Christina Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood by Jan Marsh

Christina Rossetti was barely eighteen when the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was founded by her brothers and their art student friends. Quiet and extremely shy, she shrank from being publicly associated with their activities, but was nevertheless closely and intensely involved with the PRB, as observer and participant. Indeed, with historical hindsight she can be given the honorary title of 'Pre-Raphaelite Sister' by virtue both of her literal sisterhood and her contribution to PRB productions.

Named for the art of the early Renaissance, whose ingenuous simplicity was coming back into favour, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was initiated in December 1848 as a youthful challenge to the artistic establishment of the time. The Brethren, who attached the 'secret initials' PRB to their signatures, comprised Christina's two older brothers Dante Gabriel and William Michael, the painters William Holman Hunt and John Everett Millais, sculptor Thomas Woolner and two other aspiring artists, James Collinson and Frederick Stephens.

In some ways an impulsive venture, the PRB aimed to produce works that were innovative in style and substance, and expressive of direct, sincere feeling. Behind this lay the perennial ambition of the young to be noticed and 'make a name'. As well as painting, they were also committed to the literary arts, and nearly all the PRBs wrote poetry. Indeed, the forerunners of the Brotherhood included both the Cyclographic Club, whose members exchanged drawings, and a short-lived 'poetical club' organized by the Rossetti brothers in the summer of 1848. A year later, the PRB began planning a magazine in which to display their literary talents.

Christina had declined to join the poetical club, not wishing to be seen 'showing off'. Ambitions admired in young men were thought immodest in women, who were advised to 'be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever.' But she was both pleased and proud when in October 1848 she made her public debut with two poems in the Athenaeum, the leading literary weekly of the day.

Death’s Chill Between and Heart’s Chill Between owe their titles to the author's brother Gabriel, who was a published poet himself (his now-famous Blessed Damozel had just appeared in a monthly magazine) and warmly promoted Christina's work. Hers are precocious verses of bereaved and betrayed love, appropriately juvenile in manner, but through their publication feeding into the atmosphere of creative excitement that pervaded the Rossettis' circle that autumn.

In the midst of this, she received a proposal of marriage from James Collinson, PRB. Taken by surprise, she initially declined, on the grounds that James was a Catholic convert while she herself was loyal to the Anglican church. But then James reverted, and Christina accepted: by November they were engaged to marry - at some distant date, both being still young. Born on 5 December 1830, Christina was just approaching her 18th birthday, while James was 23.

'Have you forgotten how one summer night We wandered forth together with the moon?' she wrote, in a sonnet that seems to evoke the first awkward stirrings of romance:

Have you forgotten how you praised both light
And darkness: not embarrassed yet not quite
At ease? And how you said the glare of noon
Less pleased you than the stars? but very soon
You blushed, and seemed to doubt if you were right...

Almost as shyly nervous as Christina, James shared her religious faith and literary aspirations. For the poetical club, he had written a poem called The Child Jesus, dramatising Christ's childhood in a devotional yet modern manner. Its theme surely influenced Gabriel Rossetti's choice of subject for his first painting over the PRB initials, showing The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, completed during the winter of 1848-9. For the young Virgin, his model was Christina - her features and character exactly suiting his pictorial concept of ideal womanhood, as extolled in verses written for the picture:

Loving she was, with temperate respect:
A profound simpleness of intellect
... and extreme patience...
Faithful and hopeful; wise in charity;
Strong in grave peace; in duty circumspect.

While Christina was sitting to her brother, she was also being painted by James. Shown in profile in The Girlhood, she is seen full-face, with a grave, watchful expression, in James's portrait - reproduced on the cover of the new Penguin Classics edition of her Complete Poems.

Though she was probably uncomfortable at such close scrutiny, Christina Rossetti was thus present at and in two of the earliest pictures produced by the Pre-Raphaelite Brothers. She was also caught up in the stimulus of creativity, responding with several of her most admired poems, including 'When I am dead, my dearest', 'Oh roses for the flush of youth', and also Remember, the sonnet by which she is best known today.

When exhibited in spring 1849, The Girlhood of Mary Virgin attracted considerable praise for its spiritual qualities and 'great sensibility.' The PRB had taken off, and William began keeping an official record of all achievements. Christina too had her creative record - a sequence of small notebooks into which she copied her poems, each with the date of completion.

Her reputation was growing. Once, when she was away from home, Thomas Woolner (one of the PRB's poets) requested copies of her verses. With joking allusions to her 'double sisterhood' in both the family and the PRB, Christina gave William permission to copy out any he pleased. Although never boastful, she liked to write well, sharing with her siblings a strong desire to please their mother, who kept a scrapbook of every published poem and review. Each item she considered good enough therefore found its way into print, usually sooner than later. The next opportunity came a few weeks later when she was visiting James's family in Nottinghamshire alone, because he was painting on the Isle of Wight. In another rush of brotherly enthusiasm, the idea for a PRB magazine was launched. Titled The Germ, its scope was wider than the Brotherhood itself, with contributions from established writers like Coventry Patmore, author of The Angel in the House. The Germ survived for four issues only, from January to April 1850. But it signals the budding or beginning of Pre-Raphaelitism in literature - poetry and criticism sharing the same origins and impulses as the art. As the prospectus declared, together with etchings illustrative of the main poems the magazine will contain such original Tales (in prose or verse), Poems, Essays, and the like, as may seem conceived in the spirit, or with the intent, of exhibiting a pure and unaffected style.

As the most gifted poet of the circle (albeit not yet twenty years of age) Christina's productions were in demand. A total of seven poems appeared in The Germ, chosen from the dozens in her notebook. For the sake of maiden modesty, they were ascribed to 'Ellen Alleyn', a poetical-sounding pseudonym dreamt up by Gabriel, but an open secret within the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Gabriel's Blessed Damozel was reprinted, together with his story Hand and Soul. There were poems by William and Woolner. Collinson's Child Jesus
headed the second issue. In general, however, without Christina's poems the *Germ*'s literary reputation would not now stand high: many of the other contributions are verbose and/or banal. From another perspective, however, it offered a welcome platform for her distinctive voice, as it was now developing. Here, for the first time, in the PRB's magazine, *Dream Land* and *Sweet Death*, together with 'Oh roses for the flush of youth', strike the unmistakable Rossettian note, at once simple and hauntingly enigmatic, suggestive of depths beneath the lyric surface. The best of all is *A Pause of Thought* - astonishingly mature both in content and form, with its vivid evocation of desire and disappointment, of hope and desperation:

I looked for that which is not, nor can be,
And hope deferred made my heart sick in truth;
But years must pass before a hope of youth
Is resigned utterly.
I watched and waited with a steadfast will:
And though the object seemed to flee away
That I so longed for, ever day by day
I watched and waited still.
Sometimes I said: This thing shall be no more;
My expectation wearies and shall cease;
I will resign it now and be at peace:
Yet never gave it o'er...

When the *Germ* died, in May 1850, the PRB had just achieved notoriety, with the most talked about pictures of the year. Among these was Gabriel's second Pre-Raphaelite work, the vision of the Annunciation called *Ecce Ancilla*. Again, Christina was the model for the Virgin, shown wearing a white shift on a white bed at dawn, timorously receiving the Archangel. It was an original and daring composition, the pale tonalities being symbolic of Mary's absolute purity. She is also recognisably a portrait of the artist's sister, the young poet so closely associated with the Brotherhood. This year, the PRB paintings were attacked for impertinence, ugliness and blasphemy (Millais showed the Holy Family working in an actual carpenter's shop). For avant gardistes, this could only be an asset, as William noted with satisfaction. But it also led James Collinson to resign from the Brotherhood and return to the Catholic faith. He decided to abandon art and devote his life to God in celibacy and prayer.

In a sonnet that Christina remembered to the end of her life, James dramatised a dialogue with his God. 'Give Me thy heart', says Christ. The poet protests: 'Lord, do not take it from its happy home.' But Christ is not to be denied; the poem ends with submission: 'Lord, Thy will be done. Christina was devastated. During their engagement, she had looked forward to a conjugal life of poetry, painting and mutual piety. Now, she was asked to relinquish her beloved to the 'higher' claims of the Church. 'What is it Jesus saith unto the soul?' she asked in a responding sonnet. "Take up the Cross, and come, and follow Me." Devotionally she accepted James's decision. But emotionally and poetically she was heart-broken. (Nor was it easy when, a year or so later, James gave up his vocation and resumed an artistic career.) As she slowly recovered, so her literary impulses returned. But by this time, the PRB was in dissolution, having served its purpose as a launching pad for youthful talent.

Woolner emigrated to make his fortune in the new goldfields of Australia, while Holman Hunt planned to paint authentic Biblical scenes in Palestine and Egypt. Millais, the most accomplished artist of them all, applied for election to the prestigious (and establishment) Royal Academy. Stephens gave up painting while William Rossetti began to forge a career in art criticism. Christina was herself away from London with her parents in Somerset. From this 'exile' she watched developments with some dismay, especially as Gabriel, daunted by his failure to sell *Ecce Ancilla*, was frittering away his time and talents, rather than painting
seriously. The keen stimulus of the PRB’s early days had faded. No longer were the Brothers and their friends calling every day with news and new ideas. Bored and depressed, Christina began two wryly satiric poems on the PRB. The first was only half–completed and tacitly deletes Collinson from the original fraternity, but gives the flavour of Christina’s pride and delight in the original impulse:

The two Rossettis (brothers they)  
And Holman Hunt and John Millais,  
With Stephens chivalrous and bland  
And Woolner in a distant land,  
In these six men I awestruck see  
Embody the great P.R.B.  
D.G. Rossetti offered two  
Good pictures to the public view  
Unnumbered ones great John Millais  
And Holman more than I can say  

William Rossetti, calm and solemn  
Cuts up his brethren by the column.

This was in September 1853. Two months later, when Hunt’s plans were finalised and Gabriel’s failure to exhibit even more obvious, she composed a valediction, in which exuberant praise was replaced by rueful regret:

The P.R.B is in its decadence: -  
For Woolner in Australia cooks his chops;  
And Hunt is yearning for the land of Cheops;  
D.G. Rossetti shuns the vulgar optic;  
While William M. Rossetti merely lops  
His B.s in English disesteemed as Coptic  
Calm Stephens in the twilight smokes his pipe  
But long the dawning of his public day;  
And he at last, the champion, great Millais  
Attaining academic opulence  
Winds up his signature with A.R.A.: -  
So rivers merge in the perpetual sea,  
So luscious fruit must fall when over ripe,  
And so the consummated P.R.B.

Of all those involved in its heyday, none lamented the end of the Brotherhood more than Christina Rossetti. Even though, as a woman, she could not formally join the group, through the PRB she had participated in a unique moment of creative energies, as sitter, contributor, sister, and friend to some of the most talented young artists of the day. It stimulated her imagination and provided a showcase and springboard for her work.

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