

THE SILENT PRIEST: ROSSETTI'S "A LAST CONFESSION" REVISITED

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A dramatic monologue in the line of Browning, "A Last Confession," written in or just before 1849, is one of D. G. Rossetti's more successful poems. It delves into the turbulent, half-insane mind of a dying murderer and explores it at length. The critics who have written about this poem have generally praised Rossetti for his portrayal of the speaker's psychological state and have analyzed stylistic devices, but so far there has been no satisfactory answer to a vital question: What ideas, if any, is Rossetti trying to convey through this dying Italian patriot as he confesses to a Catholic priest who cannot save him?¹ Is there, indeed, a thematic content, or is Rossetti simply depicting a psychological state? Or, as David Riede has recently argued, is Rossetti showing "the impossibility of securing full knowledge of another, or even of attaining full self-knowledge"? (*Rossetti Revisited* 102)²

In my view, "A Last Confession" is built on a basic counterpoint between Catholic Christianity, as objectified in the priest, and the non-Christian life the speaker has led. Both characters function within the Catholic framework, but the speaker has ensured his damnation while the listening confessor is on the road to final salvation. At one point, the speaker issues a stern warning to the Father:

If you mistake my words
And so absolve me, Father, the great sin
Is yours, not mine: mark this: your soul shall burn
With mine for it. I have seen pictures where
Souls burned with Latin shriekings in their mouths:
Shall my end be theirs? Nay, but I know
'Tis you shall shriek in Latin. Some bell rings,
Rings through my brain: it strikes the hour in hell.

These lines create a powerful, Dantesque sense of sin and damnation, and warn that any person, even a priest, can make a deadly mistake and end up in hell. But it is the speaker who is going to hell. The image of the bell is brilliant and haunting: reminiscent of a church bell, it turns out to be demonic and completely mental. As