeling in the summer of 1854 (when Christina wrote *Dream-Love* and *Three Stages*), and declined in intensity upon Scott's meeting with Lady Trevelyan in November 1854.

But by 1857 Scott was seeing much less of Pauline Trevelyan, and apparently in the autumn of that year his interest in Christina revived, a supposition suggested by her lyric, *Birthday*, of 18 November 1857. In this familiar anthology piece, which even William regards as emotional autobiography, she celebrates with "exuberant joy" the advent of love as the dawn of a new life:

> Because the birthday of my life
> Is come, my love is come to me.

The date of the lyric precludes the possibility of associating it with either Collinson or Cayley. The former lay buried some seven years back in the past, and the latter was not to show an interest in Christina for some five years in the future. But Scott appears prominently in the chronicle of Christina's life during this mid-period between wooers.

It was in June 1858, some seven months after the writing of *Birthday*, that Christina visited Scott and his wife at Newcastle-on-Tyne, where he held the position of Head Master at the Government School of Design. She left his home on 15 June. On the train speeding her away from Newcastle and Scott, she wrote the poem *Parting After Parting*, entitled "Good-bye" in manuscript. Although to part, she wrote, brought "Sore loss and gnawing pain," to meet was

> worth living for;
> Worth dying for, to meet;
> To meet, worth parting for,
> Bitter forgot in sweet:
> To meet, worth parting before,
> Never to part more.

To this lyric Christina joined a second written 11 June 1864, the year Scott moved permanently from Newcastle to London (*Notes*, II, 70). She called it *Meeting*.[18]

Shortly after Christina left him in June 1858, Scott went to Oxford (*Notes*, II, 41, n.). No record exists of his presence in London at this time, but it is not improbable that he went there before or after his stay at Oxford. It was his custom to visit London during the summer. Perhaps, like Christina, he too was unable to bear the "sore loss and gnawing pain" of separation, and followed her to London, hoping to renew the happy association they had enjoyed during her visit to Newcastle. If so, he was doomed to disappointment. For by 9 July, the date of *Convent Threshold*, presumably she had reached the decision to send him away, a decision she was to implement and to regret all the days of her life.

It did not take Scott long to find consolation elsewhere. Ten months after Christina's stay at his home, he "had a visit from a lady some few years over thirty," whose name he had not heard before. "She wanted to find a new interest in life," he wrote, "and thought to find it in art. She was somehow or other possessed, to me, of the most interesting face and voice I had ever heard or seen. I devoted myself to answering this desire of hers," he continued naïvely, "and from day to day the interest on either side increased" (*Notes*, II, 56–57).

Alice Boyd, the lady in question, proved to be a formidable rival. Descendant of an ancient and aristocratic Scottish family, she was, according to Dante Gabriel, "a rarely precious woman," and according to Christina herself, "the prettiest handsome woman I ever met."[19] Himself an egoist, Scott particularly prized Alice's unselfishness and nobility of character. Eager to please, he wrote, she "enjoyed others' happiness and others' ideas exactly as if they were her own" (*Notes*, II, 293). Moreover, she did not have a jealous disposition.

From what we know of him, we cannot doubt that Scott gave her cause for jealousy. "Common prudence," he protested, "is always howling against turning from one study to another, from one love to another, from one form of art to another" (*Notes* II, 220). In putting his theory into practice, not only did Scott turn from one study to another, and from one form of art, poetry, to another, painting, but he also turned with ease from one love to another, sometimes maintaining relations with two or more women simultaneously. "It may be," he wrote, "that few can do this without losing their way, coming to grief; it requires tact to hold half a dozen lines without allowing them to tangle, or to ride six horses as they do in the circus."

His own skill at this kind of management was masterly. He introduced the women in his life to

[18] My information about this poem (*Works*, p. 200) is derived from William's enlightening comment about it in his notes (*Works*, p. 473, n.).

[19] *DGRFL*, I, 266; *Anna Gilchrist*, ed. Herbert H. Gilchrist (London, 1887), p. 161.

each other, and sometimes they became warm friends. Several times Scott lived harmoniously in Penkill Castle with Mrs. Scott, Alice Boyd, and Christina.[20] He conducted his emotional affairs with a bold and truly regal disregard of conventional attitudes and mores.

VII

How soon Christina found out about what Scott discreetly called his "friendship at first sight" is uncertain. We know that he first met Alice Boyd on 18 March 1859, and that Christina finished *Goblin Market* on 27 April of that year. Allowing some time for Scott's new attachment to have become known to her, and additional time for her to have reacted to it, to have assimilated and absorbed the unwelcome experience emotionally before expressing it artistically, we may conclude that forty days would not be too long a lapse of time between the two events. Dante Gabriel and William must have found out about Scott's new friend almost immediately, for Scott lived on terms of fraternal intimacy with the Rossetti brothers, and he was a man more inclined to boast of his love affairs than to keep them a secret. If he told Gabriel and William about Alice within the fortnight, the Rossetti sisters could have learned about her shortly thereafter. Possibly Maria was the first to be informed, and it might have been through her agency that Christina was told. At any rate, not much longer than a month intervened between what may be called "a personal circumstance of a marked kind," and the writing of *Goblin Market*.[21]

Unlike the two major poems preceding *Goblin Market* (they are *Convent Threshold* of July and *From House to Home* of November) in which the central idea is the renunciation of love, *Goblin Market*, we have noted, has as its theme not renunciation but temptation. Laura, far from the thought of renouncing love, tastes the poisoned honey, longs for a second taste and is denied it. Hence, one might conclude that it is one thing to renounce love voluntarily, but quite another thing to be arbitrarily deprived of it.

That Scott could have "turned from one love to another" with such apparent ease must have been a serious shock to Christina. His behavior would have shown her the unstable nature of his earlier attachment to her, would have revealed the depth of the abyss into which she had almost plunged, the peril of the temptation from which, like Laura, she had been saved.

Was it Maria who had saved her? If so, when? And in what manner? Although these questions cannot be conclusively answered, we ought to take William's word for it that Christina's tribute to her sister at the conclusion of *Goblin Market* "indicated *something*." Perhaps, as I have already suggested, it was Maria who informed Christina about Scott's new love. If so, the strait-laced Maria would not have been the one to have omitted pointing out the moral lesson to be derived. She may even have been responsible for breaking up Christina's friendship with Scott after the Newcastle visit. Possibly in June of 1858, after Christina's return from Scott's home, Maria might have wrestled with her to prevent that "spiritual backsliding" Christina might have both desired and feared.[22]

[20] In the summers of 1866 and 1869, although Mrs. Scott may not have been present upon the latter occasion (*The Rossetti Papers*, ed. W. M. Rossetti, New York, 1903, pp. 203, 396; *Gilchrist*, pp. 160–161, 175; *Three Rossettis*, pp. 155–156; *DGRFL*, II, 201; *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Letters to Miss Alice Boyd*, ed. John Purves, *Fortnightly Rev.*, CXXIX [May 1928], 583).

[21] We cannot suppose that the actual writing of *Goblin Market* was a lengthy process, for upon more than one occasion William has assured us that his sister's "habits of composition were eminently of the spontaneous kind," that she seldom meditated or deliberated before writing a poem, but on the contrary, after "something impelled her feeling or 'came into her head', " she wrote rapidly, easily, and without hesitation, almost as though "her hand obeyed dictation" (*Works*, pp. lxviii–lxix; *New Poems*, ed. W. M. Rossetti, London, 1896, pp. xii–xiii). And of all her long poems, *Goblin Market* strikes the reader as the one the most likely to have been produced in the mood of direct inspiration. I take it that she wrote the poem out as a whole first, and later made whatever revisions and alterations she deemed necessary. It would not have been impossible for a poet with her working habits to have turned out the approximately 550 lines within a week or so.

[22] Much has been written about Maria's harmful influence over Christina. Posterity's conception of Maria as a narrow-minded, gloomy fanatic partially originated in Christina's own portrait of her sister in *Time Flies*. Maria, she wrote, "shrank from entering the Mummy Room at the British Museum under a vivid realisation of how the general resurrection might occur even as one stood among those solemn corpses turned into a sight for sightseers" (p. 128). This vivid portrait was reinforced by Sir Edmund Gosse's view that "the influence of Maria Francesca on her sister seemed to be like that of Newton upon Cowper, a species of police surveillance exercised by a hard, convinced mind over a softer and more fanciful one" (*Critical Kitkats*, p. 160). R. D. Waller was the first critic to detect and to expose the fallacy of such a conception of Maria. He emphasized the love existing between the two sisters and quoted Gabriel's opinion that Maria was "the healthiest in mind and cheeriest of us all, with William coming next, and Christina and I nowhere" (*The Rossetti Family, 1824–54*, Univ. Manchester, No. CCXVII, Eng. Ser. No. 21 [Manchester, 1932], pp. 179–180). This observation is borne out by the fact that in the depths of her last fatal illness in 1876 Maria could still write a bright little letter to Christina playfully calling her "the crowned Queen of Dears" (*Family Letters*, p. 56). On her deathbed Maria unsentimentally scoffed at what she called the "hood and hatband" style of mourning (*Time Flies*, p. 213). Cheerful

That Maria's intervention was probably of an active and positive nature is suggested not only by *Goblin Market* but by two poems written the following year which have as their theme the interference of one sister in the love affair of another. But instead of regarding the interfering sister as a human redeemer, the saved sister in the two ballads of 1860, *Sister Maude* and *The Noble Sisters*, resents the other's busybody meddling. In fact, the tone of *Sister Maude* is noticeably vindictive:

> Who told my mother of my shame,
> Who told my father of my dear?
> O who but Maude, my sister Maude,
> Who lurked to spy and peer.

The Noble Sisters is almost a travesty upon the *Goblin Market* situation. One sister sends away all the messengers of her sister's lover, the falcon, the ruddy hound, the pretty page. Finally she turns the lover himself from the door, thereby bringing down upon herself the angry denunciation of the saved one:

> 'Fie, sister, fie, a wicked lie,
> A lie, a wicked lie!
> I have none other love but him,
> Nor will have till I die.
> And you have turned him from our door,
> And stabbed him with a lie:
> I will go seek him thro' the world
> In sorrow till I die.'

These two poems together with several others were originally included in Christina's 1862 *Goblin Market* volume, but were omitted from subsequent editions. According to William, at a later date she considered the "moral tone" of all four pieces open to reproach, and hence excluded them. But even by Victorian standards this judgment is hardly applicable to the two sister poems we have been examining. Could Christina have had a different reason for not wishing them to appear in the *Goblin Market* collection? Could she have feared that they might be construed as showing an attitude of resentment, even temporary resentment, against a sister she loved dearly and had long ago forgiven for any well-meant meddling?

If we read *Goblin Market* in the context of the other poems of the period, both those preceding and those following it, we are obliged to conclude that *Goblin Market* is not the artistic mutation in the body of Christina's work that critics have occasionally implied, but that it has both chronological significance and emotional relevance in the order of her creative productions. We may additionally conclude that the emotional intensity the poem achieves is not altogether a feat of imaginative virtuosity, but is the result of deeply felt experience directly known and poetically assimilated. It is solidly rooted in the reality of Christina's own knowledge of the passions.

Skilled in what Henry James has called "the art of covering one's tracks," Christina strove to conceal rather than to reveal her intention through the use of symbolism. William Rossetti has told us that hers "was a life which did not consist of incidents: in few things external; in all its deeper currents, internal." It is only by attempting to sound these subterranean currents that we are able to gauge the depth, pressure, and density of meaning in *Goblin Market*. In referring to a different poem, Christina said that it gave "a subtle hint by symbol" of its meaning. Not, she added, that she "expected the general public to catch these refined clues; but there they are for minds such as mine" (*Rossetti Papers*, p. 81).[23]

LEWIS AND CLARK COLLEGE
Portland 1, Ore.

---

and loving though she may have been, Maria, who joined an Anglican sisterhood in 1874, was undoubtedly strait-laced and Puritanical in her attitude toward sex, and would have considered it her unquestioned duty to rescue Christina from an affair with Scott.

[23] The reference is to Christina's *Prince's Progress* of 1865.