Recasting women's stories : in the poetry of Felicia Hemans, Letitia Landon, and Christina Rossetti

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CHAPTER 7

Resisting the Doctrine of Renunciation in the Vanity Poems

Tractarian Teachings on Vanity

Rossetti's poems written on the theme of "vanity of vanities" concern the idea that worldly matters are empty and worthless. One source of influence for Rossetti to take up this theme is Tractarian teachings, especially E. B. Pusey's:[1] humans are inherently sinful, and tend to commit sinful acts. They therefore need to keep repenting of their sins on a daily basis. To show their repentance, they should stop loving the world and turn their thoughts single-mindedly toward heaven. Even if people have to suffer in this process, they should endure it, since suffering is divine providence to purify human sins.[2]

Rossetti encountered Tractarian doctrines when she was a teenager. In the early 1840s she accompanied her mother, Frances, and her elder sister, Maria, to Christ Church in Albany Street, London. This church was at that time one of the centers for the Oxford Movement (Tractarianism), which valued ecclesiastical authorities, ritualism, and Catholic-style worship. William Dodsworth (1798-1861), perpetual curate of the church, was a fervent follower of E. B. Pusey (1800-1882), one of the Tractarian leaders (Waller, 465-66). According to

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[1] Antony H. Harrison points out that Rossetti may have been drawn to this theme under the influence of Augustine's *Confessions* and the works of Dante Alighieri. The central concern of these works is "vanitas mundi", sometimes considered to be the "essential issue in Christianity". See Antony H. Harrison, *Christina Rossetti in Context* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1988), 125.

[2] For teachings of the Oxford Movement, see Owen Chadwick, ed. *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1967), a selection of Tractarian writings with an introduction. G. B. Tennyson's *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1981) is mainly focused on the theology and poetry of John Keble (1792-1866) and Isaac Williams (1802-1865).

Sara Coleridge (1802-1852), a noted parishioner of Christ Church, Pusey repeatedly preached the "worthlessness of earth" in contrast to the "blessedness of heaven", and the "wickedness of sin".[3] Pusey and his followers' teachings about human sin, renunciation and suffering were aimed particularly at women.

Pusey made it his mission to restore religious orders in the Anglican Church, and played a major role in reviving conventual life for women. With Dodsworth and other members of Christ Church, he established the first Anglican sisterhood, the Park Village Sisterhood, in 1845. This had a big impact on many young worshippers, and we may assume that the young Rossetti was no exception.[4] In Tractarian thinking, there was only a fine line between celebrating women's sanctity and glorifying women's suffering. This is indicated by the Tractarian celebration of virgin martyrs (such as St. Lucy and St. Agnes), who endured cruel executions and died as a sacrifice. Tractarians admired them for their rejection of worldly temptations, and revered them as spiritual models for British women (Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, 57-58). Listening regularly to the sermons of Tractarian preachers, Rossetti was undoubtedly exposed to the idea that women should renounce love of worldly matters, no matter how painful it might be for them to do so.[5]

This Tractarian influence is seen in a number of Rossetti's poems. She often refers to a passage in Ecclesiastes, "vanity of vanities, all is vanity", much favored by Pusey in his sermons. This does not mean, however, that she supports Pusey's advice for women to renounce earthly pleasures. Rather, she raises an implicit objection to it. Rossetti's vanity poems ultimately recognize the value of the world and suggest that the doctrine of renunciation can ruin women's

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[3] Sara Coleridge, *Memoirs and Letters of Sara Coleridge* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1874), 232, quoted in Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, 57.

[4] According to Jan Marsh, the first three members of the Sisterhood made their first appearance at Christ Church on Easter Sunday of that year: "one can imagine the thrill and awe this caused among fellow worshippers, including … Rossetti sisters" (Marsh, *Christina Rossetti*, 58).

[5] Lynda Palazzo sees Pusey as holding traditional negative views of women: "He focuses time and again on the role of Eve in the fall and her consequent legacy of corruption ... [and] echoes the teaching of the early Church Fathers, renewing their distorted claims of the innate sinfulness of womankind" (Palazzo 2002, xiii). This may have led Pusey to advise women to repent of their sins and renounce worldly pleasures.

lives, because it prevents them from fulfilling their potential on earth.

This chapter reads Rossetti's vanity poems, examining the way she conveys these misgivings about the Tractarian doctrine of renunciation. She does this by ironically presenting a female speaker who, repeating the phrase "vanity of vanities", adheres to the doctrine to the point of extreme self-denial. But before reading Rossetti's poems, we will have a brief look at Pusey's thoughts about sin, suffering, and renunciation.

Owen Chadwick calls the Oxford Movement "an impulse of the heart and the conscience, not an inquiry of the head" (Chadwick, 12). Adherents valorized ecclesiastical authorities as direct descendants of the early Church and the Apostles, and believed that obedience to the authorities and church orders would lead the mind to genuine devotion. Pusey was an earnest and passionate member of the Oxford Movement. His unquestioning faith, accompanied by this doctrine of authority, put some of the people around him under heavy pressure. His wife was "subject to a painful over-scrupulousness", and his immediate disciples labored under "a similar strain". As Chadwick points out, "Dr. Pusey ... was not always wise. But he practiced what he preached. If it was not always wise as advice, it was heroic as conduct" (Chadwick, 50). Although Chadwick defends Pusey's conduct, calling it heroic, it seems difficult to deny that Pusey's teachings did oppress people around him. What line of thinking, then, lay behind Pusey's strict morality?

Firstly, Pusey believes that humans need perpetually to reflect on themselves, to search out every sin to repent (Chadwick, 50). He advises us to choose the right thing to do in every aspect of life – not to choose the broad and easy way, but the narrow and difficult:

> some more miserable falls sink us deeper; some more difficult victories, won by God's help over ourselves, the flesh, the world, and Satan, raise us on the heavenward path; but each sense, at every avenue, each thought, each word, each act, is in its degree doing that endless work; every evil thought, every idle word, and still more, each willful act, is stamping upon men the mark of the beast; each slightest deed of faith is tracing deeper the seal of God upon their foreheads.[6]

[6] E. B. Pusey, *Parochial Sermons* III, 430-2, in Chadwick, 150. All quotations from Pusey's sermons are taken from this edition, and hereafter indicated in the text by page numbers.

This scrupulous attitude, when taken to extremes, may well stifle one's natural desires and spontaneous actions.

Secondly, Pusey implicitly believes in a wrathful God. He considers human suffering to be God's warning to us: by letting us suffer, God sends the message that "we have deeply offended Him", and that "the life which [we] are wasting is an earnest thing". Pusey further explains human suffering using a metaphor of a medicine prescribed by God: "[suffering] is His healing medicine, to burn out our wounds and purify us for His Presence" (Chadwick, 159). The metaphor of a medicine for human sin may initially appear to show a belief in God's love and grace. However, if healing itself is God's purpose, it theoretically does not need to involve suffering. So the idea of painful treatment indicates Pusey's belief in a wrathful God who inflicts punishment upon sinful humans.

Let us see how Pusey preaches the punitive significance of human suffering:

> All, then, pain, sickness, weariness, distress, languor, agony of mind or body, whether in ourselves or others, is to be treated reverently, since in it our Maker's hand passes over us, fashioning, by suffering, the imperfect or decayed substance of our souls. In itself, it were the earnest of Hell; through His mercy in Christ, it is a purifying for Heaven. Either way, it is a very solemn act. It is the Cross changed from the instrument of shame, the torture of malefactors, into the source of life ….
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> We must treat [suffering] reverently, as in His Presence, Who is causing it …. [It] is a token that God has not forsaken [people who suffer], but is still striving with them, and slaying them, if so it be, that they may live to Him. We may not then turn away from suffering in others, we may not mitigate it in ourselves, thoughtlessly ... If it were possible, it were better not even to relieve suffering, without sharing it. (Chadwick, 160)

Pusey despises human sins as shameful acts of "malefactors", and the "earnest of Hell", that need to be purged and burned away. By doing so, he justifies human suffering. This attitude contrasts with the ideas of sin and suffering in Abelard's and Julian's theology as we saw in the previous chapter. Unlike Pusey, they think that sin is an accident, something to take pity on, and that one therefore should try to relieve people from their suffering as God does. Theirs is not a God of anger

but a God of love.

Thirdly, Pusey finds little worth in worldly matters. Tractarian theology assumes that the world is imbued with God's symbolic meanings or signs. These signs are supposed to offer humans valuable moral and religious teachings.[7] However, the world continues to show Pusey only negative examples, by which humans should learn about contrary, heavenly truths:

> Every thing preaches Eternity to the awakened soul. All love of gain it sees, preaches of Him, the true riches; all disquiet "about many things," of Him, our only rest; all seeking after pleasure, of Him, the ever-flowing torrent of pleasure; all sickness of soul and body, of Him, our soul's only health; all things passing, of Him, Who alone abideth. Perhaps no place may more preach to the soul the vanity of all things beneath the sun, and the Verity of Him, the Eternal Verity, Whose and of Whom are all things, as the vast solitude of this great, crowded, tumultuous city, "full of stirs," where "all things are full of labour; man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing," where well-nigh all countenances or motions are full of eagerness, anxiety; all bent on something, seeking, but finding not, because they are seeking all things out of God, all but Himself, except when, here and there, they at last become very emptiness, because they know no more what to seek or find, but have lost themselves. (Chadwick, 157)

Pusey insists that all human struggles to find something rewarding on earth come to nothing; for the world is deceptive, transient, and without meaning. It is only when people realize the world's very emptiness that they can start to find the genuine riches – rest, pleasure, health and eternity – that God has in store for them in heaven. Pusey thus admonishes people to renounce worldly pleasures.

When women assimilate and live up to these teachings of sin, suffering and renunciation, what will happen to them? Rossetti's "vanity poems" explore this theme, reflecting her own wavering attitude toward the Tractarian teachings for women.

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[7] For the idea that the world is full of God's meanings, or the doctrine of Analogy, see G. B. Tennyson.

Rossetti's Vanity Poems

Among Rossetti's vanity poems figure two sonnets, "Vanity of Vanities" and "One Certainty", and a longer poem, "A Testimony".[8] The speakers of these poems declare that worldly pleasures and glory are all vain, empty, and transient:

> Ah woe is me for pleasure that is vain,
> Ah woe is me for glory that is past:
> Pleasure that bringeth sorrow at the last,
> Glory that at the last bringeth no gain!
> So saith the sinking heart; …
>
> ("Vanity of Vanities"; lines 1-5)

> I said of laughter: it is vain.
> Of mirth I said: what profits it?
> Therefore I found a book, and writ
> Therein how ease and also pain,
> How health and sickness, every one
> Is vanity beneath the sun.
>
> ("A testimony"; 1-6)

> All things are vanity, I said.
> Yea vanity of vanities.
>
> (25-26)

> Yet man doth hope and fear and plan
> Till he is dead: – oh foolish man!
>
> (41-42)

> Verily, we sow wind; and we
> Shall reap the whirlwind, verily.
>
> (53-54)

> Vanity of vanities, the Preacher saith,
> All things are vanity. The eye and ear
> Cannot be filled with what they see and hear.

[8] "One Certainty" and "A Testimony" were composed in 1849. See *CPCR*, vol. I, 72, 77-79. As for "Vanity of Vanities", the date of composition is unknown, but it was privately printed in 1847. See *CPCR*, vol. I, 153, 287.

> Like early dew, or like the sudden breath
> Of wind, or like the grass that withereth,
> Is man, tossed to and fro by hope and fear.
>
> ("One Certainty"; 1-6)

In each case, the speaker, as a kind of superior being, is exhorting the whole of humankind to stop foolishly embracing worldly desires. The phrase "vanity of vanities" is repeated like a spell, and assertive exclamations such as "yea", "verily", and "oh foolish man!", along with the long list of transient worldly matters (laughter, mirth, rivers, winds, our treasures, houses, wealth, labor, hopes, harvest, pleasures, and so on – "all is vanity"), reflect the speaker's religious – almost fanatic – enthusiasm. Is Rossetti in these poems single-mindedly promoting the doctrine of renunciation, acting as one of the Tractarian preachers she heard at church?

Diane D'Amico suggests that Rossetti in these poems "adopts the voice of ... [biblical] texts", and her "poetic voice takes on tones of authority not characteristic of the woman poet's sphere" (D'Amico 1999, 25). She argues that Rossetti associates herself with the preacher and the author of Ecclesiastes, promoting the idea that human life is vain.[9] It may be true that Rossetti here plays the role of a preacher. However, this does not necessarily mean that the role precisely reflects Rossetti's own viewpoint. Instead, I suggest that Rossetti keeps her distance from the speakers of these poems: she has certain reservations about the doctrine of renunciation.

The poet's distance from the speakers is suggested in the wording of the poems. Rossetti often indicates who is speaking by using phrases such as "I said" and "the preacher saith". These may be simply echoing the wording in Ecclesiastes 1: 2: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities: all is vanity". Still, Rossetti's repeated use of such phrases is significant, suggesting the existence of an auditor.[10] For when it is emphasized that something is "said" by the

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[9] Antony H. Harrison makes a similar point when saying that, for Rossetti, "renunciation of the world, with all its misguided social institutions and material temptations, is the unique route to self-fulfillment". See Antony H. Harrison, "Christina Rossetti and the Sage Discourse of Feminist High Anglicanism", in *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power*, ed. Morgan E. Thaïs (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers, 1990), 87-104, 97.

[10] The existence of an auditor is one characteristic of the genre of the dramatic

speaker, we are naturally reminded that someone is listening. If the poet brings to light the existence of an auditor, we cannot simply assume that the speaker's monologue is a straightforward reflection of the poet's feelings. Rather, it is a speech that the poet has her speaker utter, with full awareness of the audience. Since the audience is potentially expected to make some response, the poet is putting the speaker's utterance to the test, to see how it will be received. In this way, Rossetti maintains her distance from her speakers' statements.

Dorothy Mermin contends that the auditors in Victorian dramatic monologues have a certain power, even if mostly keeping silent:

> The speaker exists as a voice, while the auditors are voiceless and exist only as the speaker's utterance recognizes them. But the auditors have power too: the power to resist. They can remain unpersuaded, unmoved, hostile, or just indifferent; like the Bishop's sons or Andrea Sarto's wife [in Robert Browning's dramatic monologues], they can refuse to listen, they can even walk away. The speaker's utterance defines itself in terms of the auditor, whose presence thus creates the possibility that the speaker might not be able to speak. (Mermin 1983, 9)

Since the auditors have this "power to resist", it is possible that the speakers in Rossetti's vanity poems may face negative reactions from their auditors about the doctrine of renunciation. Indicating the existence of the audience allows Rossetti to imply the conflict of different standpoints, different values. Here we may be witnessing the young Rossetti wavering between adherence to the doctrine of renunciation and resistance to it, unable yet to take a conclusive stance.

"The Lowest Room"

The dramatic monologue "The Lowest Room", composed some years later than the vanity poems discussed above, has the same theme of

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monologue.

"vanity of vanities".[11] In this poem, Rossetti gives a clearer response to the doctrine of renouncing worldly matters.

The poem has a two-tiered narrative structure: it is basically a monologue by the female speaker, which serves as a frame for a past dialogue she calls up from memory.[12] The speaker is a middle-aged single woman. There is an auditor (or auditors) in this monologue, as is clear from the speaker's echoing – "While I?" (line 261) – of her auditor's implied question. We do not know who this silent auditor is, since the poem gives no indication. The speaker, addressing this auditor, reproduces her dialogue with her younger sister which took place twenty years ago. The past dialogue of the sisters is inserted into the speaker's present monologue.

The elder sister (the speaker of the poem) played the role of main speaker in the inset dialogue as well, and her younger sister mostly kept silent, playing the role of listener. The younger sister, though, sometimes made brief but firm responses. She exerts "power" over the speaker (the elder sister) in a more direct way than the silent auditor. After reproducing the past dialogue, the elder sister concludes her monologue by describing the two sisters' lives at present, lives which seem unchanged from twenty years ago. It is possible to think that there are two "auditors" in the poem: the unidentified auditor who is listening to the speaker's monologue at present, and the speaker's younger sister in the past dialogue. Both of these auditors, like the auditor in Mermin's theory of the dramatic monologue, have the latent power to question the values the speaker holds. Keeping this in mind, let us begin our analysis by examining the inset dialogue, which starts from the second stanza of the poem.

In the inset dialogue, the speaker repeatedly slighted worldly matters, viewing them as transient and meaningless. We may sense here an echo of Pusey's teaching of "the vanity of all things". The speaker admired, instead, ancient Greece as depicted in Homer, which she believed valued military prowess and death as an honorable sacrifice. She idolized Homer's world of wars, praising Achilles, who

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[11] "The Lowest Room" was composed in 1856, and published in *Macmillan's Magazine*, IX (1864). See *CPCR*, vol. I, 200-7.

[12] This structure corresponds with that of Letitia Landon's dramatic monologue "A History of the Lyre" discussed in Chapter 3. In Landon's poem it is the male speaker of the monologue who recollects his past dialogue with a female poet named Eulalia.

died for friendship. This glorification of self-immolation may distantly refer to the celebration of sacrifice in Tractarian teachings. The speaker, renouncing worldly pleasures, already started to decline in her youth, with her hair showing early signs of old age, the "first tinge of grey" (3-4). In contrast, her younger sister looked young and full of life. Unlike the elder sister, she valued this world, making the most of her daily life. Tending her garden and doing needlework, she was nurturing plants and producing handmade crafts. Gentle-minded, she was good at listening to others. As the speaker observes, " ... mild she was, of few soft words, / Most gentle, easy to be led, / Content to listen when I spoke / And reverence what I said" (161-64). The elder sister was secretly jealous of this beautiful younger sister who, endowed with virtues, stood in contrast to her in many ways.

The conversation started when the two sisters were in the room together, with the elder sister's lamenting the transience of worldly matters: "Oh what is life, that we should live? / Or what is death, that we must die? / A bursting bubble is our life: / I also, what am I?" (5-8) The younger sister gently asked her, "What is your grief? Now tell me, sweet, / That I may grieve" (9-10). Thus prompted, the elder sister spoke about Homer's story, telling of the bravery of soldiers and the beauty of women in ancient Greece. By admiring the world Homer depicted, she insulted women in the present world: "Then heavenly beauty could allay / As heavenly beauty stirred the strife: / By them a slave was worshipped more / Than is by us a wife" (61-65). In making this comment, the elder sister seems to have had the subconscious intention to hurt her younger sister, who presumably would one day become a wife. The younger sister, however, responded calmly, without showing any hint of agitation:

> She laughed again, my sister laughed;
>
> (65)

The repetition of the phrase, "she laughed", shows the elder sister's irritation. The younger sister's quiet self-confidence (indicated by her laughing) ruffled the elder sister, who realized that she had failed to upset her younger sister.

Impatient at the younger sister's placidity, the elder sister denounced this world more fiercely, and attacked the younger sister's enjoyment of worldly pleasures. She called her embroidery a "waste

of white" (80) (the younger sister was engaged in embroidery while they were talking), comparing it to the (in her mind more worthy) textile work of ancient Greek women, which depicted and celebrated wars. Further, the elder sister denounced their own life as a "shame" and an "aimless life" (81), implying that the younger sister who valued it was mistaken. This harsh insult finally stirred the younger sister to verbal action. She raised an objection to the elder sister's celebration of war and sacrifice, by asking the rhetorical question whether the warrior would be happy if he became a captive and lived in exile, suffering the "lot of sacrifice" (91-96). The elder sister was unpersuaded, and only repeated her belief that this world was "mean, cold and slow, … stunted from heroic growth" (105-6). Now the younger sister earnestly refuted the values the elder sister embraced:

> "But life is in our hands," she said:
> "In our own hands for gain or loss:
>
> (109-10)

> "Too short a century of dreams,
> One day of work sufficient length:
> Why should not you, why should not I
> Attain heroic strength?
>
> "Our life is given us as a blank;
> Ourselves must make it blest or curst:
>
> (112-17)

The younger sister here shrewdly pointed out that the elder sister was making excuses for living a passive life, and for not trying to make her life "blest".

The two sisters then got into an argument over the interpretation of Achilles' role in Homer's story. The elder sister celebrated Achilles, the warrior who died on the battlefield, "self-immolated to his friend" (133), after avenging the death of his friend Patroclus. Insisting that Achilles was superior to the men of this "degenerate age" (140), she revealed her belief that death as sacrifice was glorious. In response, the younger sister made what for her was an exceptionally stinging remark:

> "Gross from his acorns, tusky boar

Does memorable acts like his;
So for her snared offended young
Bleeds the swart lioness."

(141-44)

Upon hearing this "jeer" (146), the elder sister turned pale and could not speak. Since the younger sister was usually meek and taciturn, the sting of her words, when they came, was all the more effective.

After her harsh words, the younger sister quickly admitted that she had gone "too far" (147), and apologized to her sister from the heart. She had not meant to hurt her. It was the "strength of love" (159) that had made the younger sister speak harshly: she loved her elder sister, and therefore wanted her to value her present life.

It is made clear that the younger sister had learned this wisdom of valuing the present life from Christ. Even if Homer "was sufficed ... with rough-hewn virtues [and men]", the younger sister asked, "what are such / To us who learn of Christ?" (153-56) Christ's teachings, as the younger sister understood them, ran counter to the celebration of war and death as sacrifice. The elder sister sensed the rightness of the younger sister's understanding. She also realized her own sin of envy (toward her younger sister) and pride-born discontent, but was unable to apologize or reconsider her creed of the emptiness of the world. She only reiterated "vanity of vanities", as if echoing Pusey's teachings:

"The wisest man of all the wise
Left for his summary of life
'Vanity of vanities.'

"Beneath the sun there's nothing new:
Men flow, men ebb, mankind flows on:
If I am wearied of my life,
Why so was Solomon.

"Vanity of vanities he preached
Of all he found, of all he sought:
Vanity of vanities, the gist
Of all the words he taught.

"This in the wisdom of the world,

In Homer's page, in all, we find:
As the sea is not filled, so yearns
Man's universal mind.

"This Homer felt, who gave his men
With glory but a transient state:
His very Jove could not reverse
Irrevocable fate.

"Uncertain all their lot save this –
Who wins must lose, who lives must die:
All trodden out into the dark
Alike, all vanity."

(174-96)

The younger sister's response to this was soft and brief, but had the power to silence the elder sister and finalize the dialogue. She whispered,

… "One
Is here," low-voiced and loving, "Yea,
Greater than Solomon."

(198-200)

Upon hearing the younger sister's reference to the greatness of Christ, the elder sister was again speechless. They both went silent, and this was the end of the dialogue.

The younger sister's power seems to reside in her wisdom as a follower of Christ and her belief in his teachings of love and earthly life. In other words, she was a powerful interpreter of Christ's teachings. The elder sister interpreted the phrase in Ecclesiastes, "vanity of vanities", as promoting the idea that worldly matters are worthless, and made it an excuse for her passive life. She adhered to this interpretation, and even extended it to an extreme renunciation of worldly matters and the glorification of death as sacrifice. In contrast, the younger sister questioned what the Scriptures appear to say. This attitude of the younger sister's may be explained more clearly when we refer to a feminist theologian, Rosemary R. Ruether, who in her study of Christology considers ways to interpret the Bible with full awareness of contemporary debates.

Ruether claims that the books of the Bible reflect the ethical weakness of humans at the times when they were written, and contain values that today's Christians may not totally approve of. The Bible is written from a number of different perspectives, and therefore it reflects a "constant struggle between prophetic, liberating insight in changing contexts, and the sinful human tendency to delve into accustomed patterns of status and to ascribe these to the divine will". [13] This struggle exists in the biblical world, in which the prophets and Jesus criticize hypocrisies in their own society. Therefore, it is possible to judge scripture by scripture. Ruether points out that such a critical reading of the Bible is necessary when considering our own contemporary issues:

> The hermeneutical circle between scripture and contemporary concerns must be a two-way relationship. We must be questioned by but also be prepared to question scripture …. By searching in depth places where the world-view of [scripture] puzzles or confronts our assumptions, we can open up, again and again, transforming insights that expand our vision.[14] (Ruether 1989, 4)

The whisper of the younger sister, "One is here ... Greater than Solomon", subtly suggests that she was practicing such a critical reading of the Bible. She does not blindly believe in what scripture appears to say, but is "ready to question scripture" when necessary. Being a woman of few words, she did not elaborate on her thoughts

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[13] Rosemary R. Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (Crossroad Publishers, 1989), rpt. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 5.

[14] According to Cullen Murphy, after the Reformation historical and text-critical researches on the Bible started and have cast doubt on hermeneutic traditions and authorities. These researches are in a sense an intellectual revolution, clarifying that the Bible was written by different writers in different ages, and therefore reflects prejudices, social rules, and worldviews that were constructed in the ages when those writers lived. These researches still continue today. See Murphy, 30.

Lynda Palazzo suggests that Rossetti found her own experience in the words of the Bible, and focused on aspects earlier readers of the Bible had not paid attention to. Rossetti tackled the Bible using her imagination, and examined symbols and images found in the text. In so doing, she tried to find new interpretations to fit for the age she lived in. See Lynda Palazzo, "The Poet and the Bible: Christina Rossetti's Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Victorian Newsletter* 92 (1997): 5-9, quoted in Escobar, 133-34.

about Christ and his teachings. Still, her loving nature and positive attitude toward life, along with her inner confidence, testify to the power of her own Christology, which apparently covers concerns of the present life: "Our life is given us as a blank; / Ourselves must make it blest or curst" (116-17).

The inset dialogue illustrates an important characteristic of the dramatic monologue: the emerging power of the listener.[15] The poem emphasizes that the younger sister by nature is "easy to be led", "content to listen" (162-63) when the elder sister speaks. That is, the elder sister is usually the more powerful speaker of the two sisters. The inset dialogue portrays how the usual power-balance between the speaker and the auditor can be reversed, when the speaker displays her weakness. In the elder sister's case, it is the weakness of adhering to the doctrine of renunciation and the glorification of sacrificial death – only for the sake of justifying her own discontent with her present life.

Compassion, self-confidence, openness to a critical reading of the Bible – the inset dialogue reveals the virtues of the younger sister compared to the elder sister. In the last part of the monologue, the speaker (the elder sister) describes how the two sisters are living now, twenty years later. The younger sister has a family, and lives happily with her husband and daughter. The speaker, in contrast, lives alone, passively waiting for heavenly salvation. The younger sister's married life shows that she has been blessed with Christian redemption on earth. For she is described by the speaker as follows:

> She thrives, God's blessed husbandry;
> Most like a vine which full of fruit
> Doth cling and lean and climb towards heaven
> While earth still binds its root.
>
> (249-52)

Lynda Palazzo sees in the sisters two contrasting theological standpoints, and pays special attention to the figure of the younger sister presented as the embodiment of Wisdom or Sophia. She takes a

[15] The inset dialogue may not be a dramatic monologue under a strict definition of the term, for the younger sister is not always a silent listener. But in the sense that she mainly plays the role of listener, especially in the first stage of the dialogue, it can be considered to be a variant of the dramatic monologue.

different view from Diane D'Amico in thinking that, in terms of theology, Rossetti distances herself from the doctrine of passionate renunciation, as embodied in the elder sister, celebrating instead feminine wisdom as embodied in the younger sister.[16] While careful not to totally reject the renunciatory figure, Palazzo stresses the importance of the wisdom figure for Rossetti's work:

> It is not necessary to reject the figure of feminine renunciation; Rossetti continues to use her, not only for her poetic possibilities, but as recurring symbol of women's suffering and spiritual endurance. She must not, however, be allowed to obscure the empowering figure of feminine wisdom, which gains strength in Rossetti's theology as she begins to participate in work for and amongst women …. We learn that the domestic sphere is used in Proverbs as a central metaphor to present the political and economic centre of Israel after the loss of the monarchy. So rather than signal submission and inferiority, the domestic scene can be considered a sign of solidarity and hope for the future. Those poems which present us with a wisdom-figure can be interpreted with this reversal in mind. (Palazzo, 22)

Palazzo here calls our attention to the necessity of reconsidering mainstream Rossetti criticism, which tends to regard the renunciatory figure in her poems as a reflection of Rossetti herself as an "isolated, withdrawn and ultimately frustrated woman" (21).

Palazzo rightly points out the theological importance of the figure of female wisdom in Rossetti's work. As Palazzo suggests, the presentation of the wise younger sister in a domestic role does not necessarily mean that Rossetti subscribes to the widespread Victorian domestic ideology. Instead, it serves as a metaphor for "solidarity and hope for the future", and for women's life-nurturing and compassionate qualities. This being said, however, I would argue that the focus of "The Lowest Room" is more on the elder sister than on the younger sister. For the ironical presentation of this renunciatory figure is the essence of the poem. The poem's irony brings home to us how sterile a woman's life can be if she rigidly adheres to the doctrine of renunciation. In the poem, the younger sister primarily serves to expose the elder sister's weakness, and to counter the gendered

[16] Palazzo suggests that the figure of the younger sister is "modeled on the virtuous woman" such as is described in Proverbs 3:18, 4:5-6, and 7:4 (Palazzo 2002, 20).

ideology that she has internalized from her religious and social circumstances. In a word, the younger sister serves to say "no" to the renunciatory woman.

I suggest that the ironically presented renunciatory figure was one answer Rossetti gave to her own doubts about the doctrine of renunciation, which had obsessed her for some years. As discussed earlier, the vanity poems of the 1840s seem to show the degree of influence that Pusey's doctrine of the worthlessness of earthly life had on Rossetti. In "The Lowest Room", through the portrayal of the elder sister, Rossetti warns against this doctrine, showing how it can hamper women's redemption on earth.

At the time of the earlier conversation, the elder sister watched her sister living happily: she watched her in the garden making her choice of flowers "intuitively wise" (212), and brightening up at a visit from her fiancé. Twenty years later, the elder sister is still observing the younger sister "thrive" (249), now as a mother and wife, and is impressed that her face has hardly altered. Through the younger sister she keeps being confronted with the possibility for women to value the world and live a fruitful life on earth. Nevertheless, the elder sister does not try to live such a life herself. After reproducing the past dialogue for the auditor, she reiterates how blessed the younger sister is. Although the reader does not get to hear this, the elder sister's auditor probably asks, "Well, I understand how she has been and how she is; how, then, have you lived since then?" The elder sister answers:

> While I? I sat alone and watched;
> My lot in life, to live alone
> In mine own world of interests,
> Much felt but little shown.
>
> Not to be first: how hard to learn
> That lifelong lesson of the past;
> Line graven on line and stroke on stroke;
> But, thank God, learned at last.
>
> (261-68)

There is a huge dramatic irony in the speaker's words that she has at last learned a "lifelong lesson of the past". What she says she has

learned, or "graven" on her mind, is nothing but total renunciation – the creed of renunciation she had already embraced twenty years earlier. In other words, she has not learned anything since then. She learned nothing from the younger sister's words of wisdom ("Our life is given us as a blank; / Ourselves must make it blest or curst"; 117-18), and as a result has not made her life "blest" on her own. This is a surprising fact, especially since it is the elder sister herself who makes a long speech about her dialogue with the younger sister. In this sense, the elder sister's words quoted above fail to meet the auditor's (and the reader's) expectations, and to add to our surprise, the speaker does not seem to realize it.[17]

Although the poem does not say how the auditor responds, we feel tangibly the auditor's shock at seeing the speaker's obstinacy. The possibility for this silent auditor to argue back seems real, when we sense the parallel structure between the inset dialogue and the entire dramatic monologue. The younger sister, who mainly played the role of auditor in the inset dialogue, refuted the elder sister, the main speaker of the dialogue. This leads us to feel that the same can happen again for the whole monologue. Even if it happens again and the elder sister receives an objection from her auditor, though, we expect she will remain unchanged, repeating the same phrase, "vanity of vanities", as she has kept doing for the past twenty years. The speaker of this dramatic monologue is trapped in a perpetual circle of renunciation and its confirmation.

The poem shows the difficulty of abandoning fixed ideologies and adopting new ideas through conversation, and it seems safe to say that what implants such ideologies into the woman's mind is the society or religious communities she lives in.[18] Given the biographical data which indicate Pusey's influence on Rossetti, the correspondence of the phrase ("vanity of vanities") used by both the renunciatory woman and Pusey, and similarities in their ideas of the worthlessness of earth, it stands to reason that Rossetti implicitly refers to Tractarian

[17] For the characteristic of the dramatic monologue that there is a discrepancy between what the speaker means to say and what the poem as a whole signifies, see Chapter 5.

[18] Ideology is, according to Terry Eagleton's general definitions, "a body of ideas … characteristic of a particular social group or class … which help to legitimate a dominant political power". See Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso Books, 1991), 5-6.

preachers, especially Pusey, as the religious authority controlling the mindset of the renunciatory woman.[19]

Rossetti later, in *The Face of the Deep* (1892), writes the following concerning "Free Will", an issue involving the relation between authority and believers:

> 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. That tremendous endowment of Free Will which can say nay to God Almighty, is able tenfold to say nay to the strong man armed. Nothing outside myself can destroy me by main force and in my own despite: so that as regards my salvation the abstract mystery of evil concerns me not practically; my own inherent evil is what I have to cope with. Thus the universe seems to stand aside, leaving me already all alone face to face with my Judge; at once and for ever as utterly alone with Him as I can be at the last day when set before his tribunal.[20]

Rossetti courageously contends that there is "spiritual wickedness" even "in high places", and that evil can reside with "principalities, powers, rulers" in this world. She states that she needs to wrestle against such powers, but she places more emphasis on coping with her own "inherent evil", for "nothing outside [herself] can destroy [her] by main force and in [her] own despite". Here we see Rossetti underlining the absolute necessity for sound self-criticism and independence of mind to decide what to believe in, without succumbing to outside pressure. We cannot be sure if Rossetti when writing "The Lowest Room" in her twenties already had this clear

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[19] While discussing Rossetti's resistance to the idea of the worthlessness of earth, I do not mean to argue that she resists all the doctrines of the Oxford Movement. Rossetti owes much to their doctrines and poetics for her poetic possibilities. For an earlier study that points out the influence of Tractarian doctrines of Analogy and Reserve on Rossetti, see G. B. Tennyson. Marylu Hill examines "Goblin Market" with reference to the Tractarian doctrine of the Real Presence in the Holy Eucharist. See Marylu Hill, "'Eat me, Drink Me, Love Me': Eucharist and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*", in *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 43, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 455-72.

[20] Christina Rossetti, *The Face of the Deep: A Devotional Commentary on the Apocalypse* (1892), intro. Maria Keaton (Bristol: Thoemmes P. and Tokyo: Edition Synapse, 2003), 489-90.

belief, but we can at least say that the poem prefigures it.

In this and previous chapters, we have seen that Rossetti, in exploring women's suffering and redemption, resists the justification of women's suffering, and casts doubt on the doctrine of renunciation. She also reconsiders the meanings of redemption and of living in imitation of Christ. This all can be seen as part of Rossetti's attempt to "wrestle" against "principalities", as well as to cope with her own "inherent evil". The speaker of "The Lowest Room" is not exclusively a victim of religious principalities; she is also a victim of her own dogmatic obstinacy. Through this ironical portrayal of the renunciatory woman, Rossetti suggests that, in order for women to be truly liberated, it is necessary for them to severely question their own internalized ideologies.