CONCLUSION

‘We are sepulchred alive in this close world, / And want more room’: The

Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Secluded Female Art

[The] girl or woman … tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world, since she too has been putting words and images together; she is looking eagerly for guides, maps, possibilities; and over and over again in the words’ ‘masculine persuasive force’ of literature she comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together.¹

The ‘image of Woman’ as conceived by the male poet ‘negates everything she is about’, since the preoccupation of writing does not perfectly accord with her experience and, moreover, such creations have their presupposed implications of impassive quiescence that are detrimental to the very notion of creativity.

An illustrious saga of the agony and anguish of female creativity informs Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s epoch-making analysis of women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979). The authority of women’s literary imagination within the domain of an inhibiting patriarchal prerogative is what this study registers. The dilemma arising out of an authoritarian convention is symbolized at the very

beginning by presenting a narrative of Snow White, in which the Wicked Queen is transformed into an ill-fated feminist exemplar, revolting against the tortures of the patriarchal king who remains predominantly concealed. Here, the queen is emblematic of a diverse array of poets and novelists. The significance of the story lies in revealing the harsh reality of the life of the woman writer being torn by the internal contradiction between her role of an ideal daughter of patriarchy and her right to write. The experience of the woman writer is encapsulated in the chronicle of how the Queen, ‘a plotter, an artist, an impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy, witty, wily and self-absorbed as artists traditionally are’,\(^2\) endeavours to exterminate her phlegmatic, yet graceful, antagonist by ‘the traditionally female arts of tight lacing, cosmetology and cuisine, but her three “plots” succeed only in transforming her rival into the eternally beautiful, intimate object d’ art preserved in the glass coffin of patriarchal aesthetics’.\(^3\) Finally, ‘the artist end[s] up by doing the death-dance in red-hot shoes, condemned under patriarchy to monstrosity and self-destruction’\(^4\)

In her initial literary sensitivity, we recognize Elizabeth Barrett Browning dithering between two starkly inapposite artistic positions – being a woman on the one hand and writing as a woman on the other – the former being impeded by gender and the latter being precluded by the obligation of performance and self-definition. This is the dilemma which three of the best Victorian women poets – Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson – experienced when they tried to find a situation where the woman writer could establish herself irreconcilably and in which she would not merely fantasize, but articulate.

This predicament of women writers, according to Victorian critics, was perhaps due to the fact that female creativity is hardly able to transcend the individual and the perfunctory. A majority of women were deficient in the classical indoctrination that formed the basis for introduction into ‘high’ culture. Conventional constructs of the function of a poet, for example, were immanently virile. Publication was considered to be a presumptuous and unfeminine self-exposure, or even overt self-ostentation, which became more conveniently legitimized when one composed novels in order to amass money and seldom wrote poems that brought only fame. Novel writing was a preoccupation that was more comfortable for women primarily because of its less intimidating masculine convention, even though it involved less regard. It was often thought that it was more challenging for women to evoke the consciousness of the self and self-affirmation that poetry demands and that they were too inhibited to write assertive and enthusiastic verse. The acclaimed Victorian critic, R. H. Hutton, maintains that female imagination is not able to unfasten itself from ‘the visible surface and form of human existence’. It was thus problematical for women to position themselves within the rubric of the legacy of English poetry that, in its turn, gave way to such subjective restrictions.

Amidst such challenges of a stifling convention, Elizabeth Barrett Browning stands as the foremost representative figure of late nineteenth-century feminist thought. It scarcely requires an emphasis that feminist literary criticism has remained in the vanguard in initiating historical and enlightening frames of reference which facilitate us to re-appraise effectively what was considered as the most authoritative and extensively studied poetry of the mid-nineteenth century. Certainly, the genesis of a constitutional feminist stirring can be traced approximately to

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5 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar put forward most of these suggestions in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 545-9.
6 Hutton, R. H., ‘Novels by the Authoress of *John Halifax*’, *North British Review* 29, 1858, p. 467.
the time when she was sketching *Aurora Leigh*, a kind of poetry hitherto untried by women. Barrett Browning read Bessie Parkes’s polemical writings on the ‘woman question’, the latter being the governing flare of light of the women of Langham Place who predominantly struggled for the rights of women to enter vocational engagements. The Victorian ‘woman question’ engulfed a widely assorted array of debates on women and professional employment, female suffrage, celibate women and prostitution, along with the overt inhibition of the dogma of dissociated domains in gender, a precept that particularly steered the contemporaneous bourgeois domestic convictions. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, there is a reinforcing predilection to establish the zealous self-affirmation that can be distinguished in a poem like *Aurora Leigh*, rather than go into an investigation as to how much the poetic self, that the narrative corroborates, accomplishes its aspirations due to the discrimination in social position in relation to gender. On the issue of assertion of the female self, Gilbert and Gubar contend, ‘Aurora’s self-development as a poet is the central concern of Barrett Browning’s *Bildungsroman* in verse, but if she is to be a poet she must deconstruct the dead self that is a male “opus” and discover a living “inconstant” self’. What we often feel to be absent in their critique is the fact that this account of self-reinforcement is also a fundamentally covert extension of the bourgeois thought that Barrett Browning’s contemporaries substantiated through their works.

But this interpolation should not be employed as a pretext to deflect our consideration away from the quintessential femininity in Barrett Browning’s artistic sensitivity. There is seldom any doubt regarding the idea of unprecedented defiance that *Aurora Leigh* puts up by way of deploying progressive and a conspicuous array of metaphorical representations, which

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conjure up, in their turn, the idea of the female body. W. C. Roscoe is clearly astonished by the vehement persuasiveness of the following verse:

    Never flinch,
    But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
    Upon the burning lava of a song
    The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
    That, when the next shall come, the men of that
    May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
    ‘Behold, – behold the paps we all have sucked!’

Here, we are reminded of what Roscoe remarked about such a vehement revelation of the ‘woman question’: ‘… [n]o man could have written it’.

According to Deirdre David’s reading in her essay, ‘“Art’s a Service”: Social Wound, Sexual Politics, and Aurora Leigh’, this extract should not be interpreted as a completely delusory delineation of female imaginative faculty. From the perspective of Aurora Leigh’s approach to the ‘separate spheres’ demarcated for the sexes, the expressions are perhaps more contradictory than we may primarily be inclined to presume. David remarks that ‘this mammocentric imagery is ambiguous’. She goes on to say: ‘Aurora, the woman poet, rather peculiarly figures the poet’s task in conventionally male terms – as unflinching, aggressive work – and she makes the subject of the poet almost primordially female – “full-veined, heaving,

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Broadly speaking, David considers the entire tale of *Aurora Leigh* as thoroughly unprogressive, indicating that Aurora’s paradigm of artistic creation impels a ‘woman’s art’ to emerge as a virtuous service rendered to patriarchy. She also contends that the principle of poetic creation, which is discernibly corroborated in various portions of the poem, actually proceeds from Thomas Carlyle’s authoritative works on the elementary significance of labour in all forms of human struggle. In congruity with this, the idealistic certitude in poets as the ‘only truth-tellers now left to God’\(^{11}\) approximates Aurora Leigh practically to a position so as to belong to the pedigree of male Romantic poets whose doctrines she reiteratively espouses. In spite of the fact that Barrett Browning’s exemplar is not wholly in dissension with the male poetic discourse within which she has to create, her portrayal engenders hitherto unconceived levels of cognition about female authorship. Since David diagnoses ‘male terms’ intertwined within the rubric of Barrett Browning’s contentious ‘mammocentric imagery’, it is seldom impossible to come to terms with the way she concludes by saying that the poem delineates ‘a woman’s voice speaking patriarchal discourse – boldly, passionately and without rancour’.\(^{12}\)

David directs our consideration towards Barrett Browning’s conviction in her correspondence that women were subordinate to men in so far as their intellectual perspicacity is concerned, an opinion that would initially appear to disagree with the imaginative adroitness of Aurora Leigh, herself an illustrious and established poet. But the contention that David holds is that this vivacious and zealous female key figure can only experience accomplishment by ‘melting the purity of her art and sexuality (the whiter pearls) into [her cousin] Romney’s vision

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\(^{12}\) Deirdre David, ‘“Art’s a Service”: Social Wound, Sexual Politics, and *Aurora Leigh*’, p. 129.
(the wine). Their wedlock with which the ambitious narrative reaches its finale, resembles entirely a poetical rendition of the most engrossing form of Victorian romantic fiction. However, perhaps we can also say that the extent to which the zeal for emotional contentment depreciates the feminist self-assertion and aspirations, something that we frequently observe in the artistry of Aurora Leigh, the work continues to exist as a begetter of substantial dialectic. Conversely, Sandra Gilbert records the manner in which Aurora Leigh endeavours assiduously to argue against Romney Leigh’s dogmatism, calling our attention to the fact that he considers Aurora’s poetic work an inconsequential piece of ‘woman’s work’ since she survives ‘as the complement / Of his sex merely’. It is scarcely surprising in this case that a significant portion of the first book of the poem lays stress on the want of ‘mother-love’ as a mode of allaying the necessary onslaughts of offensive forms of male behaviour. There is indisputably an abundance of matter in Aurora Leigh to corroborate Gilbert’s opinion that Barrett Browning’s heroine perceptibly borrows various forms of a woman’s strength from her mother’s Italian pedigree. When Poems Before Congress was published by the year 1860, the more Barrett Browning envisaged the greatly needed integration of Italy (conceived as bearing a female identity) the more it appeared that this need could scarcely be fulfilled by a domineering masculine vehemence that she was prompt enough to inhibit in Aurora Leigh.

While Barrett Browning’s poetics increasingly grew authoritative in its social expression, taking into consideration its intrepid deployment of ‘woman’s figures’, Christina Rossetti’s poetry was extensively devotional in its theme, expression and sensibility. Perceiving that Barrett

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13 Ibid., p. 125.
Browning’s poetry is, to a certain extent, marked by affected emotions, Rossetti desires to assign an ingenuous certainty to the true-to-life experiences of the woman whose art hitherto seldom drew acclaim in the canonical traditions of the male-dominated poetry of Europe. Significantly, by way of demonstrating the unheard and somewhat atypical voice of the woman writer, Rossetti conceived of a framework within the paradigm of which a Victorian woman could be recognized as one who had the ability not merely to be a docile object of male attention, but to assume for herself the sprightly position of the paramour too. Her aspiration to articulate about a woman’s sensitivity, rather than only her caprice, steered her writings gradually towards being contemplative and devotional. A considerable number of Rossetti’s poems are engaged with the theme of seclusion. Evidently, she investigates the immured nature of female subjectivity through her art. She analyzes the cloistered self as being dissociated from the external reality with a vein of bold disobedience. Published in 1881, the poem ‘The Thread of Life’ offers an appropriate instance of Rossetti’s astounding examination of the ‘prison’ of female individuality. Assigning expression to a speaker who feels ‘aloof’ and ‘bound with the flawless band / Of inner solitude’, the poem avows the inconceivability of being persistently affiliated with the ‘merry-making crew’. It is justifiable for one to envisage the poem as gradually metamorphosing into woe and hopelessness, with the speaker’s feeling of a harrowing seclusion becoming profound with the steady, yet unhurried, progression of the verse. Elsewhere in Rossetti’s poetry, the poetic self that is distanced from the poetic fraternity does not necessarily experience a depleted state of existence. She conceives of the ‘self-chain’ as something that unites one to her or his own self. Hence, the ‘prison’ of selfhood is virtually one’s ‘sole

18 Ibid., stanza 1, lines 5-6, p. 330.
19 Ibid., stanza 2, line 9, p. 331.
Having perceived subjectivity as being confined within, the essentially disconcerted self recognizes that its own nature of existence acknowledges an unequivocal affirmation: ‘I am even I.’ Thus it is quite a recognizable attribute in Rossetti’s writings to demonstrate the way in which experiences of preclusion and denial are ingeniously transmuted into achieving self-definition. The act of transmutation occurs when, by the end of ‘The Thread of Life’, the female persona proclaims that her ‘sole possession’ is the munificence of God, with whom she will certainly be united on the Last Day. The characteristic energy and perseverance in Rossetti’s poetry can be felt from the mode in which her female speakers realize their intense and heartfelt sensibilities of marginalization as being based on an ethic of virtue and worthiness of the self.

The practice of deciphering the intellectual profundity of Rossetti’s verse came about only recently so that even as late as in 1972, Lionel Stevenson, a greatly regarded scholar of Victorian poetry, could go to the extent of saying that Rossetti’s poetry ‘contains a minimum of intellectual substance’. An opinion of this kind is completely in keeping with the many critiques and commentaries on her poetry dating from the beginning of the twentieth century. Isobel Armstrong, in an autobiographical essay sketching her evolution as a feminist reader, explores the reasons why during the 1950s contributors to the authoritative Pelican Guides to English Literature took recourse to a restrictive diction to censure rather than commend Rossetti’s writings. ‘Simplicity, modesty, delicacy, good taste, good manners, shy reserve, tenderness, truthfulness, limited pretensions, touching sincerity, ladylikeness – all these are

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20 Ibid., stanza 3, line 3, p. 331.
21 Ibid., stanza 2, line 14, p. 331.
epithets’ that, according to Armstrong, ‘are in effect coercive’.\textsuperscript{23} The consistent adjectival usage of debasing expressions in the form of these epithets implied that for a considerable period of time Rossetti could seldom be perceived otherwise, apart from being characteristically ‘ladylike’, a description with a discernible intention of denunciation. It was only late in the 1970s that a number of feminist critics provided multifarious interpretations for some of the well-known poems of Rossetti. Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Cora Kaplan and Ellen Moers were some of the most prominent critics who investigated the exceptional and the mysterious ethos of ‘Goblin Market’ (1862), the perturbing and magical fairy tale that has eventually been studied and analyzed the most among all of Rossetti’s poems. The erotic and provocative overtones of the poem have indubitably made it almost imperative for feminist critics to trace issues related to female creativity. Gilbert and Gubar thus read this narrative of female defiance against male supremacy in the following manner:

Rossetti does … seem to be dreamily positing an effectively matrilineal and matriarchal world, perhaps even, considering the strikingly sexual redemption scene between the sisters, a covertly (if ambivalently) lesbian world.\textsuperscript{24}

However, succeeding interpretations have indicated that the epithet ‘lesbian’ is not in consonance with the friendly attachment two women have for each other, particularly in a work undertaken during a time when that expression did not bear any implication of an erotic and amatory relationship. On the contrary, it may appear to be more prudent to explore how the notion of sisterhood, that thematically underpins ‘Goblin Market’ in several ways, can conveniently be associated with the whole gamut of semantic connotations in relation to the ideas of family and religion that were of distinctive significance to a large Victorian readership.

\textsuperscript{24} Gilbert and Gubar, \textit{The Madwoman in the Attic}, p. 567.
But noteworthy here is the ‘revolutionary potential’ that Lilian Faderman\textsuperscript{25} discerns in the bond of sisterhood that Rossetti illustrates. By bringing this idea to the fore, Faderman advises us against any elementary remark about an amorous affinity within the self-same gender identities, since it is not traceable in this poem only due to the fact that it was inconceivable by Victorian readers and, therefore, reprehensible.

Emily Dickinson, who is perhaps the most outstanding woman poet in the English language, certainly requires to be considered from the historical, subliminal, cultural and artistic standpoints of her femininity. The fundamental premise of feminist critical literature is that the essence of art and biography and the correlation between them is conditional upon the question of gender. That Dickinson is a poet is intrinsic to her creativity. By disintegrating her individuality into two mutually restraining constituents, ‘woman’ and ‘poet’, conventional critical thought has typified two characters instead of one. More instances of such a rupture of identity occur when her poetry exhibits traces of detachment from any significant evaluation as regards its relationship to the artist creating it. Feminist criticism endeavours to juxtapose these fragments together: ‘woman’ and ‘poet’. As Suzanne Juhasz has indicated in her book,\textsuperscript{26} critical analyses of Dickinson during both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have predominantly made the differentiation between ‘woman’ and ‘poet’. Actually, there has been a long-sustained emphasis on these elements being mutually exclusive. Studies as divergent in perspective as George Whicher’s exemplary critical biography of Emily Dickinson\textsuperscript{27} and John Cody’s psychoanalytic account of the inner life of Emily Dickinson appear as noticeably corresponding


\textsuperscript{27} George Whicher, \textit{This was a Poet: A Critical Biography of Emily Dickinson} (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1938).
inferences. While Whicher believes that the consummation of the woman lies in becoming the poet, Cody’s conclusive observations are comparatively more overwhelming:

It was Mrs. Dickinson’s failure as a sufficiently loving and admirable developmental model that set in motion the series of psychological upheavals which were unmitigated misfortunes for Emily Dickinson, the woman. These maturational impasses consigned her to a life of sexual bewilderment, anxiety and frustration by impairing those processes of psychic growth which would have made the roles of wife and mother possible. With reference to Emily Dickinson the artist, one cannot speak of misfortunes at all. For, amazing as it may seem, Mrs. Dickinson’s inadequacies, the sequence of internal conflicts to which they gave rise, and the final psychotic breakdown all conspired in a unique way to make of Emily Dickinson a great and prolific poet.  

Precisely what Cody enunciates is that, ‘the violent disharmonies and unceasing restlessness of her inner life … thus appear in her case to have contributed copiously to the transformation of woman into poet’.  

In the opinion of Adrienne Rich, ‘Given her vocation she was neither eccentric nor quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her powers, to practice necessary economies’.  

When the two terms ‘woman’ and ‘poet’ are not regarded as interchangeably delimiting, there happens to be a thorough transposition in the approach in which both the occurrences in Dickinson’s life and her poetic works are understood. The significant dilemma no longer remains singular, since it begins to bear considerable import. In her concluding paragraph, Rich unequivocally states the origin of these positions:

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To say ‘yes’ to her powers was not simply a major act of nonconformity in the nineteenth century; even in our time it has been assumed that Emily Dickinson, not patriarchal society, was ‘the problem’. The more we come to recognize the unwritten and written laws and taboos underpinning patriarchy, the less problematical, surely, will seem the methods she chose.\(^{31}\)

Rich identifies the potential vigour and significance of Dickinson’s life and art. She considers her poetry as not only phenomenal, but essentially momentous to knowledge about the experiential world. Rich reads her works as being created by a ‘mind engaged in a lifetime’s musing on essential problems of language, identity, separation, relationship, the integrity of the self; a mind capable of describing psychological states more accurately than any poet except Shakespeare’.\(^{32}\) She describes Dickinson’s art as ‘the poetry of extreme states, the poetry of danger’, that ‘can allow its readers to go further in our own awareness, take risks we might not have dared; it says, at least: “Someone has been here before.”’\(^{33}\)

In her book *Women Writers and Poetic Identity*,\(^{34}\) Margaret Homans demonstrates how indistinguishable Dickinson is from Eve, who can understand and master other speech forms apart from those of Adam’s. For instance, when Satan deceives her, it facilitates her to comprehend the metaphorical use of language. Likewise, Dickinson also ‘understands and makes use of a general dislocation between words and their referents’.\(^{35}\) Dickinson undertakes to defy the hierarchical order in language, which forms the crux of male ascendency. Hence Homans opines, ‘the desire to be at the center generates hierarchical thinking, but even the potentially


neutral concept of opposition also turns into hierarchy, because it is impossible ever to be entirely disinterested and one element must be primary and the other secondary’.  

‘ “A Woman White”: Emily Dickinson’s Yarn of Pearl’ is the concluding section of Gilbert and Gubar’s pioneering study on nineteenth-century female writers. They are enthusiastic about the widely divergent dimensions of Dickinson’s poetic impersonations. They are specifically engaged in deciphering the significance of the ‘roles’ that the poet plays. They affirm that Dickinson’s ‘posing’ proved to be ‘essential to her poetic self-achievement’.  

The woman novelist creates a distinctive narrative intonation in which she is able to articulate her decisive self on the one hand, and on the other, she is able to enact the role of the subject herself. Hence, in Dickinson, they maintain, ‘we see the culmination of this process, an almost complete absorption of the characters of the fiction into the persona of their author, so that this writer and her protagonist(s) become for all practical purposes one – one “supposed person” achieving the authority of self-creation by enacting many highly literary selves and lives’. ‘For Dickinson, indeed’, they deduce, ‘art is not so much poesis – making – as it is mimesis – enactment, and this because she believes that even consciousness is not so much reflective as it is theatrical’.

If we are to entirely fathom Dickinson’s ‘alternative power’ that is ‘potentially subversive’, we have to recognize not only her accomplishments, but also the manner in which she accomplished what she did. Suzanne Juhasz talks about words that ‘occur and reoccur:

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36 Ibid., p. 36.
38 Ibid., p. 586. Authors’ italics.
critique, strategy, subversion, appropriation, deviation, renunciation, transformation, control, possibility’. 39 She expatiates on the uniqueness of the idea of power that Dickinson developed:

These new essays, with their overlapping themes, show Dickinson first understanding her situation (critique) and then enacting in various ways (strategy) her attempts at solution. Subversion, appropriation, deviation are all kinds of sabotage, working upon the system, working within the system, using its own elements to turn them on purpose to her purposes. Renunciation is really a particular form of appropriation upon which Dickinson relied. The giving up of something valued may look like self-denial and is a firmly rooted patriarchal expectation for women (suttee being one of its extremest forms), but as a way of saying ‘no’ it can also be, and was for Dickinson, an act of autonomy. It cleared a space. A space wherein transformation might occur. But a space within the patriarchy. For transformation is the kind of magic that turns what is there at hand into something else. Something suddenly new, a creation. Transformation is a more practical, and more political, kind of magic than, say, fantasy. It is Dickinson’s stock in trade.

Transformation leads both to control and to possibility. Control, an enactment of power, requires the presence of an other, be it society, nature, person, or aspect of self. Control reminds us of the existing presence of the world. Possibility is beyond. It is the direction in which Dickinson always heads, and it is a space she sometimes creates for herself, after a transformation has taken place. Control and possibility are aspects of her power. 40

Juhasz’s comment brings us not merely to infer, but believe that Dickinson, along with Barrett Browning and Rossetti, critiqued and questioned the most basic premises and assumptions of female authorship by deploying language in such a way as to unsettle all notions of writing and creation as being an exclusively male intellectual exercise. There remains a vista of possibility in their works, whereby they have been able to transform their anxiety of such secluded art into a

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40 Ibid., pp. 18-19. Author’s italics.
subversive genre that was able to give expression to their life and experience. In ways both direct
and covert, they renounced their socially constructed roles and triumphed in carving out a
paradigm shift in the way in which female authorship was estimated and received in the
nineteenth century. Their poetry leaves for the subsequent generation of critics of women’s
writing such a rich plethora of significations regarding women’s experiences, both in life and in
art, that much of them perhaps have remained unexplored even to this day.