

A Reading of Christina Rossetti's  
"Three Stages"

Christina Rossetti has been treated as an "Anglican saint" by almost all her biographers. Her rejection of the marriage proposals of two lovers on religious grounds along with her proliferation of devotional verse has labelled her as a virtuous, self-denying, if passionate, woman. To her persistent vague illnesses are attributed the recurring themes of morbidity and mortality in her poetry. Her renunciation of her second suitor, Charles Bagot Cayley, on the basis of his agnosticism, is understandable. However, in his biography of his sister, even William Michael Rossetti finds the Roman Catholicism of James Collinson, her first suitor, insufficient explanation for her breaking that engagement.<sup>1</sup> Christina Rossetti's father was a lapsed Roman Catholic as was one of her maternal grandparents. Moreover, the poet herself was a strong Tractarian. Her poems indicate that Christina Rossetti was not a selfless martyr but rather a self-centered, strong-willed person who sought to maintain her independence through the only means available to a respectable Victorian woman: by avoiding the servitude and total commitment of a lifetime as a governess, wife, or nun. Thus her tendency toward hypochondria was reinforced when she realized that illness would prevent her from working as a governess to support her needy family. In a letter she once wrote, "I am well content with the privileges and immunities which attach to semi-invalidism."<sup>2</sup> And she was unable to give herself either in human marriage or in spiritual marriage as a nun. Her brother speculates that Christina thought herself unworthy of the convent,<sup>3</sup> but it is more probable that she could not give up the company of her mother and the home she called "a nest love-hidden from ills."<sup>4</sup>

She demonstrates the sincerity of her religious beliefs in her meditative poetry. Christina Rossetti's lifelong, daily struggle was between her own will and what she considered to be her duty, or the Will of God. She never questioned her faith explicitly. The one indication that her faith might not have been profound was her terror on her death bed. Paradoxically, in spite of the many death-wishes and pleas for rest in her verse, Christina Rossetti faced death neither serenely nor stoically. Her most recent biographer, the late Lona Mosk Packer, found two conflicting tendencies in the poet's mind at the end of her life: "On the one hand, she still retained her traditional orthodox belief in the resurrection of the body . . . On the other hand, she had an equally strong fear of death, not only the death of the body, but even more, the death of the spirit. If, as she firmly believed, life on earth was a trial, then the soul which had proved itself unworthy in this life lost