

## Notes & Reviews

### Christina Rossetti's 'A Birthday': Representations of the 'Poetic'

- My heart is like a singing bird  
Whose nest is in a watered shoot;  
My heart is like an apple tree  
Whose boughs are bent with thickset  
fruit;
- 5 My heart is like a rainbow shell  
That paddles in a halcyon sea;  
My heart is gladder than all these  
Because my love has come to me.
- Raise me a dais of silk and down;  
10 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 fleurs-de-lys;
- 15 Because the birthday of my life  
Is come, my love is come to me.<sup>1</sup>

Christina Rossetti's lyric 'A Birthday' is a great favourite with anthologists and quite rightly very much admired. Yet critical response to the poem has tended to be vague, focussing on the emotion expressed, from W.M. Rossetti's definition of the poem as an 'outburst of exuberant joy'<sup>2</sup> to the 'purely triumphant exultation at the fulfilment of earthly love' of L.M. Packer.<sup>3</sup>

Valid studies have since been made by Richard D. Lynde<sup>4</sup> and by Conrad Festa<sup>5</sup> who sees the poem as an expression of joy at the poet's reunion with Christ. There are, however, problems with a purely religious interpretation. Why does Rossetti open the second stanza with 'Raise me'? Surely something like 'Raise in his honour' would have been more fitting? Rossetti never tried to hide the religious meaning of her poetry. Furthermore, the use of biblical imagery does not necessarily make a poem a devotional one. How then is one to interpret 'A Birthday'?

I would like to suggest that the difficulties in interpreting such poems as 'A Birthday' stem from a tacit agreement among the majority of critics that the study of Christina Rossetti's poetry does not involve a study of the development in poetic thought of the time. Was she, as Festa tells us, concerned

exclusively with 'the retelling of the truths which she found in her religion'?<sup>6</sup> To limit her poetry in this way is to ignore any theoretical background to her composition. Yet there are very definite indications that Rossetti was familiar with contemporary poetic theory. W.D. Shaw's study of her poem 'Good Friday' is one demonstration of the direct or indirect influence on her of the poetic theory of E.S. Dallas.<sup>7</sup>

If we allow a similar theoretical basis for a poem such as 'A Birthday', the elements of the poem immediately fall into place and Rossetti can be seen experimenting with aesthetic ideas which resemble those of her brother Dante Gabriel. Take for example a passage from Dallas' *Poetics: An Essay on Poetry*:

*And every pleasure too, has a degree of its own at which it becomes poetry, just as ice, glass and iron have each a degree at which they melt . . . so certain moods of the mind, such as love and feeling generally, contain so much imagination as to be almost always poetic.*<sup>8</sup>

Here Dallas implies that the stronger, more intense an emotion, the more it is poetic. Why not then view 'A Birthday' as an experiment in the *representation* of an intensely 'poetic' sensation, that of 'Love's ecstatic gratification.'<sup>9</sup> It is the *means* of representation which is being examined by Rossetti.

Let us examine the images of the first stanza. They are not only figures 'recalled in their natural element'<sup>10</sup> but are each representations of a moment of fulfilment in a sense both sensual and sexual. The 'singing bird' (2.1) has found a mate and expresses his joy in song—as the poet wishes to express hers. The apple tree is representative of another time of fulfilment in nature, as is the shell which simply suggests the highest expression of fulfilment which nature has to offer in its hint of the birth of Aphrodite.

All these images seem to be very effective.