

EMOTIONAL SIMILES: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S
APPROPRIATION OF CAROLINE NORTON

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Rossetti, having just had a fresh consignment of "stunning" fabrics from that new shop in Regent Street, tries hard to prevail on his younger sister to accept at any rate one of these and have a dress made of it from designs to be furnished by himself.

D.G.R. "What is the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing bird and a water-shoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?"

C.R. "Well, Gabriel, I don't know – I'm sure you yourself always dress very quietly."

– Max Beerbohm, *Rossetti and His Circle* plate 12

This caption for the well-known Beerbohm cartoon of Dante Rossetti and his sister points to a significant fact about Christina Rossetti's poetry: both then and now there appears to be a disjunction between the poet and her work. This is particularly the case with "A Birthday," one of Rossetti's best-known and most Pre-Raphaelite poems, though one which receives less critical attention today than in earlier commentaries on her work. Written in a regular metre, it is a lively expression of joy, full of colour, movement, and rich textures. The poem was written in 1857, and published first in *Macmillan's Magazine* in 1861, and then in Rossetti's first collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* in 1862. It is often seen as emblematic of her early exuberance, a secular poem of ecstasy, in contrast to her later, more sombre devotional poems, though, as I shall argue, this apparent divide is a misapprehension. The poem is also close in style and tone to Caroline Norton's poem "My Heart is like a Withered Nut!," a similarity previously overlooked, and I suggest that Rossetti reworked Norton's poem into a very different, although formally similar, text.

Though William Michael Rossetti worked hard to memorialize his illustrious siblings, his accounts have done his sister Christina, at least, some dis-

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favours: he seemed determined both to read her work biographically (at least in part because she was female, and thus seen as more inclined towards emotion than artistry) and simultaneously reluctant to ascribe any specific biographical events to some poems for fear it might damage her ladylike reputation. In his memoirs of his sister, he is as non-committal as possible concerning the potential origin of the “joy” which might have occasioned this poem:

I have more than once been asked whether I could account for the outburst of exuberant joy evidenced in this celebrated lyric; I am unable to do so.... It is, of course, possible to infer that the Birthday is a mere piece of poetical composition, not testifying to any corresponding emotion of its author at the time; but I am hardly prepared to think that. (W.M. Rossetti 481)

Christina Rossetti's concerns that her poems should not be read as biographical are often ignored; this poem was not written close to the time of her relationships with James Collinson and Charles Cayley, leaving biographers to speculate about the possibility of an unknown lover.¹ Most prominent among these speculations is Lona Mosk Packer's suggestions that she conducted a secret relationship with William Bell Scott and celebrated their love with a poem in which “love's ecstatic gratification is expressed in a swift succession of vivid images, all decorative and richly sensuous” (115).

There are some excellent close readings of the poem, including those by Constance Hassett (5-10) and Antony H. Harrison (111-12), and as these and other critics demonstrate, it is indeed a poem which repays close reading. Although, as Isobel Armstrong points out, “the release of exuberant passion is celebrated characteristically with a ritual of artifice” (357), in the first stanza Rossetti deploys the imagery of the natural world that is distinctive within her oeuvre. “Exuberance” is a word frequently used to describe this poem, and yet it is rigidly controlled in many ways. In its format and structure, both prosodic and linguistic, it progresses from happiness towards fulfilment over the space of two stanzas.

The first stanza, as Harrison suggests, shows the speaker comparing “her heart, burgeoning with love, to images of perfect fulfilment from nature” (111); beginning with homely, Spring-like images of “a singing bird,” “a watered shoot,” and “an apple tree” “bent with thick-set fruit,”² the poem swiftly moves to more exotic imagery of “a rainbow shell” “in a halcyon sea.” These things are beautiful but, as Harrison points out, fragile; consequently, the second stanza summons what appears to be a Gothic or Pre-Raphaelite interior, combining manmade objects with natural imagery. “The need to

retreat from mutability is confirmed in stanza two, in which the speaker moves away from nature and orders the erection of what can alternately be perceived as a ceremonial platform, a bed, and an ornate memorial work of art” (Harrison 112). There is indeed something celebratory and visually spectacular in the brightly coloured decoration of the second stanza which lends the commemoration an air of permanence, but to assume this as the focus of Rossetti’s celebration is to discount her Tractarian belief in nature and its status as a reflection of the divine, constantly renewing itself, and a reminder of the permanency of God. For example, in her poem “Spring,” she writes of the spiritual power that animates nature:

Tips of tender green,
 Leaf, or blade, or sheath;
 Telling of the hidden life
 That breaks forth underneath,
 Life nursed in its grave by Death. (5-9)

Despite the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics of “A Birthday,” it is difficult to believe that Rossetti prized the work of human hands over that of God, even in carvings and paintings which represent the natural world.

The aesthetic of the poem is self-consciously Pre-Raphaelite and medieval; the manuscript emendations show that Rossetti changed the line from “my love *has* come to me” to the more archaic and pleasing “my love *is* come to me” (8; my italics). Both the images and the words offer an intentionally historical vision: archaic words such as “vair” and “fleur-de-lys” conjure up the courts of medieval kings, while the pomegranate and the dove are symbols widely used in medieval Christian art as well as in Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Most significant, however, are the details which link the poem to the Song of Songs in the Bible. The title, “A Birthday,” can be read literally (although it rarely is), but the poem is more commonly read as a love-lyric, celebrating reunion with a beloved. Song of Songs is metaphorical for the union of Christ with His Bride, the Church, allegorically expressing its love and longing in terms of human relationships. The biblical allegory offers contrasting images of a lush, verdant landscape, with references to fruit, flowers, doves, pomegranates and apples, and a luxurious palace, filled with gold, silver, and purple upholstery. The language of Rossetti’s poem is strikingly similar to that of the biblical source, and suggests that her love-lyric has a divine rather than secular meaning.

The regularity of the metre is notable, particularly given Rossetti’s tendency to a more irregular rhythm; the first octet is flawlessly iambic with

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eight-syllable lines, and a cross-rhymed scheme which, while idiosyncratic, is regular: it runs *abcdcec*. The second stanza, however, displays slightly more unusual and irregular features; while it is primarily iambic, lines 1, 2, 3, and 5 begin with a trochaic substitution, thus throwing the emphasis of the poem onto the verbs: “Raise,” “Hang,” “Carve,” and “Work.” The instinctively passive, though joyful, first stanza is thus succeeded by an active, celebratory second stanza, reflected in the metrical structure of the poem. Moreover, the rhyme-scheme is irregular, being *abcdcef* – though this is taking “fleur-de-lys” as a sight-rhyme with “dyes” and “eyes.” The final line – “Is come, my love is come to me” (16) – does not rhyme within its stanza, but reflects the final line of the previous stanza, drawing the poem to its close.

These technical details may not seem significant, but they demonstrate the way in which Rossetti’s prosody reflects her poetic voice. Moreover, they help to provide an important point of comparison to Caroline Norton’s poem. Norton (1808-1877) is better known today for her scandalous love-life and her attempts to change the law with regard to marriage and divorce.³ Yet she was a prolific author, who supported herself and her family with her writing, which she referred to as her “incessant occupation”: “I have written day after day, and night after night, without intermission; I provided for *myself* by means of my literary engagements; I provided for my *children* by means of my literary engagements” (Norton, *Letters, etc.* 12). As Chase and Levenson suggest, Norton took “as her great early subject the abjection of female passion” (25), using her poetry, in Alan Chedzoy’s words, to “seek celebrity and tell the story of her sufferings” (63). Certainly her poems did achieve considerable contemporary popularity, though this may owe as much to her personality as to her poetry. Less well-known now, Norton is linked to Rossetti for her essay on “Goblin Market” which appeared in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1863. Yet we know that Rossetti read and engaged with the work of earlier women poets, from her comments on Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the “Great Poetess” in “Monna Innominata,” to her poem on “L.E.L.,” “Whose heart was breaking for a little love.”⁴

“My Heart Is Like a Withered Nut!” was published in Norton’s first collection of poems, *The Undying One, and Other Poems* (1830). It is surprising that there have not been more critical attempts to read Norton’s poem biographically, given the popular preoccupation with her scandalous life. As Diane Atkinson admits, the poem “cries out for a biographical interpretation. Caroline was only twenty-two years old. The opening verse yearned: ‘My heart is like a withered nut, / Rattling within its hollow shell’” (68). Atkinson does not attempt to read it as evidence of Norton’s own emotions, however, and indeed to do so would be facile. *The Undying One* was generally well-

received, and Norton's status as a poet seemed assured. Though the poem reads as a manifestation of the sadness of maturity, Chase and Levenson point out the significance of Norton's youth:

Norton's coming to a writing career and her coming to consciousness of her body met violently, met productively, and no reflection on the material conditions of her literary life can ignore that first materiality, the young female body..., the only sure resource within a close system of sexual and marital exchange. This is the body, glowing as a burnished artifact, that writes itself into the early poetry, as in this characteristic passage from "The Undying One":

... beautiful is she, who sighs alone
Now that her young and playful mates are gone:
The dim moon, shining on her statue face,
Gives it a mournful and unearthly grace. (22-23)

Chase and Levenson provide a reminder of Norton's youth, and of her physical awareness of herself as a debutante; as a woman whose beauty was her trademark, appearance was important. This makes "My Heart is like a Withered Nut!" unusual in her oeuvre; here, she may be eliciting sympathy, as biographer Alan Chedzoy suggests she aimed to do with her poetry, but the materiality of the poem is aged, wrinkled, and unattractive, reflecting the misery of the speaker. The poem recalls youth and beauty – "Once it was soft to every touch"; "Once it was comely to the view" – but much like the persona of Rossetti's "Monna Innominata," with "Youth gone, and beauty gone if ever there / Dwelt beauty in so poor a face as this" (Rossetti 14.1-2), Norton's speaker must find another way to live, to find joy, peace, and comfort, and this, it seems, she cannot do; this desperation is the crucial difference between Rossetti's and Norton's poems.

Norton was, according to Chedzoy, "especially proud of the piece deliciously entitled 'My Heart is like a Withered Nut!'" (71). It is easy to see why: for all its oddities of title and of expression, it is a well-crafted poem which must have appealed to Rossetti in its form as well as tone. It is strictly rhymed, with each of the three octets following an *ababcdcd* schema with very few near-rhymes. Every line has exactly eight syllables, and it has a remarkably regular rhythm, despite a few trochaic substitutions:

My heart is like a withered nut,
Rattling within its hollow shell;
You cannot ope my breast, and put
Any thing fresh with it to dwell.
The hopes and dreams that filled it when

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Life's spring of glory met my view,
Are gone! and ne'er with joy or pain
That shrunken heart shall swell anew.

My heart is like a withered nut;
Once it was soft to every touch,
But now 'tis stern and closely shut; –
I would not have to plead with such.
Each light-toned voice once cleared my brow,
Each gentle breeze once shook the tree
Where hung the sun-lit fruit, which now
Lies cold, and stiff, and sad, like me!

My heart is like a withered nut –
It once was comely to the view;
But since misfortune's blast hath cut,
It hath a dark and mournful hue.
The freshness of its verdant youth
Nought to that fruit can now restore;
And my poor heart, I feel in truth,
Nor sun, nor smile shall light it more! (1-24)

Norton's poem draws upon the natural world to express her grief; the "withered nut" is an unusual metaphor for a melancholy heart, offering a striking visual representation of not only sadness but also age, as though the nut has lost its bloom and become dry and unappetizing. The nut, however, contrasts with the "gentle breeze" and the "sun-lit fruit" which represent "verdant youth"; this is not merely a poem of disappointed love, but one of mature adulthood and bitterness. Each stanza contains its own contrasts: the state of the speaker's heart now, and before "misfortune's blast" struck it. The poem reeks of staleness and decay, with its "deep and mournful hue," looking back on the "freshness of its verdant youth." It is notable, however, that the poem does not discuss the cause of this withering or express regret for a love lost; it simply states the fact. In many ways, Rossetti's poem is less cryptic, despite the alternative critical views on its possible "meanings," but like much of Rossetti's work, the source of sadness or joy is left obscure.

As Norton's poetic persona looks back on her springtime youth, the parallels and contrasts with Rossetti's poem are striking. Rossetti's poem seems to be a precursor to Norton's: "Life's spring of glory" (6), which Norton's poem sadly recalls, seems to be the subject of Rossetti's poem. In fact, Rossetti was known to draw on the works of other poets and novelists to

create poetic characters: for example, she wrote poems based on the novels of Charles Maturin, in which the heroines are imagined at a moment of crisis which, in some cases, did not actually occur in the novels. One can only speculate about the extent to which Rossetti intended her poem to interact with Norton's, although the similarities seem strong enough to make it highly probable that "A Birthday" is a poetic response to "My Heart is like a Withered Nut!" Rossetti's poem – drawing on biblical sources as well as a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, and with its complex prosody – is the better poem; but Norton's has a charm of its own, and demonstrates some poetic skill. Each stanza of Norton's poem is tightly strung together, moving backwards and forwards between the time when she was young and happy, and the present. Rossetti uses again this device of looking back in such poems as "May" in the *Goblin Market* volume. "May" compares youth and happiness to spring, the season blooming with promise. It is a common trope of the "poetess tradition" to see one's life in terms of the cycle of nature, a conceit which Rossetti uses repeatedly, both to celebrate renewal and to mourn the passing of youth.

The promise of renewal arises from the "Romantic longing for freedom and transcendence through nature and through poetic inspiration," which many poets of Norton's and Rossetti's generation were able to manifest (Linkin and Behrendt 206). However, the same cycle can threaten to trap women into the unhappiness that Norton and Rossetti struggle with (as in Rossetti's "May"). Whereas "A Birthday" demonstrates a oneness with nature, both outside (in the "watered shoot," for example) and when enclosed (on the "dais," for example), the other poems show a speaker constrained by the natural world, bound up in a cycle which brings them old age and unhappiness. In another poem, written in 1857 and published in 1862, the same year as "A Birthday," Rossetti appropriates the same device of a simile, drawing on nature again to provide a visual reference for emotions. "A Better Resurrection" is a poem of unremitting grief, in which the speaker is barely able to recall "bud or greenness." This poem is comprised of three octets, with a more conventional rhyme-scheme than "A Birthday," but has a much more complex metrical scheme which lends the poem a grief-stricken tone, halting and uncertain in the first line – "I have no wit, no words, no tears"; yet, because of the lurching metre and frequent caesurae of the poem, it is a surprise to note that each line except the last has eight syllables. Structurally, it is almost identical to Norton's poem.

The strongest parallels, however, lie in Rossetti's use of the simile in "A Better Resurrection": the first stanza offers "My life is in the falling leaf" (7), while the second opens with "My life is like a faded leaf, / My harvest dwindled to a husk" (9-10), and continues, "My life is like a frozen thing"

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(13). The final stanza opens with the line, “My life is like a broken bowl” (17). I contend that Rossetti is again appropriating and indeed improving upon Norton’s poem; here, the poem bears more resemblance than “A Birthday,” for although it does not open with the simile, the contrast between the present melancholy and the remembered happiness of spring recalls Norton’s approach. Yet, unlike Norton, whose speaker is sure that “my poor heart, I feel in truth, / Nor sun, nor smile shall light it more!” (23-24), Rossetti’s speaker has hope through faith: “Yet rise it shall – the sap of Spring; / O Jesus, rise in me” (15-16). K.J. Mayberry calls this poem “one of the finest examples of self-transformation based on divine order” (124), discussing its move from despair to hope to faith: “In the third stanza, the analogizing impulse continues, but as we saw in ‘A Birthday,’ it moves away from the context of nature” (125). Interestingly, Mayberry goes on to argue that the poem moves away from “the cyclical quality of natural renewal” because of its presumed impermanence, and instead the speaker recreates herself as a bowl, “something more permanent,” which, though broken, can be mended through faith (126). Both “A Birthday” and “A Better Resurrection,” though poems with very different moods, metamorphose Norton’s poem into an incremental work which demonstrates the transforming power of poetry and faith, whether from passive to active joy or from sadness to faith.

The “broken bowl” to which the speaker compares her life is, unlike the fallen leaf, able to be restored. The healing element of faith is apparent in the biblical echoes which are strong throughout this poem: the biblical title comes from Hebrews 11.35, in which those who suffer may obtain “a better resurrection.” The “broken bowl” refers to Ecclesiastes 12.6: “Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, Or the golden bowl is broken, Or the pitcher shattered at the fountain, Or the wheel broken at the well.” The biblical verse does not provide healing of the earthly body, but hope for the soul: “Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” (12.7). Rossetti’s “golden bowl” can be reshaped for spiritual ends, as her verse’s conclusion rewrites the scriptural source to suggest a renewed usefulness for the speaker as an agent of Christ on earth. By merging the two biblical allusions, Rossetti constructs a trajectory which moves from defeat to triumph.

A century ago, in *The Elements of Style: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* (1915), David Rannie evaluated the two most common figures of speech in fanciful poetry as equally appropriate to the quest for truth in religious and philosophical discourse: “The writer about religion or philosophy who is concerned with the ultimate nature of things may quite

legitimately use both simile and metaphor.... At least as illustration, [their use] is immortal” (161). For Rossetti and Norton, the structuring of a poem around a collection of similes provides an effective way to conjure up strong, emotive, visual imagery. In both “A Birthday” and “A Better Resurrection,” Rossetti draws on Norton’s use of simile within tightly structured poems, based on the broadly similar subject matter of emotional and spiritual renewal, though one is conventionally read as an expression of her early, more secular, energetic works, while the other is read as an expression of her devotional works which manifest her disillusion with earthly love. Rannie’s endorsement of the use of simile and metaphor is congruent with Rossetti’s use of simile drawn from biblical sources: while the structure comes from Norton’s work, the imagery is scriptural throughout both “A Birthday” and “A Better Resurrection.” Norton’s poem is largely conventional but without reference to Christian hope. In contrast, Rossetti’s similes ring true, primarily because Rossetti is writing of spiritual, “immortal” hope rather than of the joys and disappointments of earthly love. This difference may explain the disappearance of Norton’s poem from the canon, a canon wherein Rossetti’s poems are anthologized, discussed, and debated.

Notes

1. In a letter to W.M. Rossetti dated 28 April 1849, Christina Rossetti wrote: “I must beg that you will not fix upon any [of my poems, to pass on to Thomas Woolner] which the most imaginative person could construe into love personals” (*Letters* 1:16).
2. Hassett links this line to Keats’s “mellow fruitfulness” which will “bend with apples the moss’d cottage trees” in “To Autumn” (Hassett 7).
3. This love-life is documented, though with little mention of Norton’s prolific literary output, by Diane Atkinson, *The Criminal Conversation of Mrs Norton* (2012). Randall Craig, in *The Narratives of Caroline Norton* (2009), examines Norton’s literary works but focusses on prose fiction.
4. In her important book on Rossetti (1999), Diane D’Amico includes a chapter on “Rossetti’s Response to the Feminine Voice of Woe” which discusses Rossetti’s appropriations of and responses to earlier poetesses, though Norton is scarcely mentioned (18-42).

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