

VOICES AT THE CONVENT THRESHOLD: AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN CHRISTINA ROSSETTI AND GERARD HOPKINS

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What prompted Gerard Manley Hopkins's dissatisfied and incomplete response to Christina Rossetti's "The Convent Threshold"? Rossetti's poem had appeared in her much praised first collection *Goblin Market and other Poems*, published by Macmillan in 1862. "I am faring very well amongst the critics," she proudly announced (*Letters* 1:161), but it was not until July 1864 when Hopkins was in a rush of poetic activity that he told his Balliol friend, Alexander Baillie, that he had "nearly finished an answer to Miss Rossetti's Convent Threshold," which he proposed to call "A Voice from the World" (Hopkins, *Correspondence* 1:64).

He had already made a note of "Miss Rossetti's" name in brief references to the Pre-Raphaelites in his *Journal* at about the same time (30; 140), while his own first appearance in print in February 1863 with "Winter with the Gulf Stream" in *Once a Week* (a magazine to which Rossetti had also been a contributor) suggests that his thoughts were turning to the attractions of being a published poet. He continued to take note of Rossetti's poetic career, and in her public association with her brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael, he doubtless saw an enviable link with the now well established Pre-Raphaelite movement. Still a student of nineteen, he could also claim an acquaintance with the Rossetti family at a social level, and in the same lengthy letter to Baillie he described – with some pride – his introduction to the two sisters, Christina and Maria, and other literati at a Gurney party (Frederick Gurney was another member of the sociable Balliol set, in which Hopkins had flourished at Oxford) (*Correspondence* 1:65). And much later, in March 1872, when he was far away in Lancashire in the throes of his Jesuit training at Stonyhurst, he asked his Mother, "when you next meet Miss Rossetti give her my kind remembrances and do not forget" (*Correspondence* 1:216).

That the subject of Rossetti's poem had any direct significance for Hopkins's current and as yet fluid religious sentiments is very doubtful. His letters and poems of 1864-65 suggest that his movement from Anglicanism to Catholicism was still in its first stages, and his reception into the Catholic