

Christina Rossetti's "Pros and Cons" versus *Middlemarch*: rhythm and anti-racism

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Abstract. Christina Rossetti's short fiction has been long-neglected, we are told. In this paper, I respond to her fiction "Pros and Cons," which perhaps provides a clue regarding why there has been neglect: it leaves the impression of being an imitation of George Eliot, a mocking imitation even. I identify two differences between Rossetti and Eliot.

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"Who knows, who knows

Who will remember my prose?

I once wrote of a rose on a window sill

Who will remember that?

Possibly no one will."

Christina Rossetti is known today for her poetry, but she published a book of short fiction in 1870 entitled *Commonplace*. Within the book is a brief fiction entitled "Pros and Cons." Here is the opening:

'But, my dear Doctor,' cried Mrs Plume, 'you can never seriously mean it.'

The scene was the Rectory drawing room – teatime; some dozen parishioners drinking tea with their Rector and his wife. Mrs Goodman looked down; her husband, the Rector, looked up. (2005 [1870]: 81)

The fiction contains a debate over helping the poor. It reads like a faux chapter imitating George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, but was actually published before the monumental novel, which

appeared from 1871 to 1872. Thus I find this is somewhat troubling territory to enter into. Did Eliot imitate Rossetti or is there material like this in Eliot from earlier? Eliot's sources have been thoroughly researched; and at present I find it difficult not to believe that Rossetti is engaged in imitation, with a touch of mockery as well.

My copy of the book *Commonplace*, published in 2005, contains a foreword by Andrew Motion which interestingly does not enter into this issue – surely someone has; the helpful information is not conveyed – but does describe one of the fictions contained, itself entitled “Commonplace,” as following in the footsteps of another famous Victorian novelist. The book cover tells me that Rossetti's short fiction has long been neglected. I wish to draw attention to two differences between Rossetti and Eliot.

(a) There are anti-racist sentiments in Rossetti's fiction, which figure in a way that allows for a sharp contrast with Eliot. Here is another quotation from “Pros and Cons”:

‘Sir,’ interposed Mr Blackman, ‘we are all equals, whatever may be our colour or our country. But whilst the Zenana counts its victims by thousands, whilst the Japanese make boast of their happy despatch, whilst the Bushman, dwindling before our face, lives and dies as the beasts that perish, shall we divert our attention from such matters of life and death to fix it on a petty question of appearance? Pardon me if tears from our benighted brethren blind us to such matters as this.’ (2005 [1870]: 81)

Criticism today would be made of the description of the Bushman as living and dying as the beasts that perish. Anyway, looking into English literature, the anti-racist discourse of 1870 is interesting.

Compare that anti-racism with George Eliot's characters and descriptions. This is the rector's wife in *Middlemarch*:

“Enough! I understand,”—said Mrs. Cadwallader. “You shall be innocent. I am such a blackamoor that I cannot smirch myself.” (1871-2: chapter 62)

I suppose Eliot’s view is that a realistic portrait of various parishioners does not leave them looking so anti-racist. I find it difficult to believe that the contrast we are left with is accidental.

(b) Rossetti’s parishioners speak with more rhythm and richer imagery than Eliot’s often do – the quotation above is something of an exception. One might propose that this is because Rossetti is a poet. But as a poet she is known for what I am tempted to call a “transparent gown technique.” A critic takes out the rhymes to see what difference it would make, finding their impact faint (Dobrée 1934: 68-69). Perhaps it is the case that she is strangely more typically poetic in her prose, and more prosaic in her poetry – what sort of system is this? – but I believe she is of the opinion that this is how parishioners debating actually speak. Here is a further quotation from Rossetti, following right on from the previous quotation:

‘Our benighted brethren,’ said the Rector, gravely, ‘have my pity, have my prayers, have my money in some measure. Of your larger gifts in these several kinds I will not ask you to divert one throb, or one word, or one penny in favour of our poor fellow-parishioners. No, dear friend, help us by your good example to enlarge our field of charitable labour; to stress full-handed towards remote spots; but not meanwhile to fail in breaking up our fallow ground at home. We all know that if at this moment either our foreign or native ragged brother were to present himself in church, however open our hearts may be to him, our pew-doors would infallibly be shut against him...’ (2005 [1870]: 81-82)

The conversation that occurs is something like a sermon competition, and probably the material is designed to give that impression.

Eliot is known as someone who struggled in the medium of poetry. There is a question of whether that weakness followed her into the realistic novel, where she could not capture some relevant manners of speech. But Eliot writes of “Mr. Trumbull having all those less frivolous airs and gestures which distinguish the predominant races of the north” (1871-2: chapter 32) presumably suggesting that Rossetti has made the English more dramatic than they are.

References

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