

An important voice - reading Christina Rossetti

Complex, restless, haunting, compelling - these are just some of the ways Pamela Bickley describes the work of a major Victorian poet often too easily dismissed.

Virginia Woolf's centenary essay on Christina Rossetti is entitled, 'I am Christina Rossetti.' She refers to an unexpectedly dramatic moment at a polite Victorian tea party when a small woman, dressed in black, 'uprose from a chair and paced forward into the centre of the room ... announ[cing] solemnly, "I am Christina Rossetti".' Woolf envisages herself in this scene, breaking a tea-cup in 'the awkward ardour of my admiration.' The post-Victorian, modernist writer sees Rossetti as confident in her poetic vocation: 'sure of your gift, convinced of your vision.'

We may know Christina Rossetti from an early age; possibly from anthologies of children's verse: 'Who has seen the wind?/Neither you nor I...' certainly from the Christmas carol 'In the bleak mid-winter.' Indeed, our imagined picture of the Christmas scene is probably shaped by her vision of a Bethlehem shrouded in very English snow. But is this black-clad Victorian figure - spinsterish, self-denying, highly religious - interesting and accessible to a modern reader?

Startling power, endless variety

In fact, her lyric poetry is among the most vivid and powerful in the language, full of startling images and an

Writer

Pamela Bickley
This article first
appeared in
emagazine 28
April 2005

Poetry

Writers A-Z

Print this
article:

astonishing variety of poetic forms. Her imagery is rich and colourful: where she is celebratory it is not difficult to connect her art with the exotic tapestries of early Pre-Raphaelite painting. Consider the sumptuous pictorial world evoked in 'A Birthday':

Raise me a dais of silk and down;
Hang it with vair 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;

Dark moods

It must be acknowledged, though, that there are much darker moods in Rossetti's writing: in particular a pervasive restless yearning. This creates a haunting evocative effect. Her choice of imagery is powerfully compelling; her subject often an emotional and spiritual longing rather than the romantic passion of 'A Birthday'. In her brief lyric, 'Roses on a brier' an intensely-felt poetic moment is directed to the essentially unknowable. Many of her poems express an apocalyptic tone - she looks beyond death to a truth that cannot be articulated.

Roses on a brier,
Pearls from out the bitter sea
Such is the earth's desire
However pure it be.
Neither bud nor brier,
Neither pearl nor brine for me:
Be stilled, my long desire;
There shall be no more sea.
Be stilled, my passionate heart:

Old earth shall end, new earth shall be:

Be still and earn thy part

Where there shall be no more sea.

Asking difficult questions

Her religious life is complex; she expresses her belief in eternal truths yet we feel her own doubt and despair. It is worth having a fresh look at one of her most popular poems 'Remember me'. This sonnet was voted one of the nation's most popular poems in 1995 and is often read at funerals as a consolatory statement of nostalgic regret. It concludes in an apparently reassuring way but is surely far from simple.

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into that silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while,
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

Her vision here does not accord with any conventional Victorian heaven: what precisely is the 'silent land'? And the poem's inclusion of the facts of physical disintegration disturbs and destroys any gentle tranquillity. In her sonnets 'Two Thoughts of Death' she also dwells on the body's

putrefaction: 'Foul worms fill up her mouth so sweet and red;/Foul worms are underneath her graceful head.' The modern reader finds these images repugnant, yet even in Rossetti's collection of nursery rhymes (Sing-Song) we feel both the inescapable presence of death and the unanswerable questions it provokes:

Why did baby die,
Making Father sigh,
Mother cry?
Flowers, that bloom to die,
Make no reply
Of 'why?'
But bow and die.

In Sing-Song her lyrics are slight but engaging: she delights in the simple everyday normalities of a young child's life and conjures a magical natural world. But she also articulates an anxiety over life's fragility, which we would hesitate, now, to present to a very young listener.

What marks her out?

Is Rossetti a morbid writer? This would seem to be a justifiable question: she often alludes to 'hope deferred'; references such as 'My life is like a broken bowl' seem to proliferate. There is, certainly, much here about death. I would suggest two areas which distinguish her completely from the style and sentiment of her contemporary Victorian writers. The first is the passionate urgency of her desire and longing: there is nothing meek or self-effacing in her demand for emotional fulfilment:

How can we say 'enough' on earth -
'Enough' with such a craving heart?

Equally, the vivid strangeness of her imagery is compelling. Her language is frequently startling and unexpected. 'A Pause' is a sonnet which again begins with a death-bed but its conclusion appears to fly into the extraordinary. Note how the rhythm and metre, together with the subtlety of her alliteration, intensify her effect:

Then first my spirit seemed to scent the air
Of Paradise; then first the tardy sand
Of time ran golden; and I felt my hair
Put on a glory, and my soul expand.

An artist's life

The pre-eminence of her religious life is unarguable: in her early years she broke off her engagement to the painter James Collinson because he became a Roman Catholic - a period of her life which became one of profound depression. Later, in her mid-thirties, she rejected an offer of marriage from Charles Cayley, a highly respected gentleman scholar, this time because of her suitor's mid-Victorian agnosticism. Outwardly her life was unremarkable - but for the fact of her writing: she was in no doubt over her commitment to her art, politely rejecting revisions or suggestions from her more famous brother, the poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti. We should not lose sight of the fact that she chose her single life - and her life as an artist - at a time when women were expected to pursue only a domestic existence.

Playing with traditions

As a writer, she places herself in a distinguished tradition: in her sonnet sequence 'Monna Innominata' she gives voice to Beatrice or Laura, the silent women to whom Dante

and Petrarch addressed their love poetry. In Rossetti's view, there is nothing historically to suggest that the 'unnamed ladies' were incapable of poetry: '... one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover's poetic aptitude.' Each of her sonnets is prefaced with a quotation from Dante and Petrarch: Rossetti, like her brother, could read fluently in Italian, their father's language. But Rossetti rejects their masculine traditions and creates a strikingly original voice. In 'I wish I could remember' her epigraph from Petrarch reads 'Ricorro al tempo ch'io vi vidi prima' (literally 'I recur to the time when I first saw you.'). Rossetti's perspective is subtly different:

I wish I could remember that first day,
First hour, first moment of your meeting me ...
If only I could recollect it, such
A day of days! I let it come and go
As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow.

She is taking a traditional form - the sonnet as love poem - but in a radically individual way. We see this originality also in her tendency to challenge and tease her reader. We expect lyric poetry to be confessional and revealing but Rossetti can consciously craft an enigmatic metaphor which she refuses to elucidate. 'Memory' begins 'I nursed it in my bosom while it lived/I hid it in my heart when it was dead' and by the end of the poem we can only speculate about the nature of 'it'. The poem is expressive of grief and renunciation; she alludes perhaps to her rejection of earthly physical love yet her ultimate meaning eludes us. In 'Winter: My Secret' she makes a self-parodic joke of this and perhaps warns her reader against any tendency to read the poetry as psychobiography:

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:

Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not to-day; it froze, and blows, and snows
And you're too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? Well:
Only, my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

Goblin Market

Her narrative fantasy *Goblin Market* is the poem which has most provoked readers and critics. It is a brilliant tour de force of inventive form and language, with its own perturbing mythology. The goblin men are strange animal figures:

One had a cat's face,
One whisked a tail, ...
One like a wombat prowled obtuse and furry,
One like a ratel tumbled hurry skurry.

Yet they sound like doves cooing in the summer evening
and they offer a cornucopia of ravishing fruits:

Pomegranates full and fine,
Dates and sharp bullaces
Rare pears and greengages,
Damsons and bilberries, ...
Figs to fill your mouth,
Citrons from the South ...

The two sisters wooed by the goblin men, Lizzie and Laura, respond quite differently: Lizzie knows that goblin men are dangerous while her sister cannot resist the luscious banquet offered. She must buy their wares with a golden curl, however; a disturbing bargain which causes her to drop a tear 'more rare than pearl'. As she yields, she becomes an image of appetite and satiation:

She sucked and sucked and sucked the more
Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;
She sucked until her lips were sore.

She is left knowing only that her experience must be repeated and she spends her days 'longing for the night.' But the goblins will not repeat their offer, her desire remains unsatisfied and she falls into a decline. When Lizzie fears that her sister will die, she resolves to acquire the goblin fruit for her and sets out with her silver penny. The goblins are angered by her bargaining and assault her, the language here suggesting, as clearly as a mid-Victorian text may do, the physical brutality of their violation:

Tore her gown and soiled her stocking,
Twitched her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat.

Yet she doesn't eat, and the totemic coin is flung back at her. When her sister clings to her, hungrily sucking the fruits from her lips and body, the result is unexpected: an orgasmic, Dionysian frenzy, unconsciousness, and then, apparently, the return of Laura's original innocence. The poem concludes with a trite little moral - 'there is no friend like a sister' - which does not appear to do justice to the intensity of the narrative.

Clearly this is a poem inviting religious interpretation: Laura, like Eve, eats the forbidden fruit and is redeemed by the self-sacrificing love of her sister whose 'Eat me, drink me, love me' could be seen as sacramental. Yet there are also strong sexual overtones in the poem: the violent physicality of the goblin men is profoundly disturbing and we are told that another of their victims, Jeanie, has died

because she has anticipated the 'joys brides hope to have.'
Modern critics tend to emphasise the erotic picture of the two sisters. But any single allegorical reading tends to diminish the poem, which successfully creates its own coherent, although bizarre, world. The goblin fruits are exquisitely sensuous and alluring, but destructive; the poem remains essentially ambiguous.

Reading Rossetti

So, why read Christina Rossetti? We find profound emotional conflict and complexity in this poetry; we also find an endlessly creative lyric art. She resists easy categorisation, is never the didactic or complacent Victorian voice, but seeks rather to express extreme moods and passions. Perhaps it is easy for the modern reader to dismiss her as deeply repressed: one of her Victorian critics observed that, after Tennyson's verse, her poetry was a 'trail of fire.'