CHAPTER 5

‘The theme grows sadder – but my soul shall find / A language in these tears!’: Voicing a Female Endurance of Death

All hail unto the lightning! hurriedly
His lurid arms are glaring through the air,
Making the face of heav’n to show like
hell?
Let him go breathe his sulphur stench
about,
And, pale with death’s own mission,
    lord the storm!
Again the gleam – the glare: I turn’d
to hail
Death’s mission: at my feet there lay the
dead!
The dead – the dead lay there!¹

Though Angela Leighton finds a ‘moral accountability’ here in this verse, there is a remarkable emphasis laid upon the expression, ‘I turn’d to hail / Death’s mission’. It seems that Elizabeth Barrett Browning hurls a challenge to the inevitability of death and, when she proceeds

towards almost conquering it saying, ‘at my feet there lay / The dead – the dead lay there!’", it is no longer the ‘Wordsworthian-gleam’ turning to ‘sad vanishings’, but to a destructive ‘glare’, the implication of which is not only ruthlessly true, but is also indicative of the poet’s wish to destroy and conquer death through her female power of creativity. Her anxiety of poetics is converted into a strong vindication of her assertion as a creator. To her, it is the poet’s thought which finds expression through the vehicle of language, and here she reveals her intention to overpower death and hold high the power of poetry, at whose authoritative feet, the dead lies vanquished.

The consequences of ‘lording’ or ‘mastering’ the storm have a ‘sinister logic’ leading to as huge a catastrophe as death. Such a heavy consequence as this certainly affects the magnitude of the act of speaking in this poem. In comparison to the power of Mother Nature, her portrayer wields greater powers through her expressive pen. ‘The storm of creativity’ shows the authority that the narrator’s pen asserts. This assertion of authorship defeats its anxiety, but in the process it has to overcome certain internal and external hindrances of being a woman:

The poem enacts the female poet’s struggle to speak with a power that is not naturally her own. She refuses to be like Mother Nature, ‘All dumb’. Instead, she chooses to share the thunder of the fathers.

However, the cost of winning this struggle, she does realize, is too dear:

The speaker, in the end, is shown to have harboured a death-wish towards her victim in the very act of stealing the thunder for her speech. The idea of her guilt then comes brilliantly and nightmarishly true in the figure of the dead man at her feet.

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3 Ibid., p. 50.
4 Ibid., p. 51.
5 Ibid., p. 51.
From Barrett Browning’s earliest poems to her later ambitious work, *Aurora Leigh*, they envisage the extinction of the father figure. But this fact of his death is one which thunderously incapacitates the daughter also. This element of fatherlessness has evolved since the daughter has ceased to be a child and she yearns for an adversarial paramour, thereby demanding the privilege of expression too. Being a woman and a poet is to intimidate and imperil the father’s dominance. This appreciation of the woman’s creative predominance precipitated the occasion of much of her poetry. In a passage from a much later work, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851), which Barrett Browning wrote after escaping to Italy, the coherence between artistic conviction and the irrecoverable love of the father is made almost with a passionate conspicuity. Barrett Browning expresses:

> Could I sing this song,  
> If my dead masters had not taken heed  
> To help the heavens and earth to make me strong,  
> As the wind ever will find out some reed  
> And touch it to such issues as belong  
> To such a frail thing? None may grudge the Dead  
> Libations from full cups. Unless we choose  
> To look back to the hills behind us spread,  
> The plains before us sadden and confuse;  
> If orphaned, we are disinherited.\(^6\)

She initially intended it as a panegyric to her ‘dead masters’ but subsequently it is transformed into a placid and liturgical outpouring in the memory of her own father, with whom her anxiety

and perturbation concerning her state of ‘orphanedness’ and ‘disinheritedness’ is associated. Hence, there is an evident discrepancy in the idea of the ‘master’ and that of the ‘father’ as being sources of imagination and creativity. The speaker’s sense of consummation of her art is derived from the ‘masters’ of the past. The poet bears a devastating consciousness of being reduced to an orphan and perhaps in this uncanny expression, ‘The plains before us sadden and confuse; / If orphaned, we are disinherited’, is concealed her fear and misgiving about her deprivation from her paternal inheritance. The ‘dead’, from whom her poetry gains strength and fulfillment, are still existent in her memory. This seemingly perpetual presence of the ‘non-present metaphysical’ precludes her from being lonely in the saddening and confusing landscapes, which are mysterious due to their possible non-existence and spiritlessness. The daughter-poet can barely forget the ‘dead masters’ since this oblivion would cause distraction in her literary enterprise. Her creative faculty needs to be rejuvenated by the existence of the spirits if the world is to bear a meaning for her. The belongingness to the legacy of the classical masters is so resolutely ingrained in her that she feels herself to be emptied of her imaginative faculty and bereft of a reviving and external force, an inspiring muse. The poignancy of this intellectual vacuity, the possibility of a deserted ingenuity and the apprehensive ‘If’ in the utterance, ‘If orphaned, we are disinherited’, reveal the maturity and mellowness of Barrett Browning’s verse, a kind of suppleness and totality that particularly characterizes the endless pursuit by the daughter-poet in *Aurora Leigh*. It is not the ‘deadness’ or the apparent trustworthiness of the father that appeals to us here, but what is foregrounded in the poem is the obvious absence of the domineering father figure. Barrett Browning’s magnum opus endorses this authoritarian figure on the one hand, while on the other, at the close, it shows that she is no longer in requirement of
him. She gains strength as a woman from this unrelenting sense of a self-construed separation from the patrilineal line of descent.

Barrett Browning’s early poetry is specifically indicative of an element of intimidation to femininity that led to an intellectual subordination, since she envisaged a distinct dichotomy between womanliness and poetic self-assertion, a difference which, in its turn, makes the poet aspire for self-validation of her thoughts as a poet. The poetic expressions bear the reflections of the sublime poetic mind. The daughter-poet is subtly in disagreement with the apparition of the past or the lady genie in a garden. When she dawdles with the mother muse, she does so not with love, a feeling she associates with her father, but with the sense of an impending death. But the consciousness of the dead, embodied by the female figure, barely provides any emotional recompense for the daughter-poet’s indignation. Hence, Barrett Browning’s imaginative female representations show an anxiety of her predicament as a woman. Such a portrayal of illusory female figures, particularly that of the mother in ballads like ‘The Romaunt of Marget’ (1838) and ‘Bertha in the Lane’ (1844), is emblematic of self-abjuration and despondency. The mysterious motherly presence does not draw the daughter near with superior love, but constrains her with restrictive moral stipulations, and the daughter repudiates life due to the compulsion of fulfilling the specific social role assigned to her, the role of relinquishment and self-effacement. Unlike Casa Guidi Windows, what eventually comes out is the subordination of the daughter within the patriarchal lineage that she is associated with. Angela Leighton identifies the dilemma of the daughter unequivocally in the following way:
The emotional emphasis in them is one which forcefully rejects the fate and the moral authority of the mother, whose claim to the life of the daughter is not based on love but on the duties of their shared womanliness.\(^7\)

‘The Deserted Garden’ (1838) describes a mysterious garden, which is seldom remembered by any but a lonely child who delightfully plays there with joy. However, the speaker of the poem is the poet herself who has grown up and who has only regret now, since she has lost her childhood and along with it the garden she once cherished and was so passionate about. The imagination of the poet takes her to the garden where she, as a child, played joyously, and where also the lovers met. The child remains content and happy without any past reminiscences and, hence, requires no supernatural ‘presences of secret spirits’\(^8\) to accompany her. Amidst all the playful bliss and ecstasy, death in the guise of a white lady looms large, a figure that threatens the child with the apprehensive state of womanliness. But the child is eventually disillusioned since the garden later turns ‘deserted’. The place is now conspicuous by the absence of the mysterious female figure of creativity, and, as Leighton correctly discerns, ‘the Victorian daughter’s poetic quest proceeds\(^9\) from this void that has been created in the garden. We find a contradiction in the poet since, on the one hand, she is enough gratified with the eventual absence of the ‘fair ladye’, and, on the other, this sense of desertion imbues her with a consciousness of her own being, situated in a place haunted neither by the presence of a mother nor of a muse. This sense of ‘beingness’ in her also leaves her intellectually desolate, ‘orphaned’ and dissociated from a tradition of creativity. Barrett Browning’s anxiety of authorship emerges not only from this possible disengagement from the tradition, but also from the dichotomy that

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\(^7\) Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 66.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 69.

\(^9\) Ibid., p. 70.
exists between her sense of the liberated being and an apprehension of a simultaneous disinherittance from that tradition.

In writing about the death of Lord Byron, Barrett Browning finds a ‘language in these tears’ brought about by a theme as sombre as death:

The theme grows sadder – but my soul

shall find

A language in these tears.\(^{10}\)

Barrett Browning was in no confrontation with the dead and she accepts that ‘high heart’ or ‘high thought’ or ‘high fame’ is ‘as flat / As gravestone’. She also confidently remarks that ‘The epitaph’s an epigram’.\(^{11}\) Death demolishes all, perhaps even poetry that emerges from the expression of ‘high thought’, and reduces an epitaph to become merely epigrammatic. ‘I am’ is the only reality and is binarily opposite to the dead man’s ‘I was’. The anxiety of her poetics perhaps lies in this overpowering shadow of death which has a catastrophic effect on her art as well. In the ‘Preface’ to the first edition of *The Essay on Mind*, Barrett Browning reflects on poetry as ‘the enthusiasm of understanding’ and considers it to be ‘a high reason in her fancies’.\(^{12}\) But ‘high reason’ again is subject to obliteration by death, which is in itself an immutable truth. Hence she echoes this thought in ‘Napoleon III in Italy’:

Every live man there

Allied to a dead man below,

And the deadest with blood to spare

To quicken a living hand

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\(^{10}\) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘Stanzas on the Death of Lord Byron’, p. 54.

\(^{11}\) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Last Poems*, ‘“Died …” (The Times Obituary)’, p. 574.

In case it should ever be slow.\textsuperscript{13}

Paradoxical thoughts conflict in the mind of the poet when, on the one hand, we find her firmly announcing in \textit{Casa Guidi Windows}, ‘We do not serve the dead – the past / is past!’\textsuperscript{14}, and, on the other, in ‘The Soul’s Travelling’ we hear her saying, ‘The living, the living, must go away / To multiply the dead’\textsuperscript{15}, thereby also completing the equation between the living and the dead. The poet is nonetheless anxious about being referred to as dead by ‘future generations’:

\begin{quote}
We now must look to it to excel as ye,
And bear our age as far, unlimited
By the last mind mark! so, to be invoked
By future generations, as their Dead.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

But she reaches the height of realization in ‘A Vision of Poets’ where she describes life and death to be complementary to each other:

\begin{quote}
Life was only Death
That only Death was Life.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

A persistent sense of the mortality of human life pervades the poetry of Christina Rossetti too:

\begin{quote}
The thought of death has a constant fascination for Rossetti, almost such a fascination as it had for Leopardi or Baudelaire; only it is not the fascination of attraction, as with the one, or of the repulsion, as with the other; but of interest, sad but unquiet interest: interest
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, \textit{Poems Before Congress}, ‘Napoleon III in Italy’, p. 543.
\textsuperscript{14} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, \textit{Casa Guidi Windows}, Part I, p. 344.
\textsuperscript{15} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘The Soul’s Travelling’, p. 246.
\textsuperscript{16} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, \textit{Casa Guidi Windows} Part I, pp. 344-5.
\textsuperscript{17} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘A Vision of Life and Death’, p. 67.
in what the dead are doing underground, in their memories – if memory they have left; a singular, whimsical sympathy with the poor dead.\textsuperscript{18}

Rossetti’s poem, ‘After Death’ (1849), is a significant illustration of this remark by Arthur Symons:

He leaned above me, thinking that I slept
And could not hear him; but I heard him say,
‘Poor child, poor child’: and as he turned away
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.
He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold
That hid my face, or take my hand in his,
Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head.
He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is
To know he still is warm though I am cold.\textsuperscript{19}

In such poems, we find the themes of love and death to be woven together. According to Symons, the unique appeal of these poems consists in their passionate musical tone and their ‘thoughtfulness that broods as well as sees, and has, like shadowed water, its mysterious depths’,\textsuperscript{20} both of which are evident in ‘An End’ (1849):

Love, strong as Death, is dead.

Come, let us make his bed

Among the dying flowers:
A green turf at his head;
And a stone at his feet,
Where we may sit
In the quiet evening hours.²¹

Critics distinguish a unique disposition in Rossetti, particularly in her poems that envisage death as the pivotal idea. Alice Law²² affirms that in ‘Dreamland’ (1849), Rossetti appropriately anticipated the onslaught of death and considered it as a possibility for an unending state of tranquillity. ‘Death had no terrors for her; it was to her but as cool, refreshing sleep’.²³ However, the poet also condemns death since the dead ‘are estranged from all material things’:²⁴

Where sunless rivers weep
Their waves into the deep,
She sleeps a charmed sleep:
Awake her not²⁵

It is this ‘perfect peace’ that the poet is in search of and she firmly endorses that it is death that can provide the artist with the succour and reassurance that she passionately desires, but that is again something which seems to elude her forever. Death brings an end to all forms of restlessness and misgivings and is, most significantly, beyond time. It shall exist not only till the end of time, but outside of it as well, and in this sense, is trans-chronological. Death releases the

author from the harrowing confines of time and offers her a sense of the ecstasy of timelessness and liberation from the pangs of artistic self-expression.

Georgina Battiscombe\(^\text{26}\) diagnoses the poet’s standpoint on death as being noticeably converse. Rossetti’s experience of drooping melancholy on the one hand, and remarkable ecstasy, on the other, is demonstrated in two sonnets. The first, ‘Two Thoughts of Death’ (1850), unmask the gruesomeness of death:

\[
\text{Foul worms fill up her mouth so sweet and red; } \\
\text{Foul worms are underneath her graceful head. } \\
\text{Yet these, being born of her from nothingness } \\
\text{These worms are certainly flesh of her flesh.}\(^\text{27}\)
\]

The second sonnet avows and testifies Rossetti’s certitude and credence in life, life ceaseless and life timeless:

\[
\text{Then my heart answered me: Thou fool to say } \\
\text{That she is dead whose night is turned to day, } \\
\text{And whose day shall no more turn back to night.}\(^\text{28}\)
\]

Battiscombe enunciates this by saying that: ‘For her, death is not to be desired as an escape from this naughty world but as an entry to another and incomparably better one.’\(^\text{29}\) Hence, death to Rossetti, is a transformation of the spatio-temporal reality, into which she is oppressively thrust, to a much-desired world of her own. Death helps her migrate to such a world of rest and peace.

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where she can have a serene, sedate and idyllic experience, a world that knows no night and is
blessed with perennial sunshine.

The anxiety that the poet experiences due to the immutability of death is further unfolded
in another poem called ‘Remember’ (1849) that portrays an apprehensive and unsatiated desire
of love which is on the threshold of being interrupted by death. Here the speaker implores her
lover not to dismiss her from his mind altogether when her life would be brutally ended by death,
since on the event of termination of her life, it is her memory that he can carry for her sake:

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.\(^{30}\)

To the lover, the fact of the beloved’s death should not be a source of sadness. Death, on the
contrary, leads to an oblivion, which erases out even ‘a vestige of the thoughts’ about darkness
and corruption of the poet-lover’s individuality. Hence, death metaphorizes a reality that the poet
never moves away from, but rather acquiesces in as something untransmuting and invincible.

The poet’s yearning for death is also illustrated in another poem, ‘Oh, Roses for the Flush
of Youth’ (1849), where the speaker wishes herself to be crowned ‘old before my time’:

Oh roses for the flush of youth,
   And laurel for the perfect prime;

But pluck an ivy branch for me

Grown old before my time.\(^{31}\)

The roses emblematic of ‘the flush of youth’ are renounced by her and she earnestly craves for old age much before her time.

Dolores Rosenblum, in the 1982 issue of *Victorian Poetry*, argues that the suffering individual in Rossetti’s poetry is exceptionally the figure of a woman – an immured maiden or a denounced bride enduring a perpetual confinement in her very existence, persistently and acquiescently, for the sake of her ever-dawdling groom, and hence, for this dispirited woman, ‘the only resolution is death itself’. She courts death ‘because life is not *enough* – and because the aesthetic of renunciation requires this ultimate gesture’.\(^{32}\)

This widely diversified and, sometimes, contradictory array of implications of the theme of death inherent in the idea of love has led various critics to elucidate such conflicting thoughts in psychological and even biographical terms. C. M. Bowra describes the duality by maintaining that in works such as these, ‘the idea of love turned inexorably to the theme of death, and in this association we can surely see her instinctive shrinking from the surrender which love demands’.\(^{33}\) On the other hand, Lona Mosk Packer\(^{34}\) reads a Freudian desire for death in Rossetti’s poetry. It is a possibility that the plaintive strain of despondency and renunciation in her poetics have evolved from her apprehension that she has fallen prey to an appalling indiscretion in associating herself with one man, James Collinson, and perhaps it is this consciousness that forced a prospective relationship to remain unfulfilled, a relationship that

\(^{31}\) *Ibid.*, ‘Song’, p. 34.


could have consummated her desire for a sexual ecstasy. This absence of temporal love seemed to give rise to an urge for death later, as revealed in ‘Parting After Parting’ (1858 and 1864), a poem that she wrote after a visit to William Bell Scott and his wife in Newcastle:

Parting after parting,
Sore loss and gnawing pain:
Meeting grows half a sorrow
Because of parting again.
When shall the day break
That these things shall not be?
When shall new earth be ours
Without a sea,
And time that is not time
But eternity?35

This longing, as Packer considers, is occasioned by Rossetti’s ‘leaving Scott after having known the rare happiness of sharing a life with him, even temporarily’. 36

The self-same despair and a keen inclination for death due to an unfulfilled experience of love, as Packer declares, is evinced in ‘A Triad’ (1856), which pertains to three women possessing disparate conceptions of love. The first of them reprehensibly yields, the second is deceitful and dispassionate and the third desists and invalidates. For Packer, they represent the women in Scott’s life: Lady Pauline Trevelyan being the first of them and Scott’s mistress; Letitia Norquay Scott, a ‘sluggish wife’, as delicate as a hued hyacinth developing in ‘soulless love’ is the second; and the third is Christina Rossetti herself, a lady ‘blue with famine after

love’, ultimately collapsing into a moribund state owing to its unachievability. A majority of the contemporary critics have associated suppressed sexuality with the theme of separation between lovers in Rossetti’s poetry and have presupposed that the poet transfers her sensibilities to the narrators of her poems, irrespective of the kind of rationale she has for her pessimism and dejection. Taking into account her enchantment with death and agony that unfolds in her later verses, Geoffrey W. Rossetti urges that this was the consequence of ‘religious melancholy’ added to the impact ‘of the prolonged ill-health and troubles of later life’, some of it perhaps produced by ‘a semi-pathological condition of the body’.

Mary F. Sanders ascribes Rossetti’s passionate conviction of death to her being a habitual valetudinarian as well as to her remarkable insight and sensitivity. The upshot, Sanders maintains in *The Life of Christina Rossetti*, was that the mystifying kingdom of life beyond death was ever-existing in her mind: ‘She was stern in her beliefs; the present life was a time of prohibition, which mis-spent, condemned the soul to an eternal hell.’

A poem named ‘The Martyr’ (1846), written by the adolescent Rossetti, centres round a young girl who is on the verge of being condemned eternally for her ideology and convictions. An utter depletion of her belief and certitude at the terminating moment of her life might perpetually close the gates of paradise to her:

> See, the sun hath risen!
> Lead her from the prison;
> She is young and tender, lead her tenderly:
> May no fear subdue her,
> Lest the saints be fewer,

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Lest her place in heaven be lost eternally.³⁹

The association of the concept of death with the notion of love has elicited further readings from critics. Arthur Christopher Benson discerns in Rossetti a pessimism concerning love: ‘As a rule her thoughts of love are clouded by some dark sense of loss, of having missed the satisfaction that the hungering soul might claim.’⁴⁰ He adduces the poem, ‘When I am Dead, My Dearest’ (1848), as a testimony to this idea:

When I am dead, my dearest,
    Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head.
    Nor shady cypress trees:
    Be the green grass above me
    With showers and dewdrops wet:
And if thou wilt, remember,
    And if thou wilt, forget.⁴¹

Another widely reviewed long narrative poem, ‘The Prince’s Progress’, speaks of a different facet of the imaginary universe. The poem recounts the narrative of an elegant, yet languid, youth who undertakes a leisurely journey to catch a sight of his beloved, but dallies in iniquitous relationships on the way. He falls prey to spurious adulations and pecuniary concerns, and after coming upon his long-awaiting betrothed eventually, he discovers her to be dead. ‘There is an elusiveness about its magic’, Symons registers, ‘making familiar things look strange, and

weaving and unweaving its spells beneath our eyes.'

He emphasizes on the mysterious sparkle evident in the milkmaid’s eyes as she brings her enchantment to bear upon the straggling and errant Prince:

Was it milk now, or was it cream?
Was she a maid, or an evil dream?

Her eyes began to glitter and gleam;

He would have gone, but he stayed instead;

Green they gleamed as he looked in them:

“Give me my fee”, she said. –

John Stuart Mill contends that Rossetti’s ingenious craftsmanship is most impeccably voiced in ‘The Prince’s Progress’ due to its ‘atmosphere of old-world charm of mysticism’.

It is perceivable from the narrative structure of the poem that it, perhaps unarguably, creates a transcendental spatio-temporal world and in order to achieve this, adopts a condition of reverie for the purpose of performing an introspective appraisal of the conventions. An analogous approach is deployed in poems that conceive of a position, often related to death. In these poems, narrators cast a retrospective glance and cogitate from a metaphysical stance of subjectivity. Through this act of subjectivization, Rossetti avows ‘not only from the other side, but from the side of the “other” ’. ‘After Death’, written in 1849, is marked by disconcerting associations of power and dominance, with regard to a typical nineteenth-century artistic depiction of the beautiful dead woman, and we find the poem subverting the conventional significance to mean the contrary. Rossetti’s implication here is remarkably subtle, since with

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this metaphor of apparent ‘deadness’ in the poem, she transforms the deceased and voiceless damsel into the narrator, a prerogative she enjoys by observing a man’s actions and behaviour, most commonly unrecognized by himself. This transfiguration of the silent and dead girl gives her the authority to visualize the man inclining on the speaker and pronouncing a requiem, ‘Poor child, poor child’.\textsuperscript{46} She then withdraws herself from there quietly and expresses her awareness by a tangential indication, ‘and I knew he wept’.\textsuperscript{47} Rossetti conjures up, as well as takes up her pen against, the customary passion attached to the Victorian ‘deathbed’ spectacle, making clear the fact that it is through death that a woman achieves omniscience, unthought and unimagined by a man. Rossetti, quite perceptibly, asserts the overbearing potency of death that empowers the woman writer to be insightful and to envisage the mortal follies and misapprehensions. Through death, she triumphs over her disquietude concerning her creativity and wields enormous power despite being positioned in the midst of an inexorable male tradition of artistic expression:

\begin{quote}
He did not love me living; but once dead

He pitied me; and very sweet it is

To know he still is warm tho’ I am cold.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

Burlinson’s interpretation of this artistic autonomy of the speaker, supreme as she is by her death, is a poignant demonstration of a virtual ‘secret world of masculine vulnerability’ to the female omnipotent and omniscient narrator:

\begin{quote}
The spatial and physical autonomy of the speaker seems essential for her articulation and assertion of representational power over the unnamed older man, whose emotional response is summoned only by her demise. From her deathbed, the speaker disrupts conventional masculine/feminine, reason/feeling oppositions, making woman cold and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 32.
man warm. She also inverts public/private distinctions, so crucial to Victorian bourgeois culture’s sense of its own organization, turning the private masculine grief – so private the tears cannot be shown even to a dead girl – into a public affair and thus suggesting that the man’s personal response is part of a much larger cultural and gendered behaviour pattern regulated by notions of legitimacy. As voyeurs, readers see into a secret world of masculine vulnerability.\textsuperscript{49}

While, on the one hand, ‘After Death’ deals with the relationship between a young woman and a man, ‘At Home’ substantiates the condition of the ‘dead’ speaker who casts a retrospective glance on her adult friends who carry on with their considerably undisturbed lives. To her astonishment, she discovers that her friends exclusively pursue present and future comfort. To her perplexity, she observes that ‘… no one spoke of yesterday’.\textsuperscript{50} The speaker reflects on the possibility of dominating her companions by remaining out of their vision, but appears to prevent herself from doing so, thereby reconciling with her predicament of physical invisibility. It is this separation from the spatio-temporal reality that brings about an anxiety in the female poet’s authorship, but the contradiction in her physically inconspicuous presence is that she gives an expression to her experience, a theme that occasions the event of the poem’s composition. Her mortal non-presence leads to the poem’s presence and her non-mortal experience takes an authoritative stance in ushering the incidents happening within the poem. It is in this sense that the fact of death overpowers the living, so much so that the latter does not quite perceive the presence of the former, but can only feel the acuteness of the absence caused by such fatality.

Rossetti’s representation of speakers, who are found to either vacillate between life and death or speak from ‘a posthumous place’,\textsuperscript{51} has emerged as the subject of debate between critics. Jerome McGann has ascribed this positioning by Rossetti to her conviction of the notion

\textsuperscript{51} Burlinson, \textit{Christina Rossetti}, p. 27.
of ‘Soul Sleep’, which implied that there was a period between death and the Judgement Day when the soul hibernated or subsisted in abeyance. This view has also been argued against, while a few others consider that Rossetti was more engrossed in ‘entombment … a disturbing sleeplessness of the mind’ than in death or ‘Soul Sleep’. Irrespective of the fact of Rossetti’s explicit deployment of this idea, her positioning of speakers in equivocal situations reveals the relationship between her work and that of the other remarkable Victorian women poets such as Emily Dickinson and Emily Brontë, who have also so situated their characters as to question the social and creative inadequacies of their cultural ethos. In the writings of all these artists, the audacious subversion/inversion of the hierarchy of the living and the dead, by reinstating the body of the dead woman and making her express her mind and experience without constructing her as a reticent, calm and docile entity, appears to us as a cardinal motif of the literary persuasion of these writers as well as a revealing form of cultural representation. Such a portrayal reaches us as a stark reflection of a skillfully manoeuvred and self-conscious metaphoric design that not only foregrounded itself as a reaction against their intellectually torturous experience of peripheralization by the authoritative male literary tradition, but also unequivocally constituted the narrative of their endurance of an oppressive culture that threatened to impede their artistic endeavour of self-definition.

Rossetti worked extensively with the idea and implications of death and her poem, ‘The Hour and the Ghost’ (1856), entails yet another new mode of narrative representation of the metaphor of the dead. Characteristically, this category of poems portrays the supernatural, giving rise to speculations on such a theme, rarely conceived in poetry. These poems evidently bear a

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mood of despair and the spectacle is cryptic and inexplicable. In ‘The Hour and the Ghost’, a dead lover returns on the very day of the wedding of his beloved, who has renounced his love for someone else’s. He comes to carry her away to his home beyond the sepulchre. The lady persistently requests her new bridegroom to take her finally in his clasp:

**BRIDE.**

Hold me one moment longer,

He taunts me with the past,

His clutch is waxing stronger,

Hold me fast, hold me fast.  

In spite of her repeated requests, the ghost gives vent to his vengefulness:

**GHOST.**

O fair frail sin,

O poor harvest gathered in!

Thou shalt visit him again

To watch his heart grow cold;  

Arthur Symons delineates these as ‘strange little poems, with their sombre and fantastic colouring – the picturesque outcome of deep and curious ponderings on things unseen’. The anonymous commentator of the *Catholic World* (1876), on the other hand, seems to felicitously express the disenchantment created by the ethos of phantasm that Rossetti creates: ‘We should imagine that the ghost would have grown wiser, if not more charitable, by his visit to the other

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world, and would show himself quite willing to throw at least the ghost of a slipper after the happy pair.\textsuperscript{57}

In another poem entitled ‘The Poor Ghost’ (1863), in a situation bearing a resemblance to that in ‘The Hour and the Ghost’, the deceased beloved returns with the objective of taking her betrothed beyond the barrow. But to her utter dismay and astonishment, she is told that her death has brought their relationship to ‘an end’ and she is urged to go back:

‘Indeed I loved you, my chosen friend,
I loved you for life, but life has an end;
Through sickness I was ready to tend:
But death mars all, which we cannot mend.\textsuperscript{58}

According to Symons, the poet intends to establish these apparitions as characters in the temporal world. They are actual dead men and women who come back in their spiritual forms, and are not evoked by séance. He observes that Rossetti ‘cares intimately’\textsuperscript{59} about perceiving the subliminal state of the innate consciousness of the lifeless.

The thematics of death in Rossetti is, to a large extent, based on the unification with Christ and the revived troops of Paradise, an aspect from which she derived an atemporal sense of consummation. This is well demonstrated in the Monna Innominata sequence through the expression, ‘the flowering land / Of love’.\textsuperscript{60} A couple of lines of verse from an unpublished sonnet written in 1849 underlines an analogous thought: ‘Some say that love and joy are one: and

\textsuperscript{59} Symons, ‘Miss Rossetti’s Poetry’, p. 341.
\textsuperscript{60} Christina Rossetti, Monna Innominata, Sonnet 7, in Christina Rossetti: The Complete Poems, p. 297.
so / They are indeed in heaven, but not on earth." Rossetti reflects, as she does in ‘The Thread of Life’, ‘Three Stages’ and ‘An Old World Thicket’, on the pangs of seclusion, unaccomplishment and discontent that comprise much of the essence of the *Intimations Ode* of Wordsworth and the *Dejection Ode* of Coleridge. The quintessential argument is put forward in the second sonnet of ‘The Thread of Life’, an array of three sonnets forming a triplet, in which the speaker deplores her state of being cloistered, believing ‘Everything / Around me free and sunny and at ease.’ Despite the fact that the ‘gay birds sing’ and all ‘sounds are music’, this gaiety and freedom seem to her to be dissonant and melancholic:

> Then gaze I at the merrymaking crew,
> And smile a moment and a moment sigh
> Thinking: Why can I not rejoice with you?  

The position of the speaker here is specifically akin to that of Wordsworth in the first four stanzas of the *Intimations Ode*. His dissociated self desires harmony with the joyous entities of nature as a reservation against mortal impermanence. But, though he has been consequently successful in participating in the Mayday celebration and being in oneness with the frolicking lambs, the ‘happy Shepherd boy’ and the birds that ‘sing a joyous song’, he is able to feel that: ‘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.’ Contrarily, the speaker in Rossetti repudiates as a ‘foolish fancy’ the yearning for emancipation from self-confinement and for the pensive oneness with nature attained by Wordsworth’s speaker who employs his ‘philosophic mind’ and acquires a ‘faith that looks through death’. This faith, enrobed in enigmatic images of ‘celestial light’,

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‘clouds of glory’ and ‘mighty waters’, does not seem felicitous for Rossetti since she believes in the necessity of dissociation from the blissful objects of nature and of the temporal world, an act that would subsequently pave the path for a beatific experience. Revealing an anti- Wordsworthian thesis, the poems of Rossetti undeniably endorse, in the manner her poems ‘Three Stages’ and ‘The Thread of Life’ substantiate, what she affirms clearly: ‘I cannot crown my head / With royal purple blossoms for the feast, / Nor flush with laughter, nor exult in song.’ The third sonnet of ‘The Thread of Life’ conveys the idea of self-assertion. The self-solipsist poet maintains that the cloistered inner being continues to be ‘that one only thing / I hold to use or waste, to keep or give’. It remains, she says, ‘My sole possession every day I live, / … Ever mine own, till Death shall ply his sieve; / And still mine own, when saints break grave and sing’. In accordance with the conformist Christian ethos, death is an eventuality that requires to be hailed, and not disparaged. It is actually a portal leading to heaven. In another poem, entitled ‘Paradise’, Rossetti expresses her conviction that in the reality of physical existence, glimpses of Paradise are possible only in a reverie:

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.  

The beauty of Rossetti’s perception of death is that she conceived of afterlife as a tangibly manifest certainty, since it is only in Paradise that, she argues, divine perfection exists and where, also, the experience of alienation is overwhelmed:

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.\(^{67}\)

For Rossetti, the culmination of life is a much-coveted desire, since it is in death that she discovers bliss and ecstasy, that takes her away from moral scruples and disquietude and provides her with the blessed opportunity to ‘have my part with all the saints / And with my God’. She feels disinclined to have visions of afterlife through ‘dreams by night’, but rather wishes earnestly to experience death as a palpable reality, which she firmly believes is capable of providing her with the much-needed comfort and reassurance in the midst of the apprehensive pangs of authorship.

There’s a certain slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of cathedral Tunes –\(^{68}\)


\(^{68}\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 258. All Emily-Dickinson Poems from 1 to 494 are taken from the following e-Source:  
Indeed, this ‘certain slant of light’ in ‘Winter Afternoons’ that oppresses like death, is a theme that we find pervading Emily Dickinson’s poetics. This idea of death is nevertheless intertwined with love, underneath which run the sensibilities of despair and loss. Death, more often than not, follows from despondency and this significant perception is discernible in a handful of Dickinson’s poems. In the above-mentioned poem, dejection is indubitably certain and inexorable. The expression ‘heft’ signifies weight, with further associations of burden and anxiety. The cathedral tunes intimidate due to the grim oppression of faith, which they implore the listener to possess. Dickinson invests the poem with a dispassionate tone, as disengaged and nonchalant as the bleakest chronicle. The expression, ‘There’s a certain slant of light, / Winter Afternoons –’, reveals a sense of desolation, bearing an unfamiliar association. It comprises the poet’s artistic tropes which lead to the creation of a mysterious thought that emerges from the juxtaposition of apparently incongruous ideas. They subsequently give rise to a wholly weird array of significance conveying one unequivocal impression. The affiliation between ‘a certain slant of light’ and ‘Winter Afternoons’ may initially seem markedly inconsistent, but both the metaphors are actually made to form one single image of ‘the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes’. This act of metaphorization is therefore apparently almost vague, and yet immaculate. The epithet ‘slant’ offers us an inkling of a threatening logic and, hence, the neutrality and the seeming detachment of ‘Winter Afternoons’ appear to perplex us with a sinister enticement emerging from the oppressive echoes of the metaphor of ‘Cathedral Tunes’. At the beginning of the second stanza, this ‘slant of light’ inflicts ‘Heavenly Hurt’, thereby giving rise to a difference within: ‘Where the meanings are now?’ What emerges from this ostensible distinction in the incongruously employed imagery is the manifestation of nature, which is as atypical and inexplicable as the cathedral tunes, and an inalienable music that is both devouring and beatific.
Taking these metaphors together, Dickinson feels the oppressive ‘heft’ and, in anguish and resignation, she depicts ‘An imperial affliction / Sent us of the air’. This ‘affliction’ casts a significant dominance over the landscape:

When it comes, the Landscape listens –
Shadows – hold their breath –
When it goes, ’tis like the Distance
On the look of Death –

Here, we feel a certain similitude between the poet’s situation and that of the ‘Landscape’, both experiencing the consternation. The ‘slant of light’ appears as being ominous and shares a hostile relationship with nature. Though there is a situational affinity between the poet and the landscape, there develops a distance between them. When the latter is tormented by dejection, which is revealed in the form of ‘Shadows’ holding ‘their breath’, the poet envisions a distant death that eventually signifies the ultimate form of reality. Distance has a close association with death in many of Dickinson’s poems, particularly in her love poems, in which the non-existence of the lover is intensely felt as death. The dejection here is associated with death and is metaphorized as a ‘seal’ which, in its turn, symbolizes the truth of mortality that man is inevitably subject to. It is this seal that lends the poem a sense of finality as it draws towards the close.

Death is, hence, seen to approach with utter hopelessness and the close association that the two share is prominent in the following poem:

The difference between Despair
And fear – is like the One
Between the instant of a Wreck –
And when the Wreck has been –

The above delineation offers a brusque description of the discrepancy that exists between ‘despair’ and ‘fear’, the former being associated with the moment of annihilation and the latter with the aftermath of such destruction. Despair is also associated with motionlessness and tranquillity of the ‘Eye / Upon the Forehand of a Bust’: 

The Mind is smooth – no Motion –
Contented as the Eye
Upon the Forehead of a Bust
That knows – it cannot see –

The poet feels content with the eyes made frozen by death. The stroke of death could not take away the placidity of her mind. The poet’s heart finds solace and reassurance in the realization of its trans-temporal state of existence. In yet another poem, she unravels the ecstasy she experienced, ‘A perfect-paralyzing Bliss’, unconditional and consummate. For Dickinson, content and despair are analogous in the sense that both the sensations are not only inalienable and commensurate, but are also immaculate. One of the remarkable characteristics of Dickinsonian poetics is that she lends an equal form of completeness and purity to both pain and bliss. To her, both are plausible and fundamental and, hence, elated and felicitous.

Emily Dickinson’s creativity entailed an essential constituent of gradual undoing, since she believed that both love and poetry are associated with visions of God and eventually lead to death. Death, in its turn, is so perfectly inevitable that it stands as being relentlessly conclusive.

69 Emily Dickinson, Poem 305, p. 227.
70 Ibid., Poem 305, p. 227.
To Dickinson, ‘To be alive – is Power’, since death usurps all the vitality of life revealing the fact that it is not merely apocalyptic, but it also indicates the sense of extinction of all forms of life.

As a woman writer, Dickinson perceives with a sense of anguish that ‘I made my soul familiar – with her extremity – / That at the last, it should not be a novel Agony’. She engages herself in the act of familiarization with the most perfect form of reality or, in the poet’s words, life’s ‘extremity’, to take on the agony that death is perceived to carry with it. It seems that the poet feels death within her and wishes the soul to be ‘acquainted – / Meet tranquillity, as friends’ so much so that life becomes a tranquil experience. In ‘The last night that She lived’, Dickinson registers that ‘It was a Common Night / Except the Dying – this tolls / Made Nature different’. The bemoaners are aware of all occurrences and nondescript entities are ‘Italicized – as ’twere’. The impressions are rather quotidian here:

   We waited while She passed –

   It was a narrow time –

   Too jostled were Our Souls to speak

   At length the notice came.

The mourners only look on when the departed retires. This postponement is repressive and hence the time constricting. During the spell that prefaced death, the acquaintances are shown as preparing for the funeral, resting around the corpse and assembling together. The language in

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72 Poem 412, p. 321.

73 Poem 1100.
Emily Dickinson’s poems on death can perhaps be represented with no greater precision and profundity than in the following comment:

The language of soul is taken from the language of body, as the language of eternity is derived from the language of time, because there is no other language. All language is, in this sense, domestic. Death poems are life poems.74

Dickinson’s poems on the theme of death bear testimony to the above position and it is this insight that lends them their unprecedented literary strength. She has combined the subliminal essence of language with the metaphor of domesticity to pen some of the greatest poems in the language. ‘Too jostled were Our Souls to speak’, as the poet strives staggeringly with her art to express her experiences and enrobe them with language. ‘Jostled’ is emblematic of a thespian urge mingled with an implication of the idea of domesticity, making another certainty very clear: what is trans-experiential has to either acknowledge a ‘finite language’75 or remain silent. As the poem concludes, the grievers feel reassured to go back to their lives – ‘And then an awful leisure was / Belief to regulate’ – and to usher in ‘a discipline domestic in its language, esoteric in its particular application’.76 The repertory of words that Dickinson uses in her poetry is greatly dependent on the metaphor of domesticity, which is expressed with such grace that her poetry becomes a novel art, particularly because the expressions she employs do not associate semantically with such domestic commonality. Hence, her sense of rapture, that marks the poems as quintessentially Dickinsonian, usually offers a fallacious impression, though later it is perceived to be unobtrusively true:

I died for Beauty – but was scarce

75 Ibid., p. 467.
76 Ibid., p. 467.
Adjusted in the Tomb …\textsuperscript{77}

Perhaps, the magnificence of Dickinson’s verse lies in the fact that she deploys an apparently nondescript language with such skill that her authorial craftsmanship can seldom be disputed. The convergence of subtle ideas and a seemingly unpretentious language leads to the formation of a heightened form of creation:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –\textsuperscript{78}

This prologue to Poem 465 demonstrates that the speaker speaks after her death, an occasion when she could sense the tranquil ambience of the ‘Room’ to be in consonance with the unstirring peacefulness of the ‘Air’. The mourners have gathered around and the metaphors of ‘Eyes’ and ‘Breaths’ usher in a kind of backdrop representative of a deathbed scene:

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

Such a doleful episode is ‘interposed’ by ‘a Fly’ with ‘Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz / Between the light – and me – / And then the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see –.’ Death alienates the speaker from life, represented primarily by the ‘Eyes’ and ‘Breaths’ and more significantly by the ‘Fly’ with its ‘stumbling Buzz’. ‘That last Onset’ (the third word

\textsuperscript{77} Emily Dickinson, Poem 449, p. 347.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., Poem 465, p. 358.
conspicuous by a whimsical yet a connotative Dickinsonian upper case) was corroborated by the fact that ‘the Windows failed – and then / I could not see / to see –.’ The poet feels anxious and distraught by the ‘blueness’ and uncertainty of the finality of her being and she can feel life, being on the threshold of death, from the stirrings of the emblematic fly. This onslaught obscures her vision and she is eventually distanced from the ‘light’ of creativity by the fly, the inspiring Muse, whizzing past the ‘Windows’ and shutting her from the outside world, that is much opposed to her wish and desire. The sense of alienation from the world of human existence creates in the poet a consciousness of futility and nothingness. This act of ‘nihilization’ gives birth to a feeling of numbness as far as her ability of self-definition through poetry is concerned.

Another remarkable instance of Dickinsonian theorization of death is Poem 712, where the poet delineates her own conceptual world, familiarizing the ultimate truth of mortality with the commonality of the domestic truth of survival. The poet conjures up a stage, whereupon the actors play their parts:

Because I could not stop for Death –
   He kindly stopped for me –
   The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
   And Immortality.79

It is true that while ‘Yeats speaks of “that discourtesy of death”, Emily Dickinson enacts its civility’.80 We find an entirely different portrayal of death in this poem to what we found in ‘I heard a Fly buzz’. The patrician here comes down and accompanies the lady to the ‘Carriage’.

79 Emily Dickinson, Poem 712.
80 American Writers, p. 468.
The poem brings us close to the reminiscences of Robert Browning’s ‘The Last Ride Together’, with which it has been compared:

What if we still ride on, we too
With life forever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity …

Not only did Emily Dickinson read the poem with care, but she was also moved by a line in the second stanza: ‘So one day more am I deified’. However, she departed from the Browningesque thought of deification of the self which, together with the other, has come to constitute, for her, the ‘me’. In Dickinson, ‘we’ comprises the self, and Death, the other. The speaker observes all the happenings of the phenomenal world and ‘slowly’ drives towards ‘Eternity’ accompanied by remarkable ‘Civility’. She virtually succumbs to the gentleman in the ‘Carriage’, but her experience of life is barely melancholic. She does not fail to recognize the ‘School, where Children strove / at Recess – in the Ring –’, ‘the Fields of Gazing Grain –’, ‘the Setting Sun –’, each of which is nonetheless important to the speaker’s perception of life. The reader feels somewhat struck by the conjectural antithesis she puts forward in the terminal stanza:

Since then – ’tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses’ Heads
Were toward Eternity –

The verse here perhaps lays itself bare to our presupposition that the poet-speaker reconciles herself to ‘Eternity’ without any protest, but she does yearn for those apparently
insignificant temporal events, which provide her with the essential constituent elements for her poetry. A later poem that can be brought into context as an analogous text here is Poem 1445, where Dickinson personifies death as ‘the supple Suitor / That wins at last’. Both the poems portray death with an overtone of care and tenderness. In this poem, the progress towards death is demonstrated not as a ride towards immortality, but as ‘a stealthy Wooing / Conducted first / By pallid innuendoes / And din approach’. The essence of these lines of verse differs from that of the former poem in that it brings forth a different portrayal of death, from which we feel a magnificent theme to be at work. The grandeur and flamboyance of ‘Because I could not stop for Death’ lies in the dignified, solemn and slow drive across the outstretched vista of the countryside and the courteous gentleman who ‘paused before a House’, which was almost in ruins, to enable the driven to catch a glimpse of the threatened existence of the derelict construction. Hence, the conclusion is characterized by a contemplative aftermath sans the sonorous ‘Bugles’. The juxtaposition of two strikingly assorted images of death – the act of kindly stopping for the poet-speaker so that ‘The Carriage held but just Ourselves’ on the one hand, and on the other, that of stealthily wooing primarily by ‘pallid innuendoes’, braving ‘at last with Bugles’ and bearing away ‘in triumph / To Troth unknown’ – evokes a distinctive array of multifarious modes of signification that perhaps confounds the poet herself and causes her to struggle to convey the uncertainty of this finality that stealthily approaches, but surely destroys.

We do, of course, perceive the elegance of Dickinson’s verse that lies in its ability to thrive upon such commonplace domestic ingredients. It seems she conceptualizes her own universe of thoughts, which considerably draws upon the apparently mundane experiences, and through an extraordinary act of poetic creation she subsequently transcends them to form a trans-

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81 Emily Dickinson, Poem 1445.
temporal reality. This unique element of calm self-confidence in the poetic persona is discernible in another poem:

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth –

The Sweeping of the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.  

Thus death, for Dickinson in this poem, comes as a lover and Albert J. Gelpi appositely puts it in the following way:

… since death was crowned with power, he came as a lover-king; since death justified the “Guilt” of love, he came as a lover-redeemer. Dying itself was merely the passage, often depicted as a carriage ride, to love, coronation, heaven.

We find one instance of this idea in the inaugural stanza of ‘Because I could not stop for Death’. In this context, another poem (Poem 1123) is worth referring to as it speaks of the ‘tender Carpenter’ nailing the coffin down implying death of the lover on the one hand, and the metaphor of the ‘sovereign Carpenter’ or Christ who is indicative of death, on the other. This act of metaphorization might not be very consciously achieved by the poet but such a purport is almost effortlessly expected, considering the magnificence of linguistic workmanship evident in Dickinson’s verse. Hence, we find in her poetry a significant plethora of images of death, where

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82 Ibid., Poem 1078.
she refers to death as ‘democratic’: ‘The Beggar and his Queen / Propitiate this Democrat.’ This
description of death as a ‘Democrat’, along with the fact that ‘Death’s large – Democratic fingers
/ Rub away the Brand’ of ‘Color – Caste – Denomination – ’, did not seem adequate to her, since
the idea of death could not merely be implicated with the notion of an enigmatic equalizer and
destroyer. She does not also ignore the fact that death’s imperial sovereignty accords ‘One
dignity’ to all the subjects, each one of whom is not dispossessed of the enormous prerogative
owned by her or him. Thus it can justly be maintained that, ‘… the brides of death were
democrat-queens; the kingdom of death was an egalitarian Empire of Czars as small as
Everyman’.\textsuperscript{84} The identification of the poetic self with death appears to be overwhelmingly
consummate on the one hand, and on the other, to reflect the uncertainty and unforeseeability of
the royal ‘Redeemer’ as well as the accompanying doubt that tears apart the poetic mind which,
in its turn, envisages the process of transmutation of life thus:

Where, then, does love become life? Only after the pain – ‘over there’. ‘Till Death – is
narrow Loving –’ but then ‘Love is immortality.’ No wonder that immortality is ‘the
Flood subject’. When she and the lover had bound each other to the cross, the figure of
the man blurred with that of Christ, and as she shared in the exquisite agony of His love,
so she would share in His resurrection as well. Out of danger in the Eden-Heaven, all the
emotional and religious frustrations which she had endured at such expense would be lost
in her fulfilment in and absorption by the ‘lover’; for ‘years of troth have taught thee /
More than Wifehood ever may!’ Sometimes heaven (‘Old Suitor Heaven’) meant an
eternity wed to God, the ‘distant-stately Lover’. Then she would be ‘Bride of the Father
and the Son / Bride of the Holy Ghost’: ‘What omnipotence lies in wait / For her to be a
Bride’. Sometimes Jesus was, explicitly or implicitly, the courtly gentleman, the
Redeemer who became her Master; at other times she rejected Jesus for her ‘lover’ and
looked forward to an immortality of ‘you and me’ in Paradise. The identity of the

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 113.
heavenly ‘lover’ – God, man, or God-man – was often indeterminate, a shape projected by the need of the isolate self.\textsuperscript{85}

Death may be ambivalent, unpredictable, cryptic and speculative, but love, for Dickinson, is certain, invariable, and unwavering. It is this momentum that invigorates life, transcends the spatio-temporal sense of death and brings about resurrection. To put it in her own words, it is ‘anterior to Life – / Posterior to Death’.\textsuperscript{86} It is a journey towards immortality, where the throes of love find fulfilment ‘in ravished Holiness’ accompanied by an excruciating ‘Anger grander than Delight’ as well as a riotous ‘Transport wild as thrills the Graves’. Dickinson here is perplexed by her own anxiety of authorship. She expresses her disquietude by saying, ‘I cannot live with You – … I could not die – with You – … Nor could I rise – with You –’ , the experience ultimately leading to despondency and eventual resignation: ‘that White Sustenance – / Despair’.\textsuperscript{87} The idea of immortality is almost everywhere in Dickinson’s poetry and the juxtaposition of the apparently irreconcilable thoughts of hope and despair is astonishing. The poet even associated immortality with consciousness and with flashes of subtle insight. She contemplated immortality as the only inevitable phenomenon, bearing a profound significance as love and death, and revealing for her ‘an existential state of mind and feeling’.\textsuperscript{88} It is the consciousness, an inseparable human faculty, that enables the poet to experience such a beatific and ‘deathless’ moment. She could experience love in its agony, death in its destruction, and immortality in its unique palpability, through her secluded poetic self.

Dickinson was gifted with an amazing sense of artistry to imbibe and transform the Romantic convention of deployment of language into such a form of linguistic usage that unfolds

\begin{footnotes}
\item[Ibid.\textsuperscript{.}, p. 114.]
\item[86] Emily Dickinson, Poem 917.
\item[Ibid.\textsuperscript{.}, Poem 640.]
\end{footnotes}
‘the identity of the exclusive self’.\textsuperscript{89} There is a complete identification of the poetic self with the sepulchre, particularly due to the essence of solitude the latter bears; nature now can barely be understood to exist outside the poet, who herself becomes the very objects she experiences and writes about:

The setting is understood to contain the writer in the act of writing: the poet in the grip of what he feels and sees, and primitively inspired to carve it in the living rock.\textsuperscript{90}

The setting for Dickinson is truly the poetic self that has itself transformed, through the act of writing, into a ‘living rock’ upon which are epigraphed a multitude of experiences of love and affliction:

\begin{quote}
I’ve dropped my Brain – My Soul is numb –
The Veins that used to run
Stop palsied – ’tis Paralysis
Done perfecter on stone.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

This metaphor of ‘Paralysis’, and the palsied ‘Veins that used to run’ are all engraved ‘perfecter’ on the stone of the self. In an analysis of Poem 341, ‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes’,\textsuperscript{92} Charles R. Anderson explores the ‘symbols of crystallization’ and the essence of the stone as conceived by Dickinson:

As the images of a funeral rite subside, two related ones emerge to body forth the victim who is at once a living organism and a frozen form. Both are symbols of crystallization: “Freezing” in the snow, which is neither life nor death but both simultaneously; and ‘A Quartz contentment like a stone’, for the paradoxical serenity that follows intense suffering. This recalls her envy of the ‘little Stone’, happy because unconscious of the

\textsuperscript{91} Emily Dickinson, Poem 1046.
\textsuperscript{92} Emily Dickinson, Poem 341, p. 272.
exigencies that afflict mortals, and points forward to the paradox in another poem, ‘Contended as despair’. Such is the ‘formal feeling’ that comes after great pain. It is, ironically no feeling at all, only numb rigidness existing outside time and space.⁹³

Another instance shows Dickinson transforming from a living and throbbing being into a lifeless fragment of marble:

Vitality is Carved and cool.
My nerve in Marble lies –
A breathing Woman
Yesterday – Endowed with Paradise.

She, being now ‘Endowed with Paradise’, toils hard to retrieve herself from this transfiguration in the expectation of going back to her earlier state of life, when her actions were not fettered by the catastrophic power of such fatality:

Who wrought Carrara in me
And chiselled all my tune
Were it a witchcraft – were it death –
I’ve still a chance to strain

To Being, somewhere – Motion – Breath
Though Centuries beyond,
And every limit a Decade –
I’ll shiver, satisfied.⁹⁴

Through this yearning of the soul, echoes the Christian belief of resurrection. Dickinson has endorsed the most intense expressions of the barrow to demonstrate her inexplicable predicament. Subtle as Dickinson’s strokes of significance are, she goes to the extent of

⁹⁴ Emily Dickinson, Poem 1046.
imparting emotional implications to her verse. The unidentified ‘Who’ wrought a blotch in her and ‘chiselled’ all her ‘time’ – an act that causes a numbness in her sensations, requiring her to strive for centuries to resuscitate her tortured self, and a sense of agitation which causes her to ruminate. The poet’s consternation is nevertheless perceptible in many of her poems in which we can also trace an experience of agony and soreness, engraved on the marble of her consciousness.

This image of a perfect art on the stone of the self does not, however, necessarily pivot on the affliction threatened by an anonymous ‘who’. Dickinson envisages the circumstance after death in one of her early poems of 1860:

If I shouldn’t be alive
When the Robins come,
Give the one in Red Cravat
A memorial crumb.

If I couldn’t thank you,
Being fast asleep,
You will know I’m trying
With my Granite lip!95

The poet feels the granite within her and the stone precludes her from communicating with the living. She goes on straining herself to express her thoughts on the one hand, and on the other, she gives in to the competence of the breathing self of the other. What agonizes the female poet here is the oppression she feels at not being able to articulate her experience of the world. She

95 Emily Dickinson, Poem 182, p. 133.
would find herself greatly relieved if the pulsating other can perform the generous task of apportioning a ‘memorial crumb’ to the Robin, an act that will, by its virtue, perpetuate the poet’s elevated task. The poet here becomes the stone and yet endeavours infinitely to struggle against the forced silence that her ‘Granite lip’ has disagreeably cast her into. Joanne Feit Diehl analyses the situation rather felicitously:

The granite lip, rendered incapable of speech, is controlled by a “will” which supersedes the body’s capacity to respond – effort outlasts mortality. The struggle of the granite lip to speak after death acknowledges the effort of the vital being as it confronts the pressures that urge her into silence; hence the need of another voice, the voice of the reader, who wins the poet’s stifled thanks for carrying out the generous task of giving a crumb to a bird, the “memorial crumb” which keeps the poet’s memory alive.96

This identification of the self with the stone, resulting in a ‘psychic numbing’, metaphorically finds expression in the poem ‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes –’, with an overwhelming sense of stupefaction:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart, questions was it He, that bore,
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?

Death brings to the poet an unnerving sensation and this psychic numbness casts her into an eternal oblivion. Here again, she self-metamorphoses into stone. The poet talks of the benumbing of the senses by indicating specifically the physical positions of the nerves, heart and the feet:

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
Of ground, or Air, or Ought –

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A Wooden way

Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

The self provides the background to the poem and is itself marked by a stark inanity and emptiness. The direction of movement remains unknown to the inane self, stumbling as on ‘A Wooden way’, yet ‘Regardless’, and betraying ‘A Quartz contentment’, itself being transformed into a stone:

This is the Hour of Lead –

Remembered, if outlived,

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –

First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –97

The self gradually sails from consciousness to ‘Stupor’ and the transition is ‘the Hour of Lead’, the hour of slipping into unconsciousness beyond all spatio-temporal materiality of human existence. The entire saga of life ultimately consists of this peregrination to death, that ushers in ‘a formal feeling’ and a ‘Quartz contentment’. The irony intended by the epithet ‘quartz’ can barely be overlooked. The inherent malaise and anxiety seems very evident and the poet is apprehensive about confronting ‘the Hour of Lead’. Oblivion prevents her creativity and the cessation, that death causes to her thought, is perhaps the eternal ‘letting go’ of her poetic faculty to communicate to the world of the living.

Death, seen in its myriad perspectives, brings Dickinson to describe herself as a corpse in one of her verses, and hence this has provoked a critic to consider the representation as one of

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97 Emily Dickinson, Poem 341, p. 272.
Dickinson’s ‘most obviously hostile autobiographical poems’. This poem exhibits a transformation of the subject, who envisages her own death as having ‘the charm of a genre painting’, and illustrates the fact that ‘a change of voice is a change of style’ for her:

’Twas just this time, Last year. I died.

I know I heard the Corn,

When I was Carried by the Farms –

It had the Tassels on –

The poet laments at being deprived of the ‘Christmas glee’, and the ‘drama’ of the ‘common day’ torments her since she plays a character who does not take part in the immense mirth of the Thanksgiving celebration:

I wondered which would miss me, least,

And when Thanksgiving, came.

If Father’d multiply the plates –

To make an even Sum –

The nostalgia, the pain of a relational familiarity, and the sense of lack, emerging from the inability to associate the physically dead self with the temporality of the earthly happenings, cause an overwhelming melancholy in the omniscient poet-narrator. She clings on to the reminiscences as a source of consolation for her reclusivity and passionately craves to go back to the moment she once cherished. The poet wishes to script the never-ending ‘theatre’ of life and she records it in her immortal verses. Her life is undesirably put an end to by an unsolicited and

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99 Emily Dickinson, Poem 445, p. 344.
immature death which becomes the cause of her angst, since she is forced to take an objective stance that impairs expression and necessitates insufferable silence and passivity.

As we examine the authorial intention in the poems, ‘How many times these low feet staggered – ’ and ‘ ’Twas just this time, last year, I died’, (the second poem dated two years later), we find that the poet is quick enough to take a trans-thematic leap from individual emotions and sensibilities, which are often confused and nebulous, to a kind of poetry dispossessed of the cares and obligations of the self.

A writer, who has over 1700 poems to her credit and 1000 known letters, is seldom voiceless. Instead, Dickinson appears to condemn silence, not only because she endorses the supremacy of words, but since she is rather prone to be even more sceptical about the effectiveness of silence. She is a poet who scarcely glorifies silence and begins a poem with ‘Silence is all we dread’:

There’s ransom in a Voice –
But Silence is Infinity.
Himself have not a voice.\(^1\)

What Dickinson was anxious about was the way in which she would make silence ‘a part of the linguistic experience’\(^2\):

There is no Silence in the Earth – so silent.
As that endured
Which uttered, would discourage Nature

\(^{100}\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 187, pp. 135-6.
\(^{101}\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 1251.
And haunt the World.\textsuperscript{103}

Silence, for Dickinson, may be discouraging since it implies an event of ghastly death that appals and intimidates. It may denote an utter disengagement rather than a rapturous union. E. Miller Budick describes it as ‘the lonesome, eternal distance created by a “ransom” or a redemption that dangles unattainably beyond humankind’s reach’.\textsuperscript{104} The consternation of the poet arises from the fact that it is language that can contort meaning, and silence thus signifies the ‘absence of meaning, the ultimate cosmic default’,\textsuperscript{105} creating a void that renders all poetic expression impossible. Hence, in poem 1296, Dickinson says:

\begin{quote}
Death’s Waylaying not the sharpest
Of the thefts of Time –
There Marauds a sorer Robber,
Silence – is his name –
No Assault, nor any Menace
Doth betoken him.
But from Life’s consummate Cluster –
He supplants the Balm.
\end{quote}

The poet is clearly apprehensive of the threatening marauder called ‘Silence’, that ‘supplants’ not only ‘Life’s consummate Cluster’, but is itself more perilous than ‘Death’s Waylaying’. Thus silence can even unsettle meanings and cause them to cease, not to talk of conveying

\textsuperscript{103} Emily Dickinson, Poem 1004.
\textsuperscript{104} Budick, \textit{Emily Dickinson and the Life of Language: A Study in Symbolist Poetics}, p. 165.
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 165.
significances that ‘lie magically beyond human verbalization’. As Dickinson implies in another poem:

Great Streets of silence led away.
To Neighborhoods of Pause –
Here was no Notice – no Dissent
No Universe – no Laws

We find here that silence obliterates all laws of the Universe leading only to an eternal and devastating ‘Pause’. It has rendered all earthly time as well as language meaningless. Language fails to generate meaning and hence renders the poet incapable of expression. Thus silence accompanies death, a reality that utterly separates a dead person from all forms of breathing life. The distance is unending and unbridgeable. Only some tender impressions like ‘little Workmanships / In Crayon, or in Wool’, ‘The Thimble’, ‘The stitches’, ‘A Book’ and the exiguous pencil ‘Etchings’, remain. These are seemingly insignificant objects on which the poet thrives, with the help of which she creates and from which she derives her expression. Hence, death and silence may rob off the poet’s precious acquaintances, but not her power of self-expression.

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106 Ibid., p. 165.
107 Emily Dickinson, Poem 1159.
108 Emily Dickinson, Poem 360, p. 287.