

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S "A BETTER RESURRECTION" AND "UP-HILL"  
SELF-RELIANCE AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Christina Rossetti reveals a high degree of sophistication in her secular poetry which seems to be absent from her religious verse,<sup>1</sup> but this may be because her readers are not as alive as she was to the complexities of religious thought, sensibility, and affirmation; hence, according to Stuart Curran ("The Lyric Voice of Christina Rossetti," *VP*, 9, 1971, 298), "She was a simple and pious woman who loved the orthodox God of her Anglican parish-house." This evaluation, I fear, is simplistic, not taking into account the purely nominal Anglicanism of the poet's father and the actively Roman Catholic bias of her brother Dante Gabriel -- who had to conform to English ways or, quite literally, starve. Christina was greatly influenced by both, and it is not surprising to discover her developing heterodox ideas within apparently safe, conventional contexts; for example, in "A Better Resurrection" and "Up-Hill."

In the first of these poems, the persona feels that life is meaninglessly disappointing, and the imagery reflects (Margaret Sawtell, *Christina Rossetti: Her Life and Religion*, London: A. R. Mowberry, 1955, 47) "a very desperate, all but hopeless state." The speaker's heart is (2) "like a stone,"<sup>2</sup> (3) "numbed"; her life, a (7) "falling leaf," (9) "a faded leaf," (13) "a frozen thing," and (17) "a broken bowl"; (10-12) "My harvest dwindled to a husk; / Truly my life is void and brief / And tedious in the barren dusk." When the sufferer turns to Christ for help, the landscape is revived to (14) "greenness" by (15) "the sap of Spring," and the (13) "frozen thing" is (21) "Cast in the fire" of the Resurrection to be rescued and reshaped there.

Although an Anglican reading of the poem espouses complete dependence on Christ, a heterodox (Roman Catholic) interpretation is possible. The title itself raises a challenging question: what, indeed, could be better than the 'Resurrection'? The heterodox answer is the Resurrection not as an overwhelming event but as an historical occasion for greater self-reliance: a conscious activity by the individual will in overcoming a potentially meaningless existence; the wresting of a morally responsible self from the 'faith without works' panacea of Anglicanism. Although Fredegond Shove (*Christina Rossetti: A Study*, 1931; rpt. New York: Octagon, 1969) sees the poem as an (79) "exhausting fight against self," the poem's very structure, sophisticated and taut, reveals a self that is not gushingly dominated or swept away by its materials but, on the con-