

THE HOUSE OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: DOMESTIC AND POETIC SPACES

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In September of 1876 Christina Rossetti, her mother Frances, and her two maternal aunts Charlotte and Eliza Polidori moved to 30 Torrington Square, one of the many Georgian row houses near the British Museum. This residence became Rossetti's home until her death in December 1894. When considering Rossetti's physical surroundings, literary critics have, in general, followed one of two approaches. Either a brief summary is given, from which one infers that knowledge of place is unimportant to an understanding of her life, or a few architectural details are offered but only to develop an already formed interpretation of the life. In Virginia Woolf's 1930 essay, one finds an example of the brief overview: "Her sixty-four years seem outwardly spent in Hallam Street and Endsleigh Gardens and Torrington Square, but in reality she dwelt in some curious region where the spirit strives towards an unseen God" (244). Ford Madox Ford, although similarly focussing on the inner life, exemplifies the other approach, using physical details as both evidence for and emblem of what he terms Rossetti's "psychological cravings." Such "cravings," he concludes, compelled her to dwell in "boxlike rooms," which were "rendered dark by the shade" of the "black-trunked London trees" (424).

I do not want to dismiss either Woolf or Ford, nor the more recent biographers who, seeing Rossetti's last years as saddened by loss, describe her Torrington residence as "starved of light" (Jones 175), a "place of shadows and silence" (Battiscombe 189). Rather, I am suggesting that we take an alternative approach by examining first the structural details of a London townhouse before considering the poet's life. After establishing some sense of interior patterns, we can then consider what it meant for Rossetti to live and work within her home at 30 Torrington Square. Within its walls, Rossetti wrote at least three major works of devotional prose, two of which, *Time Flies: A*