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Nature as a 'never-failing principle of joy' and 'purest passion': Christina Rossetti's Romantic
Theorization of Nature as an Emblem of Divine Wisdom and Knowledge

Abstract

The paper attempts to show how Christina Rossetti, an ostensibly non-canonical Victorian poet, develops a poetics of Nature that transposes itself from its association with the corporeal natural reality and elevates her soul to unite with God, wherein she finds the ultimate solace from her anxiety of creation. The materiality of the mundane world could not assuage her unease and discomfiture and provide her with the necessary relief and assurance. She primarily feels deceived by the Romantic ideology of meditating Nature and her myriad forms of beauty, but later she inconsolably seeks communion with the divine. She recognizes that Nature is God's work and believes that the female poet's power lies deeply entrenched in the strength and fortitude of reverencing, adulating and glorifying the sacred and the holy, often thought to be her renunciatory pose, which again may be seen as the sublimation of her imagination from the palpable and the tangible to the transcendental – a process of complete 'desensorization' of the natural world and an exaltation to an idealistic world of the spiritual and the eternal.

The merest grass
Along the roadside where we pass,
Lichen and moss and sturdy weed,

Tell of His love who sends the dew,
The rain and sunshine too,
To nourish one small seed. (1)

Christina Rossetti was not a fervid follower, but of course, a reader who studied the Romantic artists with great circumspection. Unlike another Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Rossetti's work divulges almost no indebtedness of intellect and ideology to her poetic forefathers. On the contrary, her poetry unveils itself as an authoritative therapeutic to what she conceived of as the erroneously understood religious, adulatory and political values. However, the Romantics she considered as most significant include a luminous array of 'sublime' thinkers as, Coleridge, Blake, Wordsworth and Keats.

Rossetti was poetically akin to Coleridge and this erudite relationship was more intense and sincere than argumentatively essential, systematically organized and evidently circumstantial considerations. They both partake of an aesthetic ideological premise, gleaned particularly from Coleridge's prose rather than his poetry, that underpins this poetic alliance. This aesthetic position is constituted of the Tractarian doctrine of Analogy, which thematizes Rossetti's poems and prose compositions. This theory bases itself on the philosophical assumption that behind all natural phenomena there is existence of the divine and God is camouflaged by myriad natural visions and perceptions. This is what Rossetti expostulates in *Seek and Find*:

All the world over, visible things typify things invisible ... [c]ommon things continually at hand, wind or windfall or budding bough, acquire a sacred association, and cross our path under aspects at once familiar and transfigured, and preach to her spirits while they serve our bodies. (2)

Since Rossetti's poetry thematically serves as a corrective to the secular Romantic ideologies of her poetic ancestors, 'Consider the Lilies of the Field' can be considered as an apposite illustration. The poem envisions the doctrine lending it a poetic mode, claiming that, 'Flowers preach to us if we will hear', and exemplifies the principle with references of the rose and the lilies which declare emphatically, 'Behold how we/ Preach without words of purity.' According to the implications of the poem, it is irrefutably true that Rossetti did express stern scepticism about the philosophical, idealistic

and secular constructs of nature existing in a considerable portion of Coleridge's poetry as well as in Wordsworth's. (3) 'Dejection: An Ode' is characteristic:

O Lady! We receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
Ah! From the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth –
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element! (4)

In these poems, the speaker's detachment and isolation from nature mirrors his unaccomplished sensibility, rendered poignant with abjection and desolation, and it is from this sense of cheerlessness and despondence emerges the need for revitalization and revival. In elegizing these agonizing realizations, 'Dejection' is truly a rejoinder to the initial four stanzas of Wordsworth's 'Intimations Ode'. The essentially ontological arguments crucial to these great poems are also pivotal in Rossetti's verse, but her work is more singularly and conspicuously associated with Tractarian theology, which Rossetti tacitly offers as a restorative to the unfounded secular metaphysics contrived by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The speaker's alienated self in 'Ode on Intimations to Immortality of Childhood' yearns for unification with the divine as is reflected in the gleeful objects of Nature. Mortality is a despicable catastrophe and it is in defence of this that the speaker seeks unity with the natural elements. He consequently partakes of the Mayday carnival with the birds that 'sing a joyous song', the frolicking lambs, and the 'happy Shepherd boy', but for him nonetheless 'The Clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality.' (5) The poet envisages the concept of liberation of the self as the desire for emancipation from self-incarceration and as a meditative integration with Nature that is obtained by Wordsworth's speaker, who through wielding a philosophically curious mind, achieves a faith that overpowers death. Rossetti

departs from such an idea by rescinding it as a 'foolish fancy', since she is perceptibly agnostic about faith in what the equivocal and ambivalent images of 'celestial light', 'clouds of glory' and 'mighty waters' actually bear. She avows the essentiality of dissociation from 'the merrymaking crew' of the world in order to consequently succeed in acquiring beatific liberation.

Rossetti thus retracts the plausibility of a wedlock between mind and Nature that, as Wordsworth reiteratingly professes, will engender a secular Elysium. Her speakers unswervingly dedicate their energy and vitality rather towards being transformed into brides of Christ. Wordsworth's poems from 'Prospectus' to the 'The Recluse' contour the contrivance of a regal epic poem that impeccably exhibits his ideal of the 'great consummation':

Paradise and groves
Elysian, fortunate islands, fields like those of old
In the deep ocean, wherefore should they be
A History, or but a dream, when minds
Once wedded to this outward frame of things
In love, find these the growth of common day? (6)

In 'Paradise', Rossetti furnishes an immaculate reprisal to a secularly human transcendentalism. To her mind, Paradise is almost idealistically utopian, whose sight can only be experienced in a phantasmagoric dream:

Once in a dream I saw the flowers
That bud and bloom in Paradise;
More fair they are than waking eyes
Have seen in all this world of ours. (7)

Like many of Rossetti's poems, this poem metathesizes lavish Keatsian depictions of Nature – 'the perfume-bearing rose', birdsongs 'like incense to the skies' and 'glassy pools' – to depict a life hereafter which is contrastively dissimilar from the experiential one. Rossetti firmly presumed that 'perception' thrives only in Heaven, where the predicament of alienation can be overwhelmed, and this hypothesis constitutes 'Paradise' which again wages a direct impugment to Wordsworth's anti-conformist philosophical understanding and her riposte is all the more persuasive in delineating the afterlife as a corporeal and empirical certainty:

I hope to see these things again,

But not as once in dreams by night;
To see them with my very sight,
And touch and handle and attain:
To have all Heaven beneath my feet
For narrow way that once they trod;
To have my part with all the saints,
And with my God. (8)

The above verse faithfully portrays Rossetti's theological conviction that stands in a defying encounter with Romanticism and seeks to transpose, both religiously and as a result poetically, the Romantic ideological conception of Nature. Her use of natural metaphors generates and corresponds to diverse biblical referrals and allusions and she deviates in envisaging the physical reality of Nature as a proclamation of the glory of God. Nature, to this devout poet, is a repository of various forms and patterns. In the poem, 'Balm in Gilead', Rossetti enunciates in strict Christian incantation:

Heartsease I found, where Love-lies-bleeding
Empurpled all the ground:
Whatever flowers I missed unheeding,
Heartsease I found. (9)

It is noticeable here that 'Heartsease' and 'Love-lies-bleeding' are incongruous descriptions for a singular and solitary flower. Rossetti deliberately associates two incompatibly disparate characteristics to the same object to establish her Christian theological standpoint that it is through endurance that succour and solace is achieved. Love entails suffering in the form of heart's 'bleeding' from which the poet derives an empurpling 'heartsease'. We feel that she brackets together the idea of suffering she undergoes as a woman poet and the solace she derives from subjecting herself to such an ordeal. This almost conjures up the idea of the Christ who withstood stupendous agony to demonstrate that God typifies love and the metaphor of majestic regality signalled by the expression 'empurpled' strengthens this Christian typology. The analogy that can be said to be in function here is that, all torturous experience including that of romantic loss may eventuate personal ease and contentment, just as Christ's hardship and affliction resulted in redemption of the human race. The poet narrativizes the tale of suffering by being immured within the analogical illustrations drawn from Nature.

An analogical derivation that characterizes the poem, 'Balm in Gilead', is discernible also in one of Rossetti's sonnet, 'It is not death', where she betokens artistic silence as a begetter of suffering for the poet. She gleans hope and vigour to sing from such typological and analogical dialectics. The biblical incongruity arises when the poet declares, 'It is not death, O Christ, to die for Thee', since both the deaths, either literal or figurative, are pre-patterned towards the same restoration of human life. Rossetti derives from this biblical antithesis an analogy inspired by Nature: 'Nor is that silence of a silent land / Which speaks Thy praise so all may understand'. A corresponding, yet a converse, frame of reference arises out of the way in which Rossetti deduces the following:

Death is not death, and therefore do I hope:
Nor silence silence; and I therefore sing
A very humble hopeful quiet psalm,
Searching my heart-field for an offering;
A handful of sun-courting heliotrope,
Of myrrh a bundle, and a little balm. (10)

Rossetti recognizes that though the anxiety of authorship scourges her soul, it is her poetry that endures all adversaries, both Nature's silence and death. Her hope emerges from this paradoxical belief that 'Death is not death', 'Nor silence silence', and the 'field' of her 'heart' searches to find an embalming effect through a bundle of myrrh – another imagery of Nature that palliates her anxious authorial stance.

Rossetti's implicit desire to achieve this 'humble hopeful quiet psalm' is chronicled most strikingly throughout the whole corpus of her Nature poetry which, in totality, builds up within two discretely diverging traditions. In *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, Catherine Musello Cantalupo in her contribution entitled, 'Christina Rossetti: The Devotional Poet and the Rejection of Romantic Nature', distinguishes these two traditions as 'typological' and 'Romantic'. She expatiates on this distinction in the following way:

By "typological" nature poem, I mean a poem that reads nature as Christian exegetes have traditionally read the Bible: nature contains "types" or symbols of divine attributes and divine "messages". This view of nature differs significantly from that of the high Romantics in this respect: the Romantics believe in a goal of communion with nature since they see nature as informed by a benevolent spirit (immanence). They have infinite hope in human

constructiveness, but they concede that constructiveness and joy finally depend on the individual's, and society's, proper sustaining and ordering relationship to nature. Religious allegorists believe in human constructiveness too, but as a free gift from God, a God much greater than his created nature (transcendence). For religious allegorists, the significance of nature is that God concretely reveals himself through the multitude of signs; nature provides a set of antitypes or analogies. (11)

Rossetti's puzzlement about the Romantic contemplation of nature emanates from her fervid allegiance to this creed of analogy. Recognizably, she feels herself to be epistemologically very curious and perturbed – an inquisition she acquires from the Romantics: 'How do subject and object meet in a meaningful relationship? By what means do we have a significant awareness of the world?'

(12) Rossetti has occasionally transcribed the procedure of deciphering Nature and the elements constituting it, together with the transformations in her experience of Nature with sporadic misfigurations and discernments, in the manner of Wordsworth and Shelley. The quintessential discrepancy lies in the way in which the poets perceive and understand what Nature actually epitomizes.

In her diverse major poems, Rossetti clearly presents an expostulation on Romanticism that evolves to be an analytical and perceptive assessment of the movement and that provides an exegesis of life and the predicaments of her Christian belief and certitude. Her poems do benefit from the Romantics, the introspective elucidation of natural spectacles being primarily concerned with Romantic subjectivity. But this impetus towards the subjective alienated self is eventually triumphed over by the Christian point of view. The philosophy of Nature is in dissension with the analogical postulation to the extent that on the one hand, divinity is deeply embroidered within the fabric of the Romantic poet's Nature, and on the other, divinity is silhouetted by the Christian concept of Nature. But the Christian construct of Nature as a *sacrament* is easily disorientated by a reference to pantheism and therefore needs to be scrupulously ascertained in distinction to it. In Christian theology, the sacramental dogma of Nature is significantly concerned with the working of a 'grace', which involves the mind to discern, identify and believe in the presence of a transcendental God. The Romantics perceived Nature to be replenished with the sense of the divine so much so that God is

enmeshed with the idea of Nature and man's self-enlightenment. Unlike Wordsworth, who associates Nature with the proliferating development of the poet's mind and sometimes studies her as the reification of the soul as well as a perpetuation of his own existence, Rossetti theorized Nature as emblematic of divine wisdom and knowledge. This disparity in thought has significant corollaries. For instance, the Romantics consorted a 'never-failing principle' with Nature, as Wordsworth proclaims in the following:

O Nature! Thou has fed
My lofty speculations; and in thee,
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy
And purest passion. (13)

Wordsworth's urge to identify the inspiration he derives from Nature as the sole prerogative and his conviction that only Nature is the origin of the revitalization of the 'godhead' in the dismayed person, can barely be demarcated as 'sacramentalism' since it does not involve the action of an intervening grace concatenating humanity to God through Nature. On the other hand, Rossetti does not idealize Nature, which coupled with her human nature, appears to be fallen, and only partially rejuvenated by 'grace'. She is also, being a self-conscious poet, fervently thoughtful and perceptive of the consequences of a fallen nature and of the chasm between Nature and divinity. She correlates this associative logic to the doctrine of analogy unprevaricatingly in *Letter and Spirit* when she alludes to 'the inadequacy of aught temporal to shadow forth that which is eternal.' (14) Rossetti's investigation of Nature entails a 'principle of joy' and she is circumspect to identify it effortlessly and unfailingly. Her thematization of Nature differed conspicuously from the Romantic ideology since Rossetti inhibited the rabid allurements of Nature for the fear of fetishizing her. She firmly contended that God is wholly transcendental, not intrinsic and immanent, and Nature, being a possible impediment to spiritual communion, has seldom any role to perform. It is mainly disentanglement that she is concerned with, and not a unified confederation. This anti-Romantic contention of disassociation typifies a religious standpoint of Nature that is both magnanimous and traditionally conservative and hence appears to be a stringent form of celibacy and austerity. In Rossetti's view, deification and iconization of Nature is a perplexing desecration which shows the culpability of the age and this

position she reiteratingly asserts in *The Face of the Deep*. She was unequivocally reciprocating against the Romantic penchant for fetishizing Nature and the self. She thus observes that, 'A world of mere opinions and mere fancies, of daydreams and castles in the air, is antagonistic to the true and substantial world of revelation, and is more hollow and unavailing than was Jonah's gourd'. (15) In *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti puts forward Nature from two points of view – as a pattern and as an exuberant origin of vitality and erudition and this is the second view that Rossetti disavows. The paradise is 'spread out above all humankind as an open scroll' declaring the 'Glory of God', (16) but Nature is not so considerably consequential and essential in comparison with the significance of 'heaven':

Looking forward to this [heaven], what terrestrial sight is worth hankering after because of beauty or majesty? It will pass by and be no more seen; no, nor peered after I once grieved and grudged because I could not betake myself to a vantage ground whence to watch an eclipse: the grief might have been simply blameless, but the grudge proved that I was in a double sense loving darkness rather than light. (17)

Intelligible enough from the linguistic and metaphorical implications of the passage is the indubitable segregation that Rossetti makes between the natural and the spiritual. The expressions, 'beauty', 'majesty', 'hankering', 'grieved' and 'grudged', are Romantic associations but they also reflect Rossetti's experiential stance. Primarily she pines for Nature, but subsequently she desires to have a glimpse of that 'terrestrial light' which is 'worth-hankering' and the grief of not being able to 'betake' herself is exacerbated by the denial of Nature's transcendental beauty. She derives the elixir of life from heaven, and in the act of diminution of the glory of Nature she actually reveals her begrudging and dilemmatic 'double sense' about 'darkness' and 'light' and her absolute discomfiture as to the fact that she loved 'darkness rather than light', thereby polarizing Nature and heaven and consequently, demystifying the former and glorifying and idealizing the latter.

This discrepancy between Romantic and natural metaphysicality and the Christian respect for detachment and self-abnegation is also reflected in 'The Thread of Life' and 'An Old World Thicket', where Rossetti impugns Romantic suppositions and values. (18) The ideological dichotomy prevalent in Rossetti's nature poems actually reveals two different selves of the poet, both of which are

evidently religious. One eulogizes God through a pellucid perception of prototypical Nature, employing both exultant and lugubrious images, and the other is *compos mentis* and inhibits self-intimidation. She catechizes, cavils and strives to acquiesce in the constrictions of the conformist credence. These two attitudes are requitedly restrictive and essentially symbolize typological and Romantic patterns of contemplating Nature.

Hence Rossetti's poetry is replete with this equivocation of attitude towards Nature. In Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poems, a pulsating and vivacious Nature is trepidatingly comprehended but not assayed and appraised. The state of being insulated from Nature is experienced as an intense form of dispossession and destitution. Rossetti's speakers endure a similar sequestration from Nature, but synchronously are anxious of Nature's reigning supremacy. Her poems demonstrate a polemical thesis which constitutes a process of self-deliberation and its denouement is noticeable in a belief in an arcane and ineffable experience of divine transcendence. To her, association with Nature may be an occlusion to spiritual maturation, and hence, dissociation and disengagement is imperative.

In concordance with Romantic thought, Nature is an impeccable symbol of the reality of God's presence and is a mode of synthesis with the transcendental. Coleridge hence exclaimed about Chamouni: 'Who *would* be, who *could* be an Atheist in the valley of wonders!' (19) But Rossetti conceives of Nature as taciturn and disentangled and eventually as an encumbrance to the transmigration of her soul for the much-yearned-for unification with God. For her, the indisputable truth is neither Nature's quietude and tranquillity nor the poet's inflectional nuances, but her own certitude and love for Christ and her grave and portentous self-oblation. Rossetti presumes that in contradistinction to the ineluctable evanescence of the unpretentious and essential being, the resilience and vigour of the psyche is concealed in its uniqueness of being immortal and infinite. In the following portrayal, the immutability of the soul is affiliated with Nature's unfolding magnificence and eventual decadence:

Ever mine own, while moons and seasons bring
From crudeness ripeness mellow and sanative;
Ever mine own, till Death shall ply his sieve; (20)

In *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti professes:

The antitype determines the type, not this that It is pious to contemplate autumn, winter, spring, summer as emblematical of our dear Lord's death, burial, resurrection, ascended glory; but to treat these as if, they were a parable of those, is to deny the faith. (21)

As it is evidently perceivable that Rossetti does not circumvent the fact that Nature, as considered as 'the type' and as determined against the 'antitype', may actually reflect spiritual esotericity. But the fact that she is also reactive to the coeval non-conformist dogma, which informs the metaphysical and the inexplicable, is nonetheless true. Rossetti is impassionate about whisking past the physical manifestations of Nature in order to perceive God through Christ. The task of the poet is to disseminate the elegance and benevolence of her soul to the world through faith and love.

Hence, we find that Rossetti develops a poetics of Nature that transposes itself from its association with the corporeal natural reality and elevates her soul to unite with God, wherein she finds the ultimate solace from her anxiety of creation. The materiality of the mundane world could not assuage her unease and discomfiture and provide her with the necessary relief and assurance. She primarily feels decoyed by the Romantic ideology of meditating Nature and her myriad forms of beauty, but later she inconsolably seeks communion with the divine. She recognizes that Nature is God's work and believes that the female poet's power lies deeply entrenched in the strength and fortitude of reverencing, adulating and glorifying the sacred and the holy, often thought to be her renunciatory pose, which again may be seen as the sublimation of her imagination from the palpable and the tangible to the transcendental – a process of complete 'desensorization' of the natural world and an exaltation to an idealistic world of the spiritual and the eternal.

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