

## RENUNCIATION IN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S POETRY

From Mackenzie Bell in 1896 to Lona Mosk Packer in 1963, commentators on the life and poetry of Christina Rossetti have tended to view her either as a saint or as a tragically repressed individual. Her life gives ample evidence that she turned away from the world and its consolations -- presumably in the hope of gaining a fuller life hereafter. Well over one hundred of her poems deal with the need to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil. Since, however, a number of her poems do reveal a deep affection for life's beauty and longing for earthly joys, it has become commonplace to perceive a dichotomy between Christina's nature and her presumed commitment to renunciation. C. M. Bowra writes:

The conflict in Christina between the woman and the saint was hers almost to the end, though with the passing years her religion became more absorbing and more insistent and allowed her only at intervals to indulge her more human feelings. . . . In her religious hours she believed that the world was nothing, and then suddenly it would assert its claims, and she would regret her lost chances and vanishing dreams.<sup>1</sup>

It is the purpose of this essay to show that, except superficially, the conflict was not between the "woman" and the "saint"; rather it involved the question of an appropriate Christian response to the world and to life itself.

In her youth, Christina had been taught to believe that a Christian's best response to life is to renounce the world as worthless and to make God one's sole study. It was not her "passionate Latin nature"<sup>2</sup> that revolted against such indoctrination, but her sense of Christ's sacramental message in His redemption of the world -- namely, that the world, dearly repurchased, is acceptable and good; that life is a loving gift to be received joyously; and that each person is responsible for the care of everything that touches his life. This doctrine, largely ignored by the established churches after the Middle Ages, was not articulated for Christina as a viable Christian view. She (her brothers called her the "born apostle") could never become fully satisfied with what she had been taught so long as this sense of the sacramental world haunted her subconscious (her genes, if you will).

Many of Christina's poems, especially those written between 1849 and 1859, reflect a struggle to understand the relationship a Christian should have with the world. Three major narrative poems ("The Convent