

Pages 8-9 THREE STAGES

WMR. "This triple poem was written, as the reader will perceive, at three very different dates, ranging between 1848 and 1854. The first section was originally named *Lines in Memory of Schiller's Der Pilgrim*'; but when published by my sister, it received the altered titled *Pause of Thought*. She did not see fit to publish sections 2 & 3; not, I am convinced, that she thought them below the mark, but because of their intimately personal character. I published them in the volume of *New Poems* [NP], keeping them separate and naming No.3 *Restive*. As I mentioned at that time, I think the proper ultimate treatment for the three sections is to keep them united, as Christina herself united them in MS" (PW, p.477). See also note on *Restive*.

WMR brings the three sections together in PW (1904) and this selection does the same.

There has been much speculation about what lies behind these three poems, particularly the first two. Biographical readings cannot easily be matched with the known facts about CGR's relationship with James Collinson to whom she became engaged in the autumn of 1848. The assumption that in *A Pause of Thought* she is lamenting a longstanding failure to become famous or receive recognition for her poetic gift ('It is an empty name / I long for'), which WMR believed, has rightly been regarded as unconvincing coming from a writer who is a mere 17 years old. I believe that an understanding of what CGR means by a 'name' in this first poem of *Three Stages* can best be gleaned by reading the Schiller poem which originally inspired *A Pause of Thought* and also, perhaps, by reference to Byron's poem *Romance*, with which CGR was doubtless acquainted. I give below a translation of Schiller's poem, followed by part of Byron's *Romance*. (NB: in the actual book, the poems are printed, then the Notes continue).

Page 8 1. A PAUSE OF THOUGHT

In a letter to WMR on 25 January 1850, before the poem's imminent publication in *The Germ* (No.2), CGR makes a remark about it which suggests she cannot remember what prompted it. (See *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, vol 1. ed. A.H. Harrison, 1997, pp.33-34). Hardly a sign that she is writing from some profoundly personal experience.

This poem (amongst others) may be compared to *Fata Morgana* (p.48). See note on that poem too.

Line 2. 'Hope deferred'. A phrase from the Bible - Proverbs 13, 12 - which is a recurring motif in CGR's poetry. See note on 'All heaven is blazing yet' (p. 147).

2. THE END OF THE FIRST PART

WMR published this poem separately in NP and included this note on it: "This appears to be a personal utterance. As to what condition of facts it was founded on I feel no assurance, unless we are to regard it simply as an indication of deepening religious convictions and consequent alienation from mundane interests and desires. Tears for guilt is, in reference to Christina, a very exaggerated phrase; or possibly nothing is implied beyond 'original guilt or 'original sin'" (NP, p. 379).

In 1963, Lona Mosk Packer's biographical study claimed to know precisely what was behind her 'tears for guilt'. Packer's thesis was that CGR was secretly in love with poet and painter William Bell Scott whilst engaged to James Collinson. According to Packer, when she first met Scott and fell in love with him, she did not know that he was married. Her discovery that he was married, after she had broken off her engagement to Collinson, devastated her. Packer invokes this poem, and other poems which suggest a secret lover, as evidence to support her case. Subsequent biographers have rejected Packer's claim and picked holes in it, declaring that if CGR had a secret lover - which is pure speculation - it is unlikely to have been William Bell Scott. The year after Packer's book was published, W. E. Fredeman undermined her theory in *Victorian Studies* 8 (September 1964): 71-77. But see note on 'Parting after Parting' (p.57). Frances Thomas makes some very perceptive comments on CGR's 'tears for guilt' in her biography, pp.74-75 (*Christina Rossetti: A Biography*, 1992/94). *The End of the First Part* clearly has affinities with *Two Pursuits* (p. 13) composed six days earlier.

Page 9. 3 RESTIVE

Lines 9-12 were published as the first stanza of an untitled poem in Vrs (1893). *Restive* is WMR's title. See his note in NP, pp.381-2.

Crump dates this poem 23rd February 1865. The MS is in the British Library.

WMR. "This very impressive sonnet was at first entitled *Friends*. In the note-book containing the MS of the sonnet I find a pencil note, 'House of Charity', written against the title. The House of Charity was, I think, an institution at Highgate for reclaiming 'fallen women', and it may perhaps be inferred that Christina wrote this sonnet as if it were an utterance of one of these women, not herself. Yet one hesitates to think so, for the sonnet has a tone which seems deeply personal. 'Christina' (thus wrote Mrs William Bell Scott in 1860) 'is now an associate, and wore the dress - which is very simple, elegant even, black with hanging sleeves, a muslin cap with lace edging, quite becoming to her with the veil.' " (PW, p.485). See also note on *The Convent Threshold* (pp.58-9).

In his comment on the poem WMR seems to be assuming that deep personal feeling in a poem necessarily makes it a subjective expression of the poet's own life. See the note on *Twice* (p.85) where this question is considered. In his comment on *Dead Before Death* (p.38) WMR adopts a more flexible approach to the autobiographical element in CGR's poetry. It is notable that when CGR looks back at her own past in 'Looking back along life's trodden way' (p.149), if we may assume she is thinking of her own life in that poem, it is with a mellow serenity not regret.

Page 54 WINTER: MY SECRET

WMR. "This was at first named *Nonsense* but, if there is method in some madness, there may be nous in some nonsense" (PW, p.481).

Line 6. 'my secret's mine'. CGR's teasing, lighthearted tone may conceal something deeper. In the Vulgate version of the Bible (the Latin translation) there is a verse in Isaiah - Isaiah 24, 16 - which can be translated 'my secret is my own, my secret is my own'. It is a phrase which has been used by mystics and saints down the ages to hint at the unknowableness of the individual soul's personal relationship with God (eg. Walter Hilton, c. 1340-96, in his *Ladder/Scale of Perfection*).

Margaret Sawtell suggests that the secret CGR has in mind concerns James Collinson whom she had broken with seven years ago. Perhaps, Sawtell speculates, she had suddenly heard that James Collinson still loved her. See chapter entitled 'The Secret' in Sawtell's book *Christina Rossetti: Her Life and Religion*, Mowbray, (1955). This could account for the mysterious poem *A Nightmare* (p. 51) with its missing page (see WMR's note on that poem) written just two months prior to *Winter: My Secret*, and for the extraordinary, out-of-the-blue exuberance of *A Birthday* written just five days beforehand (see note on *A Birthday* above). Sawtell admits her theory is largely imagined. Indeed, if it were true, it would amount to a very abrupt change of feelings to those expressed in *The Heart Knoweth Its Own Bitterness* (p. 50), written only three months earlier. Anything is possible, of course, in the affairs of the heart, and CGR was 'only human', but she was not known to be subject to such volatile emotions and it is more likely that she has a divine lover in mind (if any) in *Winter: My Secret*.

Some modern commentators have made a great deal of the secrecy and reserve in CGR's poetry, believing it to be part of a deliberate strategy, a game she is playing with the reader. *Winter: My Secret* is a key poem in this critical line and Diane D'Amico considers it in her review of different readings of the poem in the concluding chapter of *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time* (1999), pp. 173-77.