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## DUALISM IN THE POETRY OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

*Theo Dombrowski*

It is not often recognized that poetry as clearly poised and firmly controlled as that of Christina Rossetti is troubled by a profound sense of fragmentation. In particular, much of Christina Rossetti's poetry reflects an acute sensitivity to the duality of experience. Indeed, the firm technical control and simple diction which characterize her poetry seem to arise not from equanimity and detachment but from attempts to resolve or control an underlying tension.

In various ways her poetry establishes the conception of a universe based on a destructive conflict of opposites. The unhappy personae of many of the poems are caught between such basic forces as desire and duty, death and life, evil and good, love and isolation. The results of the personae's subjection to such conflicts vary. Resolution of conflict—religious or secular—in one poem is undercut by submission to the destructive forces of opposition in another.

Such duality may have arisen from Christina Rossetti's own emotional conflicts between duty and erotic love: Lona Mosk Packer conjectures a biographical basis to such a conflict.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the sense of duality is evidence in turn of a deeply ingrained fragmentation of sensibility: Winston Weathers sees the sister poems (primarily "Goblin Market") as expressions of the "fragmented self moving or struggling toward harmony and balance."<sup>2</sup> Neither Packer nor Weathers, however, gives serious consideration to the dualism in Christina Rossetti's poetry. Whether or not the dualism in the poetry can be related to Christina Rossetti's own problems, much of her poetry depends on it.

The dualistic sensibility is evident in the titles of the poems themselves: "Life and Death," "Twice," "Today and Tomorrow," "Is and Was," "Two Parted" are typical. Characteristic techniques, though often of little importance, also suggest an awareness of twofold experience. Word pairs, for example, occur frequently for antithesis, balance, or sound value. The use of such pairs, though, seems largely arbitrary: poems explicitly defining tension show no more frequent use of these pairs than more equable poems.

A greater emphasis on a two-part tension is often established by dialogue. Dialogue is characteristic of the ballad, a form favored by all the

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<sup>1</sup>*Christina Rossetti* (Univ. of California Press, 1963).

<sup>2</sup>"Christina Rossetti: The Sisterhood of Self," *VP*, 3 (1965), 81.

Pre-Raphaelite poets, and even when Christina Rossetti had largely abandoned her early Pre-Raphaelite style, she continued to use ballad form. While not all of her ballads exploit dialogue (e.g. "Cousin Kate"), many poems not in ballad form do depend on dialogue to develop conflict of viewpoints. For example, many of the religious poems develop as a confrontation between different views of salvation or different moral attitudes. Further, such poems tend to use statement and reply to dramatize antithetical viewpoints rather than to develop a single viewpoint by interior argument with subtle variation. In "From House to Home," for example, the spiritual development of one of the sisters arises from the dramatic conflict early in the poem.

Antithesis, another technique relying upon two-part contrast, establishes a dualistic framework in many poems. Frequently Christina Rossetti uses antithesis almost incidentally either to bring a theme into focus or to underline the dual nature of an experience; but most often, as in the following poem, she associates the device with important contrasting ideas:

She sat and sang alway  
By the green margin of a stream,  
Watching the fishes leap and play  
Beneath the glad sunbeam.  
I sat and wept alway  
Beneath the moon's most shadowy beam,  
Watching the blossoms of the May  
Weep leaves into the stream.  
I wept for memory;  
She sang for hope that is so fair:  
My tears were swallowed by the sea;  
Her songs died on the air. ("Song," p. 290)<sup>3</sup>

Many such love poems are structured on the antithesis of present and past (or future), joy and sorrow, hope and despair, though often without the deft symmetry displayed in this poem. Often explicitly antithetical, too, are such contrasts in the secular poems as those between falling and rising, today and tomorrow, lost and found, blindness and clear vision, youth and age, life and death.

The religious poems, of course, inherit a wealth of traditional opposites; but Christina Rossetti's antithetical use of them is often more than merely conventional. Time and eternity, earthly misery and heavenly bliss intensify by antithesis the torment of a trapped soul longing for escape. And the torment is especially intense because the speaker in many of these religious poems seems torn between longing and loathing, hope and despair, resolution and weariness. Such poems as "This near-at-hand" stress the utter antithesis of heaven and earth:

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<sup>3</sup>All page numbers are drawn from *The Poetical Works of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, Memoir and Notes by William Michael Rossetti (New York, 1904).

Our land that we see is befouled by evil:  
 The land that we see not makes mirth and revel,  
 Far from death and devil. (p. 194)

Others, such as "Day or Night," employ a somewhat Manichaeian antithesis of good and evil: one stanza argues that "Day and night the Accuser makes no pause," and the second answers with a development of the assertion that "Day and night our Jesus makes no pause" (p. 229). The symbolic use of antithetical night and day reduces to elemental conflict traditional Christian belief. Indeed, rather than attempting complexity, subtlety, or ambivalence, such religious poems opt for stark conflict. Something of Hopkins' religious torment, if little of his uneasy formal expression, is often created by naked antithesis. In "None With Him," for example, "My God, to live: how didst Thou bear to live" of the first stanza and "My God, to die: how didst Thou bear to die" of the second are played off against "Whilst I do hardly bear my easy life" of the third (pp. 238-239). This poem demonstrates the control of form in many such poems, the antithesis between the first two stanzas being played off against the greater antithesis between the last and the first two, as if to entrench with deepening antithesis the persona's awe and self-abasement.

Less extensive in the poetry but equally dualistic in structure is the use of tonal shift and typographical arrangement to separate two parts of a poem. In her sonnets Christina Rossetti makes little use of the traditional shift between octave and sestet, but in other verse forms she often displaces the emotional tone or disorients expectation. Most deservedly well-known of these poems is "A Birthday" (p. 335) where the comparatively subtle shift from the inward-looking first stanza ("My heart is like a singing bird") to the imperative stance of the second ("Raise me a dais of silk and down") is central to the success of the poem.

More obviously related to a dualistic outlook is the prevalence in the narrative poems of two opposing characters. Some pairs of characters, like lovers or sinner and savior, are purely traditional or incidental, but others, such as two sisters, often seem to arise directly from a dualistic sensibility. Lizzie and Laura in "Goblin Market" are the best-known sisters, but sisters occur with varying treatment in many other poems, and most often with contrasting roles. Winston Weathers points out that the two sisters can be seen as duelling aspects of the same psyche (p. 82). When one sister betrays another (as in "Sister Maude" and "Noble Sisters") the duality becomes destructive: opposition leads not to resolution but to disintegration. That Christina Rossetti was particularly interested in the confrontation of two persons or forces seems evident from the fact that, despite ballad conventions, groups of three rarely occur. When they do occur they usually embody a two-part conflict. In "Maiden Song," for example, the conflict is between two plain sisters and the beautiful Margaret. Similarly the Holy Trinity is

almost totally absent from the religious poems: the religious experience entails not scholastic subtleties but the fundamental polarities of sinner and savior, heaven and hell.

The tendency to use techniques to stress two-part conflict is perhaps most evident in the extensive use of paradox. Because a paradox compresses opposites into a meaningful whole, however, it can emphasize either resolution or discord. As resolution paradox can draw on a deep font of Christian tradition: the achievement of life through death and of bliss through suffering, the expression of strength through weakness and attainment through denial. The very frequency of such paradoxes commands attention. Moreover, in non-religious poems paradox can similarly claim a tentative escape from conflict. One of the long series of languishing women wryly observes that when she is dead, "My quickened dust may blossom at your feet" in the form of "flowers and berries"; she will be "Barren through life, but in death bearing fruit" ("Looking Forward," p. 294). Similarly, the speaker in "Rest" asserts the meaningfulness of death in paradoxical terms: "Darkness more clear than noonday holdeth her, / Silence more musical than any song" (p. 293). Paradox can express with equal potency grief or torment, revealing duality in apparent unity. In "An Old World Thicket," for example, the persona despairs at the duality of experience and the deception of appearances and expresses her despair in paradox: "My strength was weakness and my heart was fire." The speaker is "Racing without a goal," "Birthless and deathless, void of start or stop" (p. 66).

Such essentially formal expressions of dual principles, of course, merely intensify the most important underlying dualistic themes, extending to both religious and secular subjects. More than just describing the forces of good and evil between which the speaker is trapped, the religious poems often describe a destructive result, either because the speaker is torn between desire and duty or because she cannot perceive the right path. The persona is rarely the totally passive victim of universal forces: the dualism is terrible precisely because the speaker is so intensely a free agent, forced to determine her own destiny. On one hand she is faced with her own weakness, her susceptibility to the easier way; on the other she is beguiled with seeming good, assaulted by treachery. In "The World" the speaker is wooed with "Ripe fruits; sweet flowers" by day; by night she sees that "Loathsome and foul with hideous leprosy" as the pleasures of the senses really are, they will lead her "Till my feet, cloven too, take hold on hell" (p. 182). Far from seeing the ability to choose as a means to moral stature or salvation, the speaker repeatedly views the necessity of choice as an intense torment.

Sometimes the wrong choice arises from weakness, sometimes from beguilement, but it is not only the wrong choice which destroys. Choice itself is often destructive:

None know the choice I made; I make it still. . . .  
 My heart dies inch by inch; the time grows old,  
 Grows old in which I grieve. ("Memory I," p. 334)

Thus, in some poems, the speaker courts destruction as relief from choice. In secular terms evil and good can be seen as two women: "You, my saint, lead up to heaven, she lures down to sin." The only solution is extinction: "I would that one of us were dead. . . / Or she and I were dead together" ("Look on This Picture and on This," p. 324).

Even where the speaker is not explicitly caught in a personal dilemma, the poems reiterate the impression of a world as a limbo of uncertainty, divided, incomplete: "This world is all on wax, on wane: / When shall completeness round time's incompleteness?" ("The half moon shows," p. 198). This bifurcation between appearance and reality arises not merely from the disguise of sin but also from the disguise of death as life or creation as destruction. At times this preoccupation with the horrible reality behind the pleasant appearances of nature, echoing similar themes in Jacobean playwrights, becomes a source of despair in itself. In "Today and Tomorrow," for example, dualism is fundamental to nature:

In the pleasant April days  
 Half the world will stir and sing,  
 But half the world will slug and rot. (p. 340)

In other poems, however, nature can be a mask of divine purpose, or of a somewhat pantheistic "unsolved mystery" ("Maiden May," p. 402). The theme of a destructive duality is pervasive in the poetry, not universal.

The sundering of lovers is one of the most widespread themes of bifurcation and, because of its autobiographical basis, could well account for Christina Rossetti's particular sensitivity to dualism. From her own experience the necessity of giving up love for duty seems to have awakened her to the polarity of spirit and flesh, heaven and hell, and, in a more indulgent mood, of lover and lover. The theme of split love is explored with such tenacity, with such interest in countless variations, that it seems in carrying out such an exploration Christina Rossetti was attempting to exorcise the specter of her own isolation. By the decision of either male or female, lovers can be separated by death or by treachery. Either male or female may be spiritually unworthy, or fail to requite love, or be inconstant. The split may be recent or one of long standing; it may be serious or flippant. It may be seen as triumph or defeat, and so on.

On a psychological level, a theme of bifurcation often arises from the traditional dualism of body and soul, or of will and desire. To be "Strong of limb if of purpose weak" (p. 27) is to be trapped in the basic human duality. It is as if Christina Rossetti views the self as only tenuously integrated; under stress or grief it splits. When one of the "Three Nuns" declares "My life is breaking like a cloud" (p. 14) she is merely revealing that her soul is breaking

along inherent lines of cleavage: the pattern of disintegration is both natural and inevitable, if, in this case, a sign of weakness.

Coleridge has restated the dualistic outlook held by Heraclitus and Giordano Bruno as follows: "Every Power in Nature and in Spirit must evolve an opposite, as the sole means and condition of its manifestation: and all opposition is a tendency to Re-union."<sup>4</sup> Although Christina Rossetti would perhaps admit, with regret, the truth of the first part of this "universal Law of Polarity or essential Dualism," she would seem to find some hope in the latter part. Even though her poetry remains painfully conscious of the oppositions upon which life is founded, at the same time it yearns toward the union of those opposites. While unhappiness is characteristically figured in duality, happiness is figured in unity. In the religious poems that unity is fundamental to triumph and salvation. The unity of heaven is seen not only to encompass dualities, to "overarch" them (p. 286), but to provide an escape from all conflict, whether or not that conflict directly threatens the individual:

It is a land with neither night nor day,  
Nor heat nor cold, nor any wind nor rain,  
Nor hills nor valleys. ("Cobwebs," p. 317)

Even though there seems nothing inimical in "hills and valleys" or "night and day," for Christina Rossetti they are sufficiently vivid reminders of the duality of earthly experience to be banned from her conception of heaven.

In heaven unity is praised for its own sake; it is sought with almost manic fervency: in heaven there will be

One King and one song  
One thunder of manifold voices harmonious and strong,  
One King and one love, and one shout of one worshipping throng.  
(*"The Shout of a King,"* p. 211)

The Holy Trinity is not praised in Christina Rossetti's heaven, for it would seem to confuse the essential unity. Similarly, the unity of heaven generally completes the incomplete, the self fragmented in life. On another level, those who fail to achieve a unity with another in life achieve in death a greater unity with Christ, the Heavenly Bridegroom; this unity is greater than that available to any purely human love, for "Our teachers teach that one and one make two: / Later, Love rules that one and one make one" (*"Later Life—16,"* p. 78). It seems clear that for Christina Rossetti this ecstatic state of unity—a unity that seems to merge her very individuality in the concept of oneness—is so potent that all the other theoretical attempts at a unified condition, expressed in other religious poems, are largely second best. The desire to unify life and death or fear and hope by a universal or generalized love, for

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<sup>4</sup>Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works*, ed. Barbara E. Rooke (Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), IV, 94.

example, is not so intense as the desire for unity evident in the more visionary poems.

A similar attempt to achieve a transcendent unity creates intensity in those secular poems in which the speaker yearns for death because it is "full"; it releases one from the "days . . . that wane and wax" (p. 342). Above all, though, stand the tormented poems of love. In many of these poems it is as if Christina Rossetti is searching restlessly, half guiltily, for some kind, any kind, of unity. She considers a meeting of ghosts, as if, removed from the flesh, she and her lover can at last meet, their union sanctified. But these are pallid in comparison to those few poems, "A Birthday" prominent among them, that, almost with a sense of release, unabashedly celebrate sensuous earthly love. Those restless desires that recur throughout the poems—for love, for death, for salvation, for release from torment—are characterized not by lofty strength or the grand gesture, but by the desire to submit passively, to be swept up. Even the desire for love is the desire to be overcome by a lover, leaving the speaker no choice, denying the need to say "yea or nay" ("Love From the North," p. 330). Ultimately, though, it is the foundation of Christina Rossetti's essentially tragic view of her own emotional life that any union she can achieve is purely verbal:

I say 'Cor Mio' when I remember you,  
And thus I yield us both one tender due,  
Welding one whole of two divided parts. ("Cor Mio," p. 389)

In a sense, all of her poetry is an attempt to use words to overcome the fundamental bifurcations that distressed her life and so deeply characterized her sensibility.