

Christina Rossetti's Sonnet of Sonnets: *Monna Innominata*

Jeffery Alan Triggs

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Like the poets of our day who maintain difficult relations with their great, modernist forebears, the Victorians were the troubled and sometimes unwilling inheritors of certain assumptions about poetry that grew out of the romantic period.¹ Perhaps the most important of these is the notion of poetry as expressive form. According to this view, the primary virtue of poetry is the sincere expression of personal feeling, rather than the more traditional aims of mimesis or instruction. Under this dispensation, all poetry aspires to the condition of lyric poetry, for the lyric accepts the attributes of expressive form most happily. Wary as the Victorian critics often were of the emotional excesses of romanticism, they still accepted as a starting point the essentially romantic notion of poetry as a form of personal expression, and this colored their practice of the various poetic genres.

The sonnet sequence is a case in point. The romantics may be said to have recovered the sonnet from the oblivion into which it had fallen in the eighteenth century, but they changed the form in significant ways. Unlike the Elizabethans who conceived of the sonnet as a strophic constituent of long, loosely organized sequences, which were themselves structured by "plots" of highly conventional situations and attitudes, the romantics treated the sonnet as an individual lyric poem, characterized to a remarkable degree by unity of conception and intensity of expression. The Victorians inherited this point of view, and even when they recusitated the Elizabethan form of the sonnet sequence, the romantic notion of the lyric sonnet continued to affect their practice in important ways. Where the romantics had exalted Milton as a sonneteer, the Victorians found their worthiest model in Shakespeare (see George Sanderlin, "The Repute of Shakespeare's Sonnets in the Early Nineteenth Century"). The Shakespeare who claimed the idolotry

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of the Victorians, however, was not the historical Elizabethan sonneteer we now see him to have been, but very much an autobiographical poet along romantic lines, one who in Wordsworth's phrase, "unlocked his heart" with the sonnet form as his "key." Indeed, the wariness with which nineteenth century critics such as Henry Hallam approached Shakespeare's *Sonnets* suggests the pervasive force of this misapprehension. Poetry, as John Stuart Mill put it, "is of the nature of soliloquy ... feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind" (391). The allusion here to Theseus' speech in *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a significant indicator of Shakespeare's position as a model poet for the nineteenth century, whose practice, taken out of its historical context, was reinterpreted according to romantic standards.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Victorian poets like the Rossettis and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, when they took up the form of the sonnet sequence from its long obscurity, should turn to a romanticized Shakespeare as a model, and reconceive the sonnet sequence according to romantic notions of expressive, even autobiographical poetry. The chief problem facing them was how to give adequate structural integrity to their sequences without sacrificing the intensity of personal expression which they took as central to the poetic enterprise. The Elizabethans had frankly written their sonnets as conventional poems (sometimes indeed as conventional exercises), and had contented themselves with loose overall structures. Their notion of poetic expression lay in the play with and sometimes against the conventional expectations of their audience. The romantics, of course, did not have such public conventions available to them, nor did they deem the exercise of conventions a worthy poetic aim. Instead, they concentrated on the individual sonnet as a peculiarly intense form of lyric poem. The Victorians had to find new ways to integrate the poetic aims of the romantics with the large sequential form taken from the Elizabethans. While there were different solutions to this problem, I believe Christina Rossetti's was particularly elegant and unique, and in the balance of this essay I will attempt to demonstrate this with reference to her sequence entitled *Monna Innominata*.

In order to write sonnet sequences for the nineteenth century, the Victorians needed first of all, something to replace the conventional thematic structure of the Elizabethan sequences. The resource most readily at their disposal, which they inherited from the romantics, was the presiding and unifying consciousness of the speaker, a natural manifestation of Mill's sense of poetry as soliloquy. Such a consciousness was able to gather up and give shape to heterogeneous moments of experience, and the development of such consciousness became indeed the

main action of the poetry. Joan Rees has aptly described *The House of Life* as "Rossetti's journey through his own soul" (138). The transfigured form of the sonnet sequence offered Rossetti what a similarly transfigured form of the epic provided Wordsworth: a more or less structured means of investigating and giving shape to his life's experiences. The individual sonnets are epiphanic, registering the spots of meaningful time that go to make up the consciousness of the poet. Though this is not a "tight" structure, certainly not as logical and controlled as the structure of *Monna Innominata*, it is still something completely different from the structure of an Elizabethan sequence. Structuring a long poem with a series of autobiographical epiphanies is a typical romantic innovation.

Christina Rossetti, in *Monna Innominata*, may be attempting something short of a grand tour through her own soul, but her approach is as confessional as her brother's. Instead of summing up her life's experiences, she records with psychological intensity and sincere feeling the narrower experience of one unhappy love affair. In her preface she claims with charming modesty to be recording mere fanciful experiences, but her real conception of the proper approach to sonnet writing comes in a sly comparison of her own work with the flagrantly autobiographical *Sonnets From The Portuguese*.

Had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the "Portuguese Sonnets," an inimitable "donna innominata" drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura. (*Works* 58)

This comment has several different functions. It offers, under the guise of a hyperbolic compliment, what is in fact a cogent criticism of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's flouting of the convention of unhappy love. At the same time, however, it suggests a notion of poetry quite Victorian and not at all Elizabethan: that the way for a modern poet to find a place with the immortals was to write sonnets "drawn not from fancy but from feeling." Thus Mrs. Browning was fated by her life to write, as she did and however unhappily, sonnets of happy love. There is also the suggestion, however subliminal, that Christina Rossetti herself was not so fated, and that any such serious effort as hers would indeed be drawn from feeling.

Unlike her brother, Christina Rossetti seems anxious to protect herself from the spotlight invited by overt autobiography. Indeed, this may reflect in some measure her painful shyness in an age which demanded poetry of confessional intensity, an age which led other poets, notably Tennyson and Browning, to the

development of the dramatic monologue.² Thus, her sequence, *Monna Innominata* is presented as the fancifully imagined reflections of one of the many “*donne innominate*” whose charms were sung by the medieval poets. It is an effort to give finally the woman’s side, to redress the unfairness of a strictly male viewpoint, which has given us ladies “resplendent with charms, but...scant of attractiveness” (*Works* 58). Each of the fourteen sonnets is preceded by an epigraph from Dante and one from Petrarch, as if to reaffirm some sort of relation with the great traditional sequences of the past.

In spite of this effort at concealment, early critics had no hesitation taking a biographical approach to the work. In fact, until quite recently most discussions of *Monna Innominata*, much in the manner of nineteenth century criticism of Shakespeare’s sonnets, centered around the identity of the “other” to whom the poems are addressed.³ The overabundance of strictly biographical treatments has led a critic like Joan Rees, however, to commit the opposite fallacy by treating the poems in terms of their handling of conventions and ignoring their autobiographical mode of presentation. The simple fact that Christina Rossetti’s themes are “the common stock of love poetry in all ages (Rees 159) does not preclude their being suggested by, drawn from, and expressive of personal experience. Love itself is “the common stock of love poetry in all ages.” What is of more point, is that the approach to writing poetry does in fact change from age to age. We should keep in mind the suggestion in Christina’s comment on Mrs. Browning that she herself was writing poetry “drawn not from fancy but from feeling.” In this she was nothing if not typical of her age.

It is true that a writer like Lona Mosk Packer, searching the sonnets for actual

²Robert Langbaum has argued that the dramatic monologue was in fact conceived “as a reaction against the romantic confessional style” (79).

³Most writers, notably Marya Zaturenska, Dorothy Margaret Stuart, and more recently Georgina Battiscombe, have followed William Rossetti’s suggestion that in *Monna Innominata* Christina was in fact “giving expression to her love for Charles Cayley,” whose offer of marriage she refused on religious grounds. Lona Mark Packer’s 1963 biography created something of a stir by claiming that William was in fact shielding Christina in making this assertion (225). Packer’s own candidate is William Bell Scott, whose marriage to Alice Boyd at the time of Christina Rossetti’s first Penkill visit presented in her opinion a more formidable, more traditional, and less respectable obstacle than any opposition to Cayley’s religious views (226). It should be noted however that more recent critics such as Battiscombe have refused to take Packer’s argument quite seriously. Like the controversy about Shakespeare’s sonnets, it appears that the mysterious identity of Christina’s “suitor” is not easily solvable. The fact that even William considered such an identification necessary, however, is itself an indication of the age’s preoccupation with autobiographical poetry.

biographical evidence, comes up with much sheer silliness, without any real bearing on our final valuation of the poems as works of art. The sixth sonnet is a good example.

Trust me, I have not earned your dear rebuke,
I love, as you would have me, God the most;
Would lose not Him, but you, must one be lost,
Nor with Lot's wife cast back a faithless look
Unready to forego what I forsook;
This say I, having counted up the cost,
This, though I be the feeblest of God's host,
The sorriest sheep Christ shepherds with His crook.
Yet while I love my God the most, I deem
That I can never love you overmuch;
I love Him more, so let me love you too;
Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such
I cannot love you, if I love not Him,
I cannot love Him if I love not you.

Packer comments that this sonnet may reflect an earlier conversation between Christina and William Bell Scott (her candidate for the role of suitor) about their relationship, which she had broken up in 1858. He may have brought up this fact, and "to this she could have replied that if so, it was not from lack of love" (230). This is surely reductionist, based as it is on a dubious theory about Christina's private life. On the other hand, Rees goes too far in the other direction when she considers the same poem only in terms of philosophical play with the theme of "the relation of human love to claims of a higher order [which] has worried love poets in ages of faith at least from Petrarch onwards" (157). Indeed, her approach leads her very readily to one of those "daring paradoxes" such critics love to find: "Love of God does not exclude love of the lover but includes it" (157). But Christina Rossetti cannot so easily be turned into an Elizabethan. This is taking the poem too much in abstraction to recognize all the effort she has gone to so that it will seem like deeply felt personal expression. What else is the subtle psychological "back-sliding" of the sestet which Rees has noted (157)? The important thing here, the "poetry," as it were, is not the philosophy but the confrontation of philosophy with personality. This is what pulsates so interestingly through the sequence. To ignore Christina's "Victorianism," which we do if we treat her as if she had a twentieth century awareness of the Elizabethan uses of conventions,

is to miss her own unique solution to the problem of writing an autobiographical sonnet sequence.

And clearly the tone of the poems is autobiographical. In spite of the frequent fig leaves plucked from Dante and Petrarch and the archetypal situations which the love affair Christina describes sometimes seems to fit, the situation and feelings in *Monna Innominata* are quite alien to those of any Elizabethan or Italian sequence. The subtle observations and psychology which Christina's sequence records are as particular and private as anything in *The House of Life*. Unlike the Elizabethans' and even Dante Rossetti's sonnets, the sonnets of *Monna Innominata* are not heterogeneous but suggest a definite, tightly constructed plot. Indeed the defined and particular quality of the plot precludes any Elizabethan-style structuring according to conventional situations. And since Christina's sonnets deal with a more narrow situation than a "journey through the soul," the broad structuring categories of *The House of Life* will not do either. Christina's solution, which has all the beauty of a tightly, logically conceived form, is to order her experiences according to the dictates of the sonnet form itself.

It is surprising that critics have not made more of the important subtitle of *Monna Innominata: A Sonnet of Sonnets*. Like the later sequence of twenty-eight sonnets entitled *Later Life: A Double Sonnet of Sonnets*, the full title of *Monna Innominata* suggests that Christina Rossetti consciously structured her sequence as a macro-sonnet, each individual poem fulfilling the logical function of an individual line in a sonnet. As we shall see in going through the poems, this allows for the two broad movements of feeling marked by a "turn" which we expect in a sonnet, while maintaining a sonnet's general impression of unity. The first eight sonnets (the "octave") are characterized by a basically optimistic celebration of the speaker's love. The first three rather naively celebrate the powers of secular love. The next three attempt to reconcile this love with the claims of religious faith. The seventh and eighth sonnets suggest desperate attempts to hold on to love. The "turn" occurs in the ninth sonnet where an insurmountable obstacle to that love is mentioned for the first time. The last six sonnets (the "sestet") are all concerned in various ways with renunciation and acceptance of the fate of unhappy love. It is into this taut mold that Christina's alter-ego "donna" has poured the expression of her feelings.

The first sonnet is a breathless celebration of the newly awakened feeling of love and the lover's blithe dependence on the presence of the beloved:

Come back to me, who wait and watch for you: —
Or come not yet, for it is over then,

And long it is before you come again,
So far between my pleasures are and few.

The speaker displays all the innocent egoism of a youthful lover obsessed completely in the object of her affection:

For one man is my world of all the men
This wide world holds; O love, my world is you.

The sestet of the sonnet, however, suggests already something of “the pang” that may attend such earthly passion, dependent as it is on requital. John Donne, with the distance of wit, might have written that “Dull sublunary lover’s love / Whose soul is sense / Cannot admit absence,” but Christina, with a more tender feeling, presents the speaker’s subjective mood:

My hope hangs waning, waxing like a moon
Between the heavenly days on which we meet:
Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang
When life was sweet because you called them sweet?

The second sonnet, in what is perhaps a less ambiguous mood of hopeful love, is given over to consideration of the “unrecorded,” unnoticed “first moment of your meeting me.” It would seem that the speaker knew her beloved long before she knew that she was in love with him. She now chides herself for being “so dull to mark the budding of my tree / That would not blossom yet for many a May.” Now she vainly searches her memory to recollect that “day of days. . . that touch, / First touch of hand in hand.” It is worth noting here the private use of seasonal imagery. The use of budding and blossoming as metaphors of youthful love is certainly “the common stock of love poetry,” the familiar vocabulary of many an Elizabethan poet. But unlike Elizabethan poetry, Shakespeare’s sonnets included, the blossoms do not have a generalized, public significance. The budding is “*of my tree*,” its significance is privately perceived and personally expressed. We are not common shareholders of the meaning, but overhear, as it were, the speaker’s own apprehension of it.

Private seasonal images are found also in the third sonnet, which might make an interesting comparison with the “Care-charmer sleep” group of Elizabethan sonnets:

I dream of you, to wake: would that I might
Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;

Nor find with dreams the dear companion gone,
As, Summer ended, Summer birds take flight.
In happy dreams I hold you full in night.
I blush again who waking look so wan;
Brighter than sunniest day that ever shone,
In happy dreams your smile makes day of night.
Thus only in a dream we are at one,
Thus only in a dream we give and take
The faith that maketh rich who take or give;
If thus to sleep is sweeter than to wake,
To die were surely sweeter than to live,
Though there be nothing new beneath the sun.

Here, one might think at first, is the old convention of courting sleep so that one might achieve fulfilling love in dreams. Like Astrophil, the speaker is calling on “The baiting place of wit, the balm of woe / The poor man’s wealth, the prisoner’s release,” so that she might, if not Stella’s, at least her own beloved’s “image see.” But Sidney’s jaunty catalogue of Elizabethan paradoxes suggests a very different approach, a very different tone from Christina’s quietly expressed wish to see more of her lover in her dreams. There is nothing of the “brilliant exercise” in the imagery of *Monna Innominata*. A conventional theme is picked up, but it is so personalized as to be almost unrecognizable as a convention. There is “nothing new beneath the sun,” as Christina, following *Ecclesiastes*, assures us, but the concerns of lovers are made new by being newly, personally felt and expressed. Indeed she is not far here from the Rilke of *Duineser Elegien* whose lovers renew by reenactment the experiences of all the lovers of the past. This is different, however, from the exercise of a public convention. No Elizabethan working in the “care-charmers” tradition would have taken the “sleep wish,” as Christina does, to its logical conclusion: the “death wish.” This is the extravagant psychological result of her contemplation, and she draws back from it with typical humility in her somewhat playful allusion to *Ecclesiastes*. Her conscience is not lulled.

Indeed the next three sonnets work at creating a more ennobling conception of love capable of being reconciled with her religious faith. The fourth sonnet begins with a playful comparison of their different “loves”:

I loved you first: but afterwards your love,
Outsoaring mine, sang such a loftier song
As drowned the friendly cooings of my dove.
Which owes the other most? My love was long,

And yours one moment seemed to wax more strong.

But with deeply felt love such comparisons prove ultimately to be odious: “Nay, weights and measures do us both wrong. / For verily love knows not ‘mine’ or ‘thine’. . . / For one is both and both are one in love.” Confident in such love, she addresses him in the fifth sonnet as “my heart’s heart. . . you who are to me / More than myself myself;” and asks that God be with him and keep him “in strong obedience leal and true / To Him whose noble service setteth free.” The reader should note this first, surprisingly late, entrance of God in the sequence. It is an effort, completely alien to the Elizabethan temperament, to elevate the almost embarrassingly secular love in the first three sonnets to an acceptable level of piety. For herself, the speaker maps out in typically Victorian fashion a domestic role:

To love you without stint and all I can,
To-day, to-morrow, world without end;
* * * * *

Since woman is the helpmeet made for man.

We have already considered, among other things, the confrontation of philosophy with personality in the sixth sonnet. The nature of this confrontation, its intimate connection with Christina’s private concerns should be more clear by now. Rees’ paradox, that “love of God does not exclude love of the lover but includes it,” is a hard-worn plateau of feeling which the speaker achieves out of *psychological* necessity. It is the culmination of Christina’s effort to spiritualize a love first perceived and expressed in secular terms.

The seventh and eighth sonnets bring the movement of the octave to a climax with a somewhat desperate attempt to maintain the equilibrium of the sixth sonnet. In the seventh, Christina proclaims herself and her beloved “happy equals in the flowering land / Of love” that “builds the house on rock and not on sand.” In the sestet of the sonnet, however, she recognizes the bravado of this language: “My heart’s a coward though my words are brave — / We meet so seldom, yet we surely part / So often.” Her only comfort now, a feeble hope perhaps, flapping its tinsel wing, is drawn from her reading of the Bible: “Though jealousy be cruel as the grave, / And death be strong, yet love is strong as death.” In the eighth sonnet Christina makes a last, rather desperate stand for requited love. Interestingly, her inspiration is Esther, who used her feminine wiles to gain the favor of King Ahasuerus and thus to save her people. Esther, a modest virgin devoted to her stepfather, trusts herself to the mysterious working of God’s will, and summons

the courage to act desperately and uncharacteristically in behalf of that will. It is this courage Christina calls upon:

If I might take my life so in hand,
And for my love to Love put up my prayer,
And for love's sake by Love be granted it!

The love that she is granted is not a requited love, however. The ninth sonnet marks the "turn" from happy to unhappy, or better, to unrequited love which will be the principal concern of the final sestet of sonnets.

Thinking of you, and all that was, and all
That might have been and now can never be,
I feel your honoured excellence, and see
Myself unworthy of the happier call:
For woe is me who walk so apt to fall,
So apt to shrink afraid, so apt to flee,
Apt to lie down and die (ah woe is me!)
Faithless and hopeless turning to the wall.

If she has lost "the happier call" of requited love, she is still "not hopeless quite nor faithless quite, / Because not loveless." As Plato was so fond of saying, honor is due not so much to the beloved as to the lover, for the lover has *within himself* the beneficent powers of love. Such a love may indeed "toil all night, / But take at morning." The allusion in the sestet to Jacob wrestling with the angel is suggestive of the epiphanic quality of the insight gained in the sonnet. Jacob [whatever it is he really wrestled with] faced the depths and came through them: "for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Genesis 32.30). Christina too has faced what she thought unfaceable and, not unmarked, not unwounded, has come out with her life preserved.

The last five sonnets chart, as it were, the psychology of loss and renunciation. The tenth sonnet, following hard on the "wrestling" of the ninth and suggestive of a natural psychological backsliding, expresses the speaker's world weariness after her loss:

Time flies, hope flags, life plies a wearied wing;
Death following hard on life gains ground apace.

Though "faith runs with each" and indeed "outruns the rest," the speaker no longer looks for happiness in earthly love but in an afterlife:

Let us go fall asleep, dear friend, in peace:
 A little while, and age and sorrow cease;
 A little while, and life reborn annuls
 Loss and decay and death, and all is love.

The speaker is “all air and fire,” leaving as it were her body to the baser elements. This mood is heightened in the beautiful eleventh sonnet.

Many in aftertimes will say of you
 ‘He loved her’ — while of me what will they say?
 Not that I loved you more than just in play,
 For fashion’s sake as idle women do.
 Even let them prate; who knows not what we knew
 Of love and parting in exceeding pain,
 Of parting hopeless here to meet again,
 Hopeless on earth, and heaven is out of view.
 But by my heart of love laid bare to you,
 My love that you can make not void nor vain,
 Love that foregoes you but to claim anew
 Beyond this passage of the gate of death,
 I charge you at the Judgment make it plain
 My love of you was life and not a breath.

Here the notion of Platonic love, already suggested earlier, is given full expression. On the strength of a philosophy grounded in personal faith, Christina makes claims for her love, defeated in earthly terms, which yet exceeds the narrow boundaries of mortal life. From the perspective of eternity, her love surely will be justified.⁴ In this confident frame of mind, she is able to accept (in the twelfth sonnet) without grudging it someone who might take her place in her lover’s eyes:

If there be any one can take my place
 And make you happy whom I grieve to grieve,
 Think not that I can grudge it, but believe
 I do commend you to that nobler grace,

⁴On some other occasion it might be amusing to compare closely this subtle poem with Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s often anthologized “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.” One is of sad love, the other of happy; one is the product of a woman of deep faith, the other of a woman whose saints are all “lost”; one is written in a quietly meditative style, the other in a burst of rhetoric. Yet what they have both in common is the conviction that the best poetry springs from the sincere expression of personal feeling, that the way to poetry lies through the self.

That readier wit than mine, that sweeter face.

One might reasonably look for irony in this, but if there is any it is subsumed in the overriding power of Christina's unrequited love: "since your riches make me rich, conceive / I too am crowned, while bridal crowns I weave." Her love is selfless, and in this lies her power to overcome adversity:

since the heart is yours that was mine own,
Your pleasure is my pleasure, right my right,
Your honourable freedom makes me free,
And you companioned I am not alone.⁵

The last two sonnets bring the macro-sonnet to its logical conclusion, the thirteenth concerned primarily with the fate of the beloved, the fourteenth with Christina herself. In the thirteenth sonnet, she trusts herself finally to God: "If I could trust mine own self with your fate, / Shall I not rather trust it in God's hand?" After a Job-like catalogue of His qualities, she still finds herself seeing through a glass darkly, with

only love and love's goodwill
Helpless to help and impotent to do,
Of understanding dull, of sight most dim.

All she can do now is commend her beloved "back to Him / Whose love your love's capacity can fill." With this she dismisses the beloved, and in the fourteenth sonnet she turns at last to consider her own fate:

Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there
Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this;

⁵The language here might bear comparison with that of the Elizabethans, particularly Donne in *The Holy Sonnets*. Indeed, paradoxes seem a basic religious mode of expression, and Christina's mood here, like Donne's, is steeped in religious feeling. One might note, however, that the personal form of address Donne reserved for his conversations with God is here applied to Christina's beloved. This brings into question whether the sonnets are conceived as actual addresses to the beloved or interior meditations. We remember that according to the notion of the "two audiences," Elizabethan sonnets supposedly addressed to a "lady" were in fact aimed at the same time at a public audience of courtly readers. This double motive may be detected through close observance of the many ironies, poses, and public conventions that inform the Elizabethan texts. Christina's sonnets pose a more difficult problem. The beloved is clearly not a paper figure, and there is no evidence that she is winking at a wider audience at the same time. If they are fancifully addressed to him, then they have the quality of a private meditation, like Donne perhaps, but most unlike Sidney.

Youth gone and beauty, what remains of bliss?
I will not bind fresh roses in my hair,
To shame a cheek at best but little fair,—
Leave youth his roses, who can bear a thorn,—
I will not seek for blossoms anywhere,
Except such common flowers as blow with corn.
Youth gone and beauty gone, what doth remain?
The longing of a heart pent up forlorn,
A silent heart whose silence loves and longs;
The silence of a heart which sang its songs
While youth and beauty made a summer morn,
Silence of love that cannot sing again.

In another age this beautiful poem might have been called “A Farewell to Cupid.” But unlike the sonnets of renunciation by Fulke-Greville or Drayton, it does not vanquish its mistress with a conceit or a convention. After the mood of philosophical exultation, she is left finally, her youth and beauty gone the way of all youth and beauty, with her private sorrow: “The longing of a heart pent up forlorn, / A silent heart whose silence loves and longs; . . . Silence of love that cannot sing again.”

The reader should note here the effect Christina Rossetti gains through one of her favorite devices in *Monna Innominata*, the repetition of key words and phrases. Apart from lending a feeling of unity to the individual sonnets and the sequence as a whole, this repetition suggests the hypnotic murmur of a mind talking to itself, which we as readers, taking our cue from Mill, must overhear. The substance of the poetry, its characteristic mode of expression is thus confessional. Its characteristic tone is that of a private diary or letter. In this, as we have seen, it is fairly typical of its age. What is not typical is Christina's way of structuring her sonnet sequence in an age which had effectively lost touch with the conventions of the Elizabethans. The “sonnet of sonnets” or macro-sonnet furnishes her with a tighter, more logical structure than either the loose conventional sequences of the Elizabethans or her own brother's loosely epiphanic “journey through his own soul.” Indeed, the macro-sonnet solves the problem of whether the sonnet should be conceived as an intense individual lyric (the form favored by romantic idolaters of Milton) or the strophic constituent of a much longer work (the form suggested by Elizabethan practice). The individual sonnets of *Monna Innominata*, unlike the romantic sonnets of Wordsworth and Keats or even the individual poems of *The House of Life*, do not stand on their own as individual lyric poems; but neither are

they episodic constituents of a long, rambling sequence in the manner of the Elizabethans. Taken together as constituents of a larger sonnet, they form an intensely unified lyric whole. And they must be so taken.

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