EMILY DICKINSON AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: THE RHETORIC OF AMBIVALENCE

By

REBECCA LALRINTLUANGI

Department of English

submitted

in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English
of North-Eastern Hill University,
Shillong

Chapter—I

INTRODUCTION

No two poets can be so alike and yet so different as Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. On the personal level, their lives run almost parallel to each other's at every turn, yet neither can be dismissed as a mere reflection of the other. Their individuality and unique personalities are asserted even by the colour of the clothes they chose to wear. The 'Nun of Amherst' chose to dress in white whereas Christina Rossetti wore the black dress of the Lay Sister of the Anglican Church. Till today, Dickinson not only remains one of America's greatest poets, but has also become almost a cult figure there. The Homestead where she lived all her life is open to visitors every summer. One may see the white dress and a lock of her dark hair reverentially displayed by the Amherst College on her birthday week.

Christina Rossetti's appeal, although cloistral, is in no way inferior to that of Dickinson's. She too, has not lost her appeal with her popular children's verses and devotional poems. In 1892, Walter Raleigh thought Christina Rossetti to be "the best poet alive"[1]; and in 1904, Ford Madox Ford wrote that every lettered person carried about with him a little of

Rossetti's verses. Accounting for her popularity, Madox Ford said that Rossetti "became the poet of suffering" and "suffering is a thing of all ages."[2] She is much anthologised and the enduring popularity of her poems proves her greatness. Celebrated poets of her time Jean Ingelow, Felicia Hemans, Letitia London, Dora Greenwell and Augusta Webster are almost unknown today. But the "High-Priestess of Pre-Raphaelitism" continues to hold her own, taking her place beside the likes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson. To read the love poems of these four poets together has been likened to opening a bottle of rare wine.[3] Barrett Browning was already a published poet and Emily Brontë engaged in the imaginary world of Gondal when Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti were born.

Even though Emily Dickinson is an American poet, scholars and critics have, in recent times, begun to place her among the Victorians. In The Language of Exclusion The Poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti (1987), Sharon Leder and Andrea Abbott make no distinction between England and America as they write about the socio-economic background of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. Instead they present the poets as products of the Victorian world. They even describe Dickinson's mother as an "ideal Victorian woman". Dickinson's literary mentors were John Ruskin, Robert and Elizabeth Browning and Tennyson, all of them English and

Victorian. Judith Farr, therefore, writes in the introduction of Emily Dickinson A Collection of Critical Essays (1996) that in so far as Dickinson "took and translated so much- subjects, themes, topical diction, a Ruskinian aesthetic - from the art and culture of her day" that it is imperative, to recognise her as she was "a remarkable or ... an exceptional mid-Victorian". The term "Victorian" not only refers to a particular era in the history of Great Britain, but also the "flavour or ethos of the period" and in literature, a certain "style and attitude" that reflect the concern of the age.[4] Citing the themes of 'transience, death, eternity and religious faith' in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, Stephen Gurney endorses that she may be called a "Victorian" in the broadest sense of the term.[5]

To designate Emily Dickinson as a "Victorian" or to refer Nineteenth Century America as 'Victorian America' as Vivian Pollak[6] and Alfred Kazin[7] have done is parallel to Christina Rossetti being called a Pre-Raphaelitic poet. The Pre-Raphaelitic Brotherhood formed in 1848 consisted of Dante Gabriel, Holman Hunt and John Millais, and later expanded to include Thomas Woolner, Frederick Stephens, William Michael Rossetti and James Collinson, the man Christina Rossetti was later engaged to for some time. The members of the mysterious "P.R.B." were painters, sculptors and poets, since Dante Gabriel proposed that they "include all the nice chaps" "who

do anything in the literary line".[8] However, his proposal to include his sister was demurred on the ground that she being a woman would spoil the brotherhood. Dante Gabriel, in a letter to Homan Hunt protested that he merely meant that she should allow him to read her poetry in their meetings. But Christina Rossetti herself vetoed this suggestion, for fear that such a reading would seem a "display" of herself. The Pre-Raphaelites created a synthesis of poetry and painting, aiming for the principle of "Truth to nature". Although Rossetti did not become a member of the "P.R.B.", her poetry was nevertheless influenced by the ideals of the movement. She also posed for a number of their paintings. In 1848, Dante Gabriel painted her in "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin". She was, in the words of Frances Thomas, her biographer, "a black-clad figure flitting dimly through the brilliant peacock world of the Pre-Raphaelites."[9] As the sister of two of its members and the one-time fiancee of another, she was closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelites. With her poem "A Birthday", Rossetti is regarded to have reached the height of Pre-Raphaelitism. She weaves a wonderful tapestry of brilliant colour and texture with vivid iconography:

> Raise me a dais of silk and down:
> Hang it with vain and purple dyes:
> Carve it in doves and pomegranates,
> And peacocks with a hundred eyes;
> Work it in gold and silver grapes
> In leaves and silver fleur-de-lys.
> Because the birthday of my life
> Is come, my love is come to me.[10]

C.M. Bowra in The Romantic Imagination (1961) observes that Christina Rossetti's poetry reveals her "dual personality": One side of her was Pre-Raphaelite, delighting in pictorial images; while another side of her was grave and serious, bound to her inner or spiritual life. The above poem as well as "Goblin Market" are representative of the Pre-Raphaelitic side of her nature.

Traditionally, Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti have been viewed as reclusively eccentric poets whose works reflected the abnormality of their lives. Born within a few days of each other, these two poets lived in an age when the dominant culture for women was "romance, marriage and motherhood". Victorian England and America relegated single women as "redundant" and useless and by defying the social norm of marriage, both Dickinson and Rossetti risked being stigmatised. On the other hand, unlike the married woman, they were free to pursue their poetic vision and leave a wealth of literary treasure of posterity. Dale Spender, in The Writing or the Sex (1989) says that "because marriage has so often been a full time occupation for women, with little or no opportunity for writing, one of the first questions a woman has had to ask is whether she could marry - and write? ... but literary women have ordinarily been required to choose, and no matter what the decision, it has often been accompanied by a sense of loss." Spender mentions Elizabeth

Barrett Browning and Charlotte Brontë among the few lucky ones who had literary career and marriage while Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti are listed among those who chose their writing over marriage.

In The Language of Exclusion, Leder and Abbott have offered a new approach to the study of the two poets by "releasing" them "from the prison of their private selves and by demonstrating their poetic responses to the public events of their age." They draw attention to the "shared historical experiences" in order to "reveal their public significances" at the same time exposing the inadequacy of the spinster/recluse model for studying their works. However, in order to assess their true genius and poetic worth, it is necessary not only to read Dickinson and Rossetti in their historical perspective, but also to make an in-depth study of their poetry. This will enable us to see the diversive and ambivalent attitudes which their poetic voices proclaim and express with conviction. If their poetry was a mere record of their private selves, it would have failed to attract or sustain universal interest. On the contrary, they have chosen such themes as love, faith and post-mortal existence which are of universal interest, not only during the Victorian age, but at all times. Sometimes the poets project contradictory attitudes in their poems. Leder and Abbott mention that Dickinson's "poems point in a million directions" while Farr

refers to her "multiplicity of attitudes". What the poets so convincingly convey cannot always be taken to be their personal convictions, for that would mean contradicting themselves often. It is rather, their rhetoric, the art of persuasion that gives ambivalence its credibility. It is imperative at this point, to define the terms "rhetoric" and "ambivalence".

In the Aristotelian sense, "rhetoric" is the art of "discovering all the available means of persuasion in any given case". A modern day definition of the term as given by Anthony C. Winkler and Jo Ray McCuen in Rhetoric Made Plain (1974) is that it is "the art of putting one's case in the strongest and best possible way." The authors allow that "all those strategies of communicating in speech and writing that we all use everyday in an attempt to sway each other" fall within its scope. They also point out that rhetoric begins where grammar ends. Here one may quote from Dickinson; "This was a Poet/It is that" and Rossetti's lines "Gone were but the Winter/Come were but the Spring" as pertinent examples.

Ambivalence is part of human nature in so far as there is inevitable opposition between thoughts and actions or words and feelings. Twentieth Century Chambers Dictionary defines Ambivalence as the "co-existence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes towards the same object. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it also, as "acting on or

arguing for sometimes one and sometimes the other of two opposites". Ambivalence in human nature has been best portrayed by the unforgettable fictional character Holden Caulfield, the hero in Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye (1951). Holden, whose one side of the head is significantly covered with "millions" of gray hair brands all grown-ups as "phonies" all the while he is painfully anxious to act like one. He declares, matter-of-factly, that he is the "most terrific liar you ever saw." He conspiratorially admits that he often tells people he is glad to meet them even when in actual fact he is not. And with a wisdom that goes beyond his sixteen years, he asserts, "If you want to stay alive, you have to say that stuff though".

In The Landscape of Absence (1974), Inder Nath Kher observes that ambivalence is "integral to poetic creation". Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti's poetry do not always have actual bearings on their thoughts or lives or even with reality. But unlike Holden, they do not confess to be "terrific liars". On the contrary, the aim of their rhetoric is to lend credibility to the thoughts expressed in the poems, to convince readers that whatever is said in the poem is the truth, at least within its own local parameter. The rhetoric of ambivalence therefore, is the art of creating opposing truths and realities that not only exist side by side, but remain harmonious and cohesive. It is a literary

technique or strategy by which the poets offer multiple, often contradictory ideas about a certain theme or concept with the same degree of sincerity and conviction. It cannot be denied that the ambivalence of the poets' minds are largely expressed and reflected in their poetry, especially with regard to Emily Dickinson's faith and Rossetti's renunciation of earthly love. However, a good part of their poetic expressions are deliberate compositions without being necessarily connected to their personal convictions. Examples of this kind of composition are the poems portraying 'ghosts' which we find in Rossetti's poetry. The poetry of Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti is not random production. Instead, each poem is well thought out and well revised. The ambivalence in their poetry does not grate or jar, but reflects the essence of poetic creation and the complexity of the poets themselves. Matters of the heart, man's eternal quest for God and curiosity about existence beyond this life elicits ambivalent feelings which Dickinson and Rossetti have endeavoured to express and convey.

A very important point to be kept in mind while studying the poetry of Dickinson and Rossetti is that the speaking 'I' does not necessarily refer to themselves. Dickinson has taken pains to clarify this point when she wrote to Higginson that her poems are spoken by a "supposed person",[11] an alter ego or merely the poetic voice. Rossetti

too, while replying to her brother's criticism of "Under the Rose" draws attention to what she terms the "poet mind",[12] which allows her to compose about situations and emotions beyond and outside her own experience. When the creative mind is at work, both poets take recourse to this devise of using the "supposed person". In other words, the poet-persona is created. Failure to acknowledge or remember this often leads the unsuspecting or over-enthusiastic scholar to lose himself or herself in a maze of fascination, coming up with such claims as the marriage of Emily Dickinson with an already married clergyman or her lesbian relationship.[13]

Since mid-nineteenth century England and America relegated single unmarried women as "redundant" and exclusive from society, Leder and Abbott have justified Dickinson's withdrawal from society as "a reasonable response" to that society and not due to her eccentricity. Hers was a radical position in defiance of the Victorian society's expectations of women. As for Christina Rossetti, she became obsessively religious and developed a world-weariness which her poetry inevitably reflects time and again. Dickinson and Rossetti, did not, however, let their reclusiveness stand in the way of keeping themselves abreast of the socio-economic and political conditions of their time. They were also interested in the growing feminism of the age since they chose not only

to remain as daughters, but also to pursue the unlady-like career of a poet.

The term 'feminism' was first used by the French dramatist Alexander Dumas in 1872 in a pamphlet "*L' Homme-femme*" to designate the then emerging movement for women's rights. It was, essentially, a movement for extending the franchise to women in England, but over the years, it has evolved to a universally accepted cultural movement for the equality of the sexes in almost every aspect of life. In "Men Against Patriarchy", Toril Moi describes the terms 'feminist' and 'feminism' as "political labels indicating support for the aims of the women's movement. 'Feminism' then is a specific kind of political discourse; a theoretical and political practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism."[14]

Emily Dickinson was introduced to feminist literature by her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson. Together they read Aurora Leigh, a feminist verse novel by Elizabeth Browning and The Princess by Tennyson, both of which portrays the new intellectual woman and which no doubt encouraged Dickinson to be a full-fledged poet. She admired Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale, the latter being an epitome of "the heroic single woman" and who also happened to be a role model for Christina Rossetti. Emily Dickinson had been introduced to feminism during her year at Mt. Holyoke, a seminary for

women, that taught women to become better housewives and mothers as well as to "shed a civilizing influence over an increasingly corrupt patriarchal influence".[15] But Dickinson, like Rossetti, was ambivalent towards feminism. The Seminary also stressed the importance of accepting Christ, and the young Emily found herself the only one who could not "accept Christ", and was torn between envy and mockery of those who did accept Him. She was also not interested to become a missionary or a teacher; nor was she interested to be a wife and a mother. She was, however, in the words of her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi, "an instinctive feminist." But with Emily Dickinson, nothing can ever be cut and dried. Her career as a poet and her refusal to be caught up in a marriage, to the extent that even the lover in her poems is kept at a distance from her persona may be construed as her feminism and a bid for independence. But she was also contented not to lend any contribution to the emerging new woman, by taking up the career of either a missionary or a teacher or a nurse. On the contrary, she secluded herself in the little upstair room of her father's house, where she "oftenest stayed with myself", writing ambivalently:

> Alone, I cannot be –
> For Hosts – do visit me –
> Recordless Company –
> who baffle key –

They have no Robes, nor Names –
No Almanacs – nor Climes –
But General Homes
Like Gnomes –

Their coming, may be known
By couriers within –
Their going – is not –
For they're never gone – (#298)

Even as early as her stay at Mt. Holyoke, Dickinson had written that she had "enjoyed the solitude finely". In a way, her life typifies what Tricia Bicketon has said, that

> it is often a very positive experience for a woman to be alone. It may be the first time in her life she discover what she wants, her own needs, without taking someone else into consideration ... She may discover new possibilities, talents and horizons ... Indeed, perhaps she becomes stronger and attempts to do things that once seemed easier to avoid. She is free, as it were, to create herself.[16]

Dickinson's seclusion upstairs elicits an enthusiastic comment from Karl Keller"."If going up there makes one a madwoman there's a hell of a good universe up there, let's go". For it is up there that Dickinson has created her ambivalent and enigmatic self through the 1775 poems. Living in a pre-dominantly patriarchal culture as a single unemployed woman, she was excluded from the dominant culture in more ways than one. But Emily Dickinson was able to turn her exclusion into an advantage, whereby she has created a 'self' that may best be described as the 'Myth of Amherst'. She challenged, in her own way the 'patriarchy and sexism' of

the dominant culture, gaining for herself freedom to explore the 'undiscovered continent' and following the Emersonian advice "who so would be a man, must be a nonconformist. ... Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind".[17] She was also at the same time, quite naturally drawn to other feminists. One of Dickinson's childhood friend was Helen Hunt Jackson, who became famous as a poet and a writer Jackson was also an activist who championed the cause of Native Americans and who also championed Emily Dickinson as a poet.

In the spring of 1862, after reading an article "Letter to Young Contributors" in The Atlantic Monthly, Emily Dickinson wrote to the author T.W. Higginson, asking him for his opinion on four of her poems, including "Safe in their alabaster Chambers". Higginson, once a Unitarian Clergyman was not only an influential critic, but also a liberal thinker, interested in and sympathetic to the status of women. His opinion on the poems Dickinson sent him was not favourable. He thought that they were "remarkable though odd, ... too delicate - not strong enough to publish".[18]

Both Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti's exposure to the growing feminism of the age and their ambivalent reaction to it has been noted here as it contributed to a better understanding of their art. However, it is not the aim of this dissertation to fit in the poems written by them in

the feministic mould or to interpret them wholly from the feminist perspective. Rather, it concentrates on noting how ambivalence, real, as well as contrived, is a dominant characteristic of Dickinson and Rossetti's poetry. The poets had an ambivalent attitude not only towards feminism but life in general. This ambivalence is largely reflected in their poetic utterances and composition through the language and rhetoric used by them.

Unlike Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti was educated at home by her mother Frances Lavinia, a professional governess. Ill health, a common enough trait of Victorian womanhood prevented Rossetti from becoming a governess herself. Though she was born with the volatile temperament of her Italian ancestors and given to terrible tantrums in childhood, she suddenly became grave and melancholy by the time she reached adolescence. Leder and Abbott suggest that Rossetti's bouts of melancholia were perhaps her way of justifying her concentration on her writing as well as her lack of regular employment. They point out that one of Rossetti's aunt, Margaret, "would erratically break out into fits of hysteria" so as to "conveniently" escape the pressure for a regular job. Rossetti was engaged, first as her mother's assistant in the two day schools, which eventually failed; and as her father's nurse till his death in 1854. After her father's death, having no vocation for nursing,

Rossetti nevertheless applied as volunteer to go to Scutari with Florence Nightingale. But at twenty-four, she was too young for the post and was rejected. This gesture however reveals her desire to identity with other single women knowing full well it was considered unnatural.

Around this time, the notion that single women should be "either self-supporting or engaged in some worthwhile occupation" was floated by some women writers known to Rossetti. There were Sisters of Charity (1855) by Anna Jameson, Women and Work (1856) by Barbara Leigh Smith and the newly launched English Women's Journal (1858) edited by Bessie Rayner Parkes. Sometime in 1859, Christina Rossetti joined the St. Mary Magdalene Home, a London diocesan penitentiary for 'fallen women' as a volunteer. The House of Charity, as it was also called, was established in 1855 and staffed by nuns from the Anglican sisterhood. Although Rossetti did not formally join the sisterhood, she dressed herself in the habit of an Associate of the Order in "black with hanging sleeves, a muslin cap with lace edging, quite becoming to her with the veil". Some of her poems of this period, "Cousin Kate", "Margery" and "Maude Clare" reveal her deep preoccupation with the 'fallen woman' or unmarried mothers. The poem "Under the Rose" written in 1869 and later retitled "The iniquity of the fathers upon the children" is

about the shame and pain of illegitimacy from the point of view of the child.

Christina Rossetti also came to be associated with a new feminist group formed in the late 1850s called the Langham Place Group. The members consisted of Barbara Leigh Smith, a cousin of Florence Nightingale, Bessie Rayner Parkes and Adelaide Procter. Smith brought the Married Women's Property Bill before Parliament in 1857 and in the next year, Parkes found the English Woman's Journal Smith, who also helped to found Girton College for women was largely interested in Parliamentary reform and helped to organise the Women's Suffrage Petition Bill, presented to Parliament in 1866. Although Rossetti felt that she was only at the "merest outskirt" of this radical feminist group, she, none-the-less was much influenced by it. She became an 'outer sister' in the Anglican Sisterhood and corresponded with the Suffragist Augusta Webster. However, her stand on the Woman Question is rather ambivalent. She opined that since the Bible reserves certain duties and privileges "exclusively" for men, it is clear "that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes". At the same time, she writes,

> On the other hand if female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence, then I confess I feel disposed to shoot ahead of my instructresses, and to assert that female MPs are only right and reasonable...[19]

Then again:

> Nor do I think it quite inadmissible that men should continue the exclusive national legislators, so long as they do continue the exclusive soldier-representatives of the nation, and engross the whole payment in life and limb for notional quarrels. I do not know whether any lady is prepared to adopt the Platonic theory of female regiments; if so she sets aside this objection, but I am not, so to me it stands.[20]

"The Lowest Room" is an attempt "to satisfy the conflicting claims of womanhood, parenthood and sainthood."[21]

In spite of her acquaintance with "strong-minded women" and their ideas on the equality of the sexes and liberalism, Christina Rossetti never actually became one of them. Similarly, Emily Dickinson never attempted to join nursing or other community work despite her admiration and reverence of Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale. After a normal adolescence and early youth, Dickinson, for whatever reasons, neurotic or eccentric, began to withdraw more and more come society,. After living in Amherst for two months, Mabel Loomis Todd wrote to her parents about Emily Dickinson:

> I must tell you about the character of Amherst. It is a lady whom the people called the Myth. She is a sister of Mr. Dickinson and seems to be the climax of all the family oddity. She has not been outside of her own house in fifteen years, except once to see a new Church, when she crept out at night, and viewed it by moonlight ... She dresses wholly in white, and her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely, but no one ever sees her ...[22]

It has sometimes been conjectured that Emily Dickinson turned away from society into the safety of her father's house as a result of her unhappy love affairs, especially her affair with Rev. Charles Wadsworth, the already married clergyman. But this is too trivial a reason for an intelligent, sane young woman to go into seclusion for the rest of her life. A reason which Dickinson herself would have scorned as preposterous.

Judith Farr points out that Dickinson was certainly not alone in her avoidance of company. Recalling other new England writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne and Thoreau, Farr advises that one should "recall that mid-Victorian America often associated the achievement of high art with the reclusion of the artist". She also points out that The Atlantic Monthly, where, incidentally T.W. Higginson published his "Letter to a Young Contributor" which encouraged Dickinson to send him her poems, recommended in January 1860, that to be an 'artist', one "must be lifted away and isolated from worldly surroundings" and must live alone. The Atlantic also often featured artists such as Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church and Sanford Gifford, who would disappear for months or even years while engaged in a project. Farr is of the opinion that by her seclusion and reclusiveness Dickinson "might have seen herself belonging spiritually to their company."[23] Here, one may also note that

Emily Dickinson's seclusion and her temperament conforms to Emerson's description of the Transcendentalist or the Idealist:

> They are lonely; the spirit of their writing and conversation is lonely; they repel influences; they shun general society; they incline to shut themselves in their chamber in the house, to live in the country rather than in the town, and to find their tasks and amusements in solitude.[24]

An interesting point to be noted for consideration is the fact that among Dickinson's list of reading is Thomas á Kempis' Of the Imitation of Christ. R.B. Sewall[25] informs us of the two editions of the book, one of 1857 which bore the poet's name in Sue's handwriting, and another of 1876, a present to Dickinson from Sue both of which are heavily marked. Quoting some of the marked passages, Sewall constructs the degree of influence which the Imitation has had on the poet. According to him, exhortations such as "Despise the World"; "Fly the tumultuousness of the world as much as thou canst"; "Take refuge within the closet of thine heart", which abounds in the Imitation, "must have had an attraction quite apart from its doctrinal basis" for Dickinson, with her "religious and social problems" and her burgeoning talent still unfocussed." Sewall further states that the religious side of the book must have been treated the same way as the Amherst sermons, "with contrived indifference". But the general injunctions of the Imitation

calls for renunciation of the world and all earthly love. Exhortations such as "Retire into your Chamber and shut out the tumult of the world"; "The cell continually dwelt in, grows sweet, but if you keep not to it, it becomes tedius and distasteful" and "It is praiseworthy for a religious to go seldom abroad, to shun being seen, and not to desire to see men" are likely to have led Emily Dickinson to withdraw more and more from society to the extent that she stopped seeing anybody. Even her letters were addressed for her to shield her handwriting from public eyes; her sister Lavinia and to be fitted for her dresses. Does it not appear, then, that the young Emily Dickinson who could not accept Christ like the others while at Mt. Holyoke Seminary decides to undertake seclusion as an alternative to conversion? Her letters to her friends Abiah Root and Jane Humphrey reveal that she was desperate in her failure to be converted and her subsequent feeling of being different from those who had, including "darling Vinnie". It must have occurred to her that conforming to the regimen and locale prescribed in the Imitation would do just as well. Apart from following the exhortation to renounce the world and to live in seclusion, Sewall also quotes this passage which was marked in the 1876 copy" "Never be entirely idle, but either be reading, or writing, or praying, or meditating or endeavouring something for the public good". He says that Dickinson endeavoured to

work for the common good "with the living word in hundreds of letters and poems".

The Imitation was also read by Christina Rossetti, but there has been, as yet, no study about its impact on either her life or her poetry. But there is no doubt that the Imitation, which had a great influence on Dickinson's life but not on her work had the same strong influence on Rossetti and her works. Writing in the Memoir, William Michael Rossetti claims that his sister was never a "great devourer of books" although the number of books read by her during her entire life was "necessarily considerable". Her knowledge of the Bible was "minute and ready". This was "supplemented" by her readings of the Confessions of Augustine and the Imitation of Christ by Thomas á Kempis. But even prominent critics like Jerome McGann have not delved into why the Imitatio Christie was so popular during the Victorian Age or to what extent it has influenced Christina Rossetti. However, it may safely be claimed that both her life and her devotional poetry bears a deep imprint of the Imitation. On the personal level, Rossetti, not unlike Dickinson has responded to the call to renounce the world and earthly love. She rejected two offers of marriage, one from James Collinson and the other from Charles Bagot Cayley on the ground that neither men satisfied her spiritual expectations. She chose, instead, to remain single and spent her time visiting and

counselling fallen women in the House of Charity. The Imitation contains instructions such as: "Therefore renounce all earthly things, render yourself pleasing and faithful to your Creator, so that you may attain true bliss"; "Therefore learn also to part with a dear friend for the love of God. And do not be sorrowful if a friend abandons you, but reflect that one day we must leave each other."[26]

Many of Rossetti's poems are about the parting of close fiends and true lovers. Perhaps the most profound is "Parted" where the speaker philosophically accepts her separation from her beloved as an act of God. Nursing the memory of her love, the poet-persona can only hope and wait for a reunion in Paradise, where there will be no more parting. The pain of loss is mingled with a note of resignation. Giving up her earthly lovers, the poet strives to love Christ above all others. In "Ash Wednesday", she pleads,

> Good Lord, I ask much of Thee
> But most I ask to love Thee
> Kind Lord be mindful of me
> Love me and make me love Thee.

If Rossetti's life was influenced by the Imitation, her poetry has also been greatly influenced by this noble book. Colleen Hobbs mentions in "A View from The Lowest Place": Christina Rossetti's Devotional Prose that Thomas á Kempis has been cited by Antony Harrison[27] as one of the literary models to have influenced Christina Rossetti. Not only are phrases lifted from the Imitation, but the theme from it echo

and reecho in a number of her poems. The poem "Passing away" reflect the passages "It is vanity to love what is passing away with all speed, and not to hasten thither where everlasting joy is" and "Oh how quickly does the glory of the world pass away! "Men pass away". Moreover, the idea of the lowest place is derived from the Imitation, which, quoting Luke 14:10 teaches that those who put themselves at the lowest place are highest in the sight of God and more glorious in as much as they were more humble. a number of Rossetti's devotional poems reflect her desire for a better existence in heaven, for which pursuit she has renounced all earthly things. Her renunciation is in response to the injunctions laid down in the Imitation and not due to "bitterness" as alleged by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in The Mad Woman in the Attic (1979). These authors have claimed that Rossetti, "banquetting on bitterness, must bury herself alive in a coffin of renunciation..." Their opinion is not unlike the criticism made by Christabel Coleridge about Rossetti's prose. Writing in the Tractarian publication, The Monthly Packet three months after the poet's death, Coleridge comments that the prose works are "more calculated to help people to lay down their lives in the battle than to get up and live to fight another day". Antony Harrison argues that Rossetti's renunciation is a 'pose' deliberately adopted to enable her "to examine sensual and worldly impressions". The

truth, however, is that Rossetti, a Tractarian since her early youth, was largely influenced by the Imitation and this is inevitably reflected in her writing.

Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti undoubtedly have been greatly indebted to Thomas á Kempis' Of the Imitation of Christ. It explains the reason for their reclusiveness and withdrawal from society. It is a manual of daily living that both poets strove to follow. One because she loved her Lord above all else and the other to compensate her inability to accept Christ. But their lives were far from being simple. Ambivalence coloured and compounded what would otherwise have been gray and dreary. For in spite of their seclusion and reclusiveness, neither poet was cut off from social reality. They kept themselves abreast of all national and international events. Dickinson wrote about the American Civil War in such poems as "It feels ashamed to be Alive" and "When I was small a woman died". The poem "I like to see it lap the miles" is a commemorative poem on the railroad which her father brought to Amherst.

Christina Rossetti at twenty-four applied and was rejected as volunteer to work in Scrutari with Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War. She was also interested in the Woman Question and even expressed the idea that mothers should be MPs. At the same time, she staunchly held that woman are Biblically ordained as the inferior sex.

Ambivalence is as much a part of Rossetti as it is a part of Dickinson's. They were involved with the world without letting the world be involved with them. They were detached from the world they deeply cared for. It is necessary to mention that ambivalence in the poets' lives as well as the influence of feminism and the poet's personal reading, especially the Imitation in order to have a better understanding of their poetry. Their poetry, by and large is a reflection of their ambivalence regarding such themes as love, faith and the after-life. Their rhetorics bring out this ambivalence in an effective and masterly manner.

When all these have been said, it is doubtful whether the two poets themselves would take kindly to each being likened to the other. It is even more unlikely that they would appreciate each other's works. Emily Dickinson would, no doubt dismiss Rossetti's poems with impatience. Like her namesake in England, the other Emily (Brontë), Dickinson might well claim that "no coward soul" is hers. A bold spirit like hers would be well and truly bored with Rossetti's meek and humble spirit. On her part, Rossetti would find most of Dickinson's poems blasphemous and altogether incomprehensible. She exclaimed that the American poet had "a startling recklessness of poetic ways and means".[28] when she finally read Dickinson after the latter's death. Yet there is an uncanny similarity in the thought processes and in the

composition of some of their poems. The most obvious ones are "Safe in their alabaster Chambers" and "They lie at rest our blessed dead" to describe the dead; "Uphill" and "What Inn is this" describing the grave as an 'inn' where souls may rest; and "Of course - I prayed" and "Its a weary life, it is she said" to express a wish for self-abnegation. The last two poems are quoted below.

> Of course - I prayed -
> And did God care?
> He cared as much as on the Air
> A Bird - had stamped her foot -
> And cried "Give me" -
> My Reason - Life -
> I had not had - but for Yourself -
> 'Twere better Charity
> To leave me in the Atom's Tomb -
> Merry, and nought and gay and numb -
> Than this smart misery[29] (376)

and

> Its a weary life, it is she said
> Doubly blank in a woman's lot,
> I wish and I wish I were a man
> Or, better than any being were not,
> Were nothing at all in all the world,
> Not a body and not a soul
> Not so much as a grain of dust
> Or drop of water from pole to pole.[30] (312)

Non-existence is preferable to life without consolation or life as a woman. The speakers in both the poems echo the voice of Victorian womanhood. More poems are read and discussed in the next three chapters with special attention on the rhetoric that helps bring out the poets' ambivalence on their subjects.

Chapter—V

CONCLUSION

The studies made in the preceding chapters have established, without question that ambivalence is indeed Emily Dickinson's forte, with Christina Rossetti not far behind. The poems have not only withstood the test of time but literary criticism as well, including that of feminist literary criticism. Anachronistic readings[1] by which twentieth century pre-occupations are retrojected on the poems produce interpretations such as the homosexual leanings of Emily Dickinson. Poems directly addressed to Sue Dickinson and those that are conjectured to be addressed to a woman whose identity is unknown constitute what feminist critics label the "sisterhood" poems. Some of these poems are "One Sister have I in our House", "Dying! Dying in the Night" and "Ourselves were wed one Summer dear".

By the same token, feminist critics read Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" as either an expression of lesbian relationship or Christian allegory with a female Christ figure. The other so-called 'anti-marriage' poems by Leder and Abbott, namely "Cousin Kate", "Maude Clare" and "An Apple Gathering" do have, in each of them seminal ideas of

feminism. Ambivalence, ellipses and the very nature of the rhetoric used by the poets encourage and sustains feministic reading and interpretation of the poems. At the end of it all, "who was Dickinson's lover?" ceases to be the burning question. The poems convince scholars that Dickinson did not write about only one aspect of love. Love and marriage with the accompanying pain and betrayal are part of the poet's repertoire. With regard to religious faith and the after-life, Dickinson's ambivalence is truly reflected in her poems. Her persona believes and not believes at the same time. Doubting even His existence in one poem, "I know that He exists", she listens to God, "a noted preacher" every day in the poem "Some keep the Sabbath". It becomes less imperative therefore to try to solve the mystery that is Emily Dickinson than to accept Dickinson the poet, whose ambivalence is the truth about herself. If her question to "Infinitude", "Hadst thou no face/That I might look on Thee" were asked of her, the answer, unhesitatingly would be that ambivalence is the real face of Emily Dickinson. Her poetry, like a multi-faceted gem dazzles with the same ambivalence.

T.W. Higginson described Emily Dickinson as a "wholly new and original poetic genius".[2] Dickinson's poetry is a living example of the truth behind Paul de Mann's statement: Rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration".[3] In such poems as

"I heard a fly buzz-when I died", "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I started early - Took my Dog", the poet's rhetoric defies simple logic to plunge into new avenues of experience and activity. The same may be said of the love experiences of Dickinson's persona. The clever use of indeterminate terms like "You", "Thee", "Sweet" effectively camouflages whether the lover is a man, Christ or even a woman. A secret ambiguity is established through the strength of vagueness. In such poems as "If I may have it when its dead", "I started early - Took my Dog" or "In Winter in my Room", the experience goes beyond the norm of human experience in a way which is not quite supernatural either. Moreover, the ambivalence makes it impossible to gauge to what extent the poet uses facts from her life, unless of course, the ambivalence is accepted as the basis of her life, therefore, the basis of poetic creation.

Having never been married and often referring to herself as a nun, Dickinson's speaker in such poems as "There came a day at Summer's full" and "Ourselves were wed one summer dear" may be assumed to be the "supposed person". The picture of a faithful woman betrayed or left by a lover is a suitable mask for a spinster poet. It adds the realistic feeling to the texture of the poems. It is also less threatening to her reputation to write about a distant lover separated from her, when obviously there is no one around who

might be identified as the lover. But most of all, it has created a mystery so provocative and tantalising, that reader's interest in Dickinson and her poetry will never wane.

Dickinson's poems on personal faith have all the ambivalence of the poems on love and more. Her personal rejection of conversion colour the poems with shades of irreverence and lack of conviction. Her persona rejects God and Heaven, but partially accepts Jesus. But Dickinson's God and Jesus, are in fact, customized deities, made to fit in the mould of her poetry as these lines, "God is a distant, stately lover" and "The Savior must have been a docile gentleman" illustrate. Her explosive rhetoric "Burglar! Banker - Father", "mastif", 'adamant', 'a God of flint' reduces the Almighty to a mean and arbitrary God who takes delight in tormenting human beings. Yet to this God, Dickinson prays, if only to parody the Lord's Prayer in "Papa above" (#61). Contradictorily, her persona also claims daily communion with God (#324) and boasts of an unshakeable faith in Jesus (#497), the same that she denies knowledge of, elsewhere. The contradictory position is given expression through her rhetoric of ambivalence. Belief and unbelief are proportionately represented in Dickinson's poetry.

Dickinson's hermaneutic of post-mortal existence conveys her ambivalence on the subject. Her rhetoric is not

only an exploration, but the opening of new avenues of consciousness of being. The voices in "Because I could not stop for Death" and "I heard a fly buzz - when I died" are supposedly those of deceased persons, the former being dead for "Centuries". No place is assigned to them by the poet who lets them recollect and narrate the moment when death claimed them:

> Because I could not Stop for Death -
> He kindly stopped for me
> The carriage held just Ourselves
> And Immortality.

and

> And then the Windows failed - and then
> I could not see to see -

Almost at the same time, Dickinson regards going to Heaven after death almost obligatory. Her persona far from looks forward to going to Heaven, which is an entirely different place to the one Rossetti looks forward to going. At other times, the grave is depicted as the final destination, the permanent home of the spirit. Of her own mother, the poet writes: "My own is in the Grave". There is bewilderment in the voice which exclaims: "Lives he in any other world/My faith cannot reply" (#1557) at the death of Rev. Charles Wadsworth. Dickinson's eschatology is neither fully Christian nor wholly pagan. It is ambivalent in a way that is uniquely Dickinsonian. Whereas she pleads ignorance in the above lines, at other times, she is almost blase about going to

Heaven. Her persona is more eager to be announced in the "mystic green" than she is to be in the eternal presence of God.

In contrast to Dickinson's bold, sometimes blistering rhetoric, Rossetti's rhetoric is subdued and calm in the main, but can also be sharp and witty when she chooses. When she chides the persistent suitor in "No Thank You John", her rhetoric is pert and sarcastic:

> I'd rather answer 'No' to fifty
> Johns
> than answer 'Yes' to you.

Like her persona in "Isidora" who says, "I must choose 'twixt God and man", Rossetti chose God over her earthly love. Her rhetoric expresses the pain of this renunciation. Rossetti's romantic life may be declared to be in a state of twilight zone. The "Monna Innominata" which William Michael Rossetti declares to be "personal utterances" is a monument of love and renunciation. The poet's ambivalence towards her love is set from the very first line of the first sonnet: "Come back to me, who wait and watch for you - Or come not yet, for it is over then". The day the lovers met for the first time is a day that "seemed to mean so little, meant so much"; Renouncing him for the love of God, the speaker says: "Yet while I love my God the most, I deem/That I can never love you overmuch". This love that she feels for the beloved, even though she has renounced him, still has the power of

transforming her. In sonnet #nine, acknowledging her "faithless and hopeless" state, she claims she is "yet not hopeless quite nor faithless quite" because she is "not loveless". But the speaker feels the need to commend her beloved to God, since in her own heart there is only "love's goodwill, which is "Helpless to help and impotent to do/Of understanding dull, of sight most dim." The Monna Innominata's purpose is to give voice to the hitherto silent nameless lady of courtly love. But the poet swerves from this purpose by addressing herself to the matter between earthly and heavenly love; between desire and deferral. The rhetoric abounds in repetition and ambiguities throughout the sequence. Starting from sonnet #one, lines 1-2, "Come back to me ... or come not yet", Sonnet #three lines 1-2, "I dream of you, to wake ... would that I might/Dream of you and not wake"; sonnet #five, lines 1-2: "O my heart's heart and you who are to me/more than myself" and so on. Here in this sonnet sequence and in others, ambivalence finds expression in the form of love and renunciation and love and betrayal.

Similarly, in her poems on devotional themes, Rossetti, who was intensely devout portrays her 'Lord' as being full of grace and as a willful scourge at the same time. Rossetti's poetical ambivalence is often expressed through juxtaposition of words that convey opposite meanings:

"I would have gone; God bade me stay
I would have worked: God bade
me rest."

"For though He slay us, we will trust
in Him ...
Yea, though He slay us we will vaunt
His praise ...."

Rossetti's poems, in the words of Arthur Symons are "surcharged with personal emotion, a cry of the heart, an ecstasy of the soul's grief or joy, ..." Most of the devotional poems are in the form of prayer. Unlike Emily Dickinson who addresses Jesus as an independent deity, Christina Rossetti uses "Lord" in the New Testament sense of the term to mean Christ. In the poem "Perfect Love Casteth out Fear", she opens the poem with "Lord, give me blessed fear", again juxtaposing words of contradictory meaning. She asks for both fear and love, giving them a common factor "blessed". Her prayer in that with the 'fear' of the Lord, she might love Him more.

Rossetti's poems are often structured as dialogues between the soul and the Godhead to which we, as readers, are also listeners. We cannot help but notice the paradox in the lines "... without a hiding place

To hide me from the terrors of Thy
Face -
'Thy hiding place is here
In mine own heart, wherefore
The Roman Spear
For thy sake I accounted dear' -
My Jesus! King of Grace.

In these lines, Jesus is both the 'terror' from which the soul needs to hid as well as the hiding place. On its part, the soul prays for "blessed fear" of the Lord, who, is, at the same time, the only one who can 'cast out' that 'fear' and replace it with love. Intense faith and love co-exist with an acute sense of unworthiness in the devotional poetry of Christina Rossetti. In lines reminiscent of the Holy Sonnet of John Donne, Rossetti in "Cried out with Tears" supplicates: "Lord, must I perish, I who look to Thee? Look Thou upon me, bid me live, not die".

The attraction of the 'world' that 'woos' her by day inevitably leads to retrogressive glances which in turn are responsible for the feelings of guilt. These nostalgic backward glances towards the world also 'translates' in the words of Stephen Gurney, into 'ghosts' who roam the realms of her poetry.

Christina Rossetti's formulation of post-mortal existence is characterised by the same ambivalence that has marked the poems on love and faith. She has contradictory visions about the state of the soul after the body ceases to live. The poem "At Home" begins with "When I was dead, my spirits turned". The speaker being clearly a deceased person echoes the poet's ambivalence in her attitude: "Sad/To stay and yet to part how loth."

The ambivalence is conveyed by the use of the word "yet". Similarly, the other ghosts too show a reluctance to completely leave the world. The ghost in "The Ghost's Petition" enters the house at midnight after he "shook the door like a puff of air". He tells his wife he has "come from the meadow/where many lie" because he has been disturbed from his rest by her weeping. The 'poor ghost' too come back from "the other world" as the tears and sobs of her friend have awakened her from her sleep. She promises to "go home" to her 'bed/Dug deep at the foot and deep at the head' to 'sleep' till Judgement Day. The appearance of the ghosts expresses, at one level, the attraction that the world still has for those who have gone out from it. At a deeper level, it may be interpreted as signifying the backsliding of a soul towards the world it has renounced for the higher service of God. But from the merely aesthetic point of view, the poems describing ghosts may be regarded as artistic creations signifying art for art's sake.

The devotional poems reflect the vision of a future ecstasy of the soul in the presence of God and angels. After the death of the "mortal crust", the part of her that 'dies not' but only 'sleeps' a while will waken eternally, "with hymns and halleluiah on its lips. The poem "Of Him that was Ready to Perish" ends with the prayer: "Bid me also to Paradise, also me,/For the glory of Thy Name."

Much as Rossetti's persona longs for Paradise even claiming Christ as her 'Heavenly Lover', she also hopes for a reunion with her earthly love. In the "Monna Innominata" and "By way of Remembrance" the persona voices her hope of claiming her loved one on earth in Heaven, never to be parted from each other again:

> In Resurrection may we meet again:
> No more with stricken hearts to part in twain;
> As once in sorrow one, now one in mirth
> One in our resurrection songs of praise.

In Christina Rossetti's poetry, the earthly lover does not merge into or become the Heavenly Lover. The latter is Christ, whose Godhead the poet never for a moment ever forgets. But the woman in her has equal desire to meet her beloved in Heaven. Rossetti's rhetoric on love and faith, therefore, is a study in ambivalence. Renunciatory love that claims the beloved even in Heaven is juxtaposed with hopes of Heaven through Grace. Unsightly ghosts exist side by side with blessed souls on the pages of her tome. Innocent young girls live with vile sadistic goblin merchants in the same glen. The ambivalence in "Goblin Market" alone draws attention to the poet's rhetorical ability. It has caused the narrative to be interpreted as a feminist version of temptation and redemption with a female Christ figure. It is also read as a lesbian manifesto. The poet herself maintains that 'Goblin Market' is a fairy tale and nothing more. But

the rhetoric itself lends a hand in the way modern critics choose to read the poem.

In the poetry of Christina Rossetti, the function of the rhetoric of ambivalence as a literacy strategy is to infuse a note of realism. It acts as a restraint that prevent the poems from being mere flights of fancy and imagination. Ambivalence does more than simply contradict. It anchors the poet's expressions to a level of verisimilitude that is wholly acceptable. Even the poet's hermeneutics of eschatology seem probable when expressed through the rhetoric of ambivalence. Through this strategy, both Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti have expressed divergent emotions such as love and renunciation, faith and doubt, certainty of Heaven and its non-existence in their poetry. The use of the rhetoric of ambivalence marks the superiority of the poets as artists for whom the only tools of creation are words and more words.