

Charting the Landscape of the “Inner Life”: Editing, Publishing, and Categorizing the Religious Verse of Christina Rossetti  
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Books matter to people, not just because of the content within them but also because of their materiality. Book lovers appreciate the physical properties of a book and know that *it matters* how ideas are presented on the paper between two covers. After spending some time getting to know four nineteenth century poetry collections – all either comprised of or connected to Christina Rossetti’s devotional poetry – I wondered, how can the material properties of a physical book change a reader’s experience of belief in poetry?

The four texts I have been studying over the past few weeks include *Poems of the Inner Life: Selected Chiefly from Modern Authors*, *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, Christina Rossetti’s *Verses*, and *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*. *Poems of the Inner Life* is part of the Armstrong Browning Library (ABL) rare books collection. It was published in 1866 and includes poems by Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Keble, and most importantly for this study, Christina Rossetti. It was purchased in 2010 from bookseller Leonard Roberts. Both *Time Flies* and *Verses* are a part of the ABL’s 19<sup>th</sup> Century collection. *Time Flies*, published in 1890, is inscribed by Christina Rossetti and dated “May 1894” by the author. It also includes an inscription by V.C. Turnbull on the title page and numerous notes throughout, which are also presumably Turnbull’s. *Time Flies* was purchased from Maggs Bros. Ltd. in 2014. *Verses* was printed in 1893. It is available on the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Women Poets website (<http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/ab-wpc/id/49850/rec/3>). It was purchased from antiquarian book dealer John Hart in 2000. *The Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, published in 1904 and edited by William Michael Rossetti, is part of the ABL’s Non-Rare book collection. It was a gift to the library from George Leslie Brook upon his death in 1987.

Although somewhat arbitrarily chosen and combined out of all the existing and available iterations of Christina Rossetti’s poetry from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these four texts craft a narrative. They tell how Rossetti could have been read at various junctures in the Victorian era and, thus, tell a story of how Victorians *materially* encountered religious belief in poetry. These four texts demonstrate that compilers and editors directly affect the reader’s experience of a poem and, subsequently, their experience of belief in poetry.

### Poetry and the “Inner Life”

Christina Rossetti’s early poetry met the public in the popular medium of the periodical. *The Athenaeum* published her first two poems, “Death’s Chill Between” and “Heart’s Chill Between,” in 1848 (ODNB). She also published poetry in *The Germ*, a magazine published by the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood (of which her two brothers were a part) and *Macmillan’s Magazine*. Her first collection of poetry, “*Goblin Market*” and *Other Poems*, appeared in 1862, published by Macmillan & Co (ODNB). By the time *Poems of the Inner Life* appeared, Rossetti’s poetry had won wide recognition and was deemed worthy of anthologization alongside such literary (and religious) luminaries as Tennyson, the Brownings, and John Keble.

In 1866, Emily Faithfull, Printer in Ordinary to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, published *Poems of the Inner Life*. Compiled and edited by Robert Crompton Jones, this little collection of verse joined a host of other poetry anthologies and devotional volumes popular in Victorian England at the time.<sup>1</sup> Jones’s presentation of Rossetti’s poetry in this volume is markedly different from her self-

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the ABL holds a copy of *Golden Thoughts from Golden Fountains*, a collection of religious verse and prose excerpts published by Frederick W. Warne in 1868. The anthology is ornately decorated and includes illustrations

presentation in the *“Goblin Market” and Other Poems*, as well as from her self-presentation in later devotional works, such as *Time Flies*, which will be examined later. The reader encountering religious poetry in this text would find these poems at once moored by attentive devotion but adrift from theology as Jones identifies the “inner life” as the province of poetry, thus equating poetry with spirituality and severing spirituality from religion and theology. The move is both textual and material.

The attractive blue cover of the book features a three-lined gold border and a title in gold centered and surrounded by a decorative bracket. Inside, the poems are carefully arranged in a series of four “provinces” of the “inner life”: Nature, The Kingdom of Heaven, Life, and Death and Immortality. These provinces alternate between this world and the transcendent. Nature and Life, the two provinces of humanity’s existence in this world, are also the only two sections with sub-sections. For example, “Life” is broken into sub-sections that either correspond to particular Christian virtues or to particular disciplines of the Christian life. Each major section features a divider page with an illustration – sometimes overtly religious, sometimes symbolically so – a header above the first poem in the section, and an ornate decorative letter (a drop cap) to begin the first poem of each section. These details suggest a devotional attention to the arrangement of the poetry and may echo the decorative flourishes and dedicated artistry of illuminated manuscripts.

While internal pages do not continue the border motif from the cover title, the illustrations and poems themselves become border markings, implying containment. The blank space around the poems and illustrations contain the text just as much as lines upon the page. By eschewing drawn borders on each page, a common element of decorative devotional aids, and by allowing the textual and graphic elements of the page to dictate the space, Jones may be hinting at his belief, expressed in the introduction that this is Religious Poetry “in no narrow, technical sense of the word; but amidst all the variety of its themes, there is a constant reference to that deeper principle of religion which underlies all the Theologies, and which is at the heart of the true inner life of Nature and of Man, of Earth and of Heaven” (3). The material decisions Jones made in order to present these poems to readers echo this statement in form, highlighting the separation of religion from theology – that is, spirit from dogma. In so doing, he equates poetry with the province of spirit and religion, not doctrine or theology.

### **Making Secular Time Sacred**

With *Time Flies* and *Verses*, Rossetti herself, in partnership with her printer (the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge), decided how she wanted to present her own poetry. Her organization and categorization of her own poetry shapes the reader’s experience of belief in her poetry in quite a different way than Jones’s approach to the same. Whereas Jones’s material choices encourage the reader to see a separation between the religious and the theological, between this life and the divine life, and between inner life and outer life, Rossetti’s *Time Flies* (which also functions devotionally) inspires readerly encounters with the divine within the secular, hinting at the possibility that the transcendent may actually be the fundamental. Rossetti’s material choices reach across Jones’s divide between the religious and theological and attempt to show that, at the very least, they are related.

Released in 1885 (the ABL edition was published in 1890), *Time Flies: A Reading Diary* was described by Christina Rossetti to her friend Carolina Maria Gemmer as “A miscellaneous set of short readings in prose and verse” (*Letters*). Rossetti’s self-deprecating description of her volume

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commissioned by the publisher from well-known artists of the day. Such a volume would have been a thoughtful and, no doubt, costly gift. The ABL copy is inscribed by Robert Browning to Lily Benzon “because of a poem in it about doves.”

belies its careful construction. The cover of the 1890 edition owned by the ABL features a gilded title emblazoned above a decorative illustration of a winged hourglass. Above the hourglass hovers a butterfly or moth, perhaps echoing either transformation or the fleeting nature of life. Inside, the readings are organized according to the progress of the secular calendar, beginning on January 1 and finishing on December 31. Each “entry” in the diary is assigned its day, and when the date and content coincide with a major feast day on the church calendar, Rossetti also includes the feast name.

Other than a single border along the top of each page to separate the title and page number from the text, the pages of this reading diary remain undecorated. Even the titles, reduced to only the date in most cases, feel spare. Additionally, the readings are not separated from one another, other than by the bold-faced date, and, as such, give the sensation of the swift movement of time – of reading on from day to day with little to mark the time. In simplest terms, of time flying. A section of moveable feasts is included at the end of the readings for the calendar year. Thus, while Rossetti’s primary organizational principle is the calendar year, the feasts of the church calendar comprise an implicit organizing principle, breaking into “secular” time – the time of work and industry and production – to draw readers across the divide of this life and the divine life.

### **Material Acts of Devotion(?)**

Like *Time Flies*, *Verses* bears the mark of Rossetti’s own material choices. Karen Dieleman has written extensively about the organization of the poems in this volume, as well as the physical features of the text itself, in chapters 3 and 4 of her book *Religious Imaginaries: The Liturgical and Poetic Practices of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, and Adelaide Procter*. I will pull on her work for my own, brief analysis of *Verses*.

Published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1893, one year before Rossetti’s death, *Verses* collected much of Rossetti’s previously published devotional poetry from *Called to Be Saints*, *Time Flies*, and *The Face of the Deep*. The poems are collected under several headings, respectively: “Out of the Deep,” “Christ Our All in All,” “Some Feasts and Fasts,” “Gifts and Graces,” “The World. Self-Destruction,” “Divers Worlds. Time and Eternity,” “New Jerusalem and Its Citizens,” and “Songs for Strangers and Pilgrims.” This arrangement follows, loosely, the progression of the liturgy in an Anglican communion service as it leads worshipers through preparation, reception, and meditation on the way to an encounter with God (Dieleman 106). The liturgy creates the impression of life as a spiritual journey, a model mirrored in the arrangement of sections in *Verses*. Thus, readers are invited into Rossetti’s volume as into a liturgical space – even an ecclesiastical space – where they encounter belief in poetry as a part of a larger and more universal expression of faith and practice. This explains Rossetti’s emphasis on the doctrine of the communion of the saints, which in itself is further proof of Rossetti’s very different approach to the “division” between the life of this world and the divine life than Jones’s in *Poems of the Inner Life*.

The design and layout of *Verses* also connects the reader to a larger system of read and sung faith practice. The most striking aspect of the material presentation of Rossetti’s poetry in this volume, to me, was the outlining of the pages in red. Upon further research, I found that 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> religious texts, such as prayer books and Bibles, were often decorated thus by hand as an expression of devotion. In keeping with the Victorian propensity for nostalgia and imitation of the past, *Verses* echoes this devotional practice with one key difference: rather than being applied by hand by the owner or some other individual connected with the ownership of the book, the printer adds the lines, making them a feature of the text for all to encounter. Thus, rather than simple nostalgia, the inclusion of these red lines may suggest a broad invitation to join with saints past. Dieleman, commenting on the book as a whole, argues that the “design and appearance of Rossetti’s last publication of religious poems (*Verses*) to look like a prayer or hymn book...is not accidental. It

communicates a particular religious intention and attitude before the poems are even read.... Just as the elaborate interior arrangements and decorated appearance of Christ Church aimed to create an environment in which the indwelling of God was everywhere signified, so the visual and material effects of Rossetti's poetry in *Verses* keep the reader ever mindful of the devotional space he or she has entered" (125).<sup>2</sup>

In a marked departure from Rossetti's self-presentation in *Time Flies* and *Verses* and from the broad church orientation of Jones's anthology, William Michael Rossetti's 1904 edition of Christina Rossetti's collected works presents the poetry within the context of a person. That is to say, William Michael's edition foregrounds the author and her life, sublimating belief to an individual experience and shaping Rossetti studies for the larger portion of the twentieth century.

William Michael's edition of Christina's poetry makes three notable physical changes to the presentation of her poetry (both devotional and "non"-devotional): the poems are arranged, more or less, chronologically within sections; the volume includes a portrait of Christina on the frontispiece; and the volume is published with a memoir of Christina's life prior to the poetry. The portrait of Christina on the frontispiece is particularly of note, as it provides a striking visual for the implications of William Michael's arrangement. The portrait is a sketch of Christina's head and neck in profile. Her hair is neatly pulled back in a bun at the nape of the neck, her head is bent slightly forward and downward, and her eyes seem to have just fallen. She looks pensive. The shading on the side of her face gives definition to her cheekbones, lending a quiet beauty to her face, but it is clear that this portrait is not for the sake of beauty. The portrait, William Michael explains in an 1896 volume of Christina's unpublished poems, was done by Dante Gabriel Rossetti when she was 18 years old. William Michael speculates that it is a study of Dante Gabriel's for the Virgin Mary in *Ecce Ancilla Domini* (xiii). Thus, William Michael casts Christina as a biblical character of quiet renunciation, and Mary's famous words from the Annunciation echo in the reader's ear: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1.38 KJV).

These details, especially when added to the memoir at the beginning of the collection, create a liturgy of quite a different kind. As James K.A. Smith has argued in *Desiring the Kingdom*, liturgy is not just the province of the church. Secular institutions – that is, institutions of government, commerce, and pleasure – create liturgical spaces and forms all the time, and these "secular" liturgies shape individual habit and practice just as much as religious and ecclesiastical liturgies do. What is done with the body, argues Smith, shapes the mind and soul. William Michael's "liturgy" disturbs the ecclesiastical bent of Rossetti's other works by leading readers into communion with the author rather than with the life of the divine. Unlike *Verses* and its self-conscious attempt to lead readers to an encounter with God within the physical structure of the book, William Michael's collection leads readers to encounter Christina, thus implying that her poems express a personal journey of struggle and belief. While no doubt true that a poet's works are informed by their lives, William Michael may have inadvertently encouraged a view of Christina Rossetti's faith as naively solipsistic and renunciatory.

## Conclusion

From Jones's anthology of religious poetry across a broad spectrum of Christian belief during a time period of division and reform within the Church of England, to Rossetti's liturgical self-presentation of belief in *Time Flies* and *Verses*, to William Michael's presentation of belief as a matter of individual experience, each text examined here puts boundaries around the experience of

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<sup>2</sup> For a fuller consideration of these material choices, see chapter 4 of Dieleman's book where she examines Rossetti's genre choices in light of liturgical forms and the material features in light of sacramental worship and "ecclesiological attentiveness to aesthetics and arrangement" (139).

faith in poetry, albeit in different ways. Jones's anthology, in attempting to remove theological boundaries that he sees as obstructions to essential faith, separates this life from the divine life, creating boundaries for each world and setting them (perhaps inadvertently) in contrast to one another. Rossetti's devotional diary, *Time Flies*, works within the boundaries of "secular" time to find a sacred rhythm, implying that the boundaries drawn by the world of work and commerce may include a more fundamental sacred order. *Verses*, Rossetti's most obvious expression of liturgical form in print, establishes boundaries of another kind: here she utilizes the structures of the liturgy and the ritual of the church service, as well as the visual red lines around each page, to draw the readers into an encounter with the divine. By marking off time and space thus, she gathers, as the liturgy does, the past, present, and the future into one place. By contrast, William Michael's arrangement, we have seen, imagines the boundary around Rossetti's poetry as that of her own person – her life and her experiences.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this is a somewhat arbitrary combination of texts. Although unified by their common connection to Christina Rossetti and their location in the Armstrong Browning Library, there are many other texts worth examining in light of this conversation. Rossetti's other devotional collections, as well as her early poetry collections, could extend this study in helpful ways. Additionally, analyzing her presence in the periodical press might open questions about the way such a medium influenced the reader's experience of belief in poetry. In an undergraduate context, it might be an interesting exercise to ask students to examine one poem present in all four volumes and to draw conclusions about the different ways it is presented. This would give students a more focused, less diffuse, example of the concepts I've introduced here.

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