CHAPTER 1

‘The Chiepest Apprehension / Upon my thronging Mind’: The Woman

Author’s Anxiety of Self, Subjectivity and Creativity

… England has had many learned women, not merely readers but writers of the learned languages, in Elizabeth’s time and afterwards – women of deeper acquirements than are common now in the greater diffusion of letters; and yet where were the poetesses? The divine breath … why did it never pass, even in the lyrical form, over the lips of a woman? How strange! And can we deny that it was so? I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none. It is not in the filial spirit I am deficient, I do assure you – witness my reverent love of the grandfathers!\(^1\)

How to position the poetic ‘grandmothers’, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson, in a literary tradition, is the argument that constitutes the cardinal concern of the present chapter. The recognition and acknowledgement of more women poets and particularly the creation of a Romantic feminine tradition with significant representatives, like Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon, have given birth to a literary domicile for the Victorian women poets, an intellectual abode that was not made available to earlier critics. Consequentially, they positioned the women poets in relation to a male poetic tradition, or in affiliation with female novelists of the nineteenth century. In order to ensure the impeccability of these judgements, critics also attempt to examine and decipher the characteristic features of such a literary tradition. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar apply and reconsider the Freudian model of

poetic practice propounded by Harold Bloom in his book, *The Anxiety of Influence*.\(^2\) Bloom contemplates all male poets in possession of the mother, the poetic ‘muse’. Gilbert and Gubar interpose the woman writer into this archetypal male poetic tradition and conceive of her as being caught in the rupture of a two-fold creative angst, situated in a position so as to both encounter the resilient and domineering male precursors and their debasing and repressive representations of women on the one hand, and also to counter the insinuation that the act of writing is conspicuously and unrelentingly a male intellectual industry, on the other. If we look at what Gerard Manley Hopkins once wrote to his friend R. W. Dixon in 1886, we can clearly comprehend the cause of doubt and apprehension of ‘literary women’ having to confront this oppressively ‘patriarchal theory of literature’ and find out a locus of her own:

> The artist’s “most essential quality”, he declared, is “masterly execution, which is a kind of male gift, and especially marks off men from women, the begetting of one’s thought on paper, on verse, or whatever the matter is.” In addition, he noted that “on better consideration it strikes me that the mastery I speak of is not so much in the mind as a puberty in the life of that quality. The male quality is the creative gift.”\(^3\)

Gilbert and Gubar postulate that women authors do not experience the ‘anxiety of influence’ in a similar manner, as their male counterparts do, only because of the fact that they have to contend with their predecessors who are ‘almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different from her.’ What is more oppressive to the female writer is her portrayal by male writers as being completely dissonant with ‘her own sense of her self’:

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Not only do these precursors incarnate patriarchal authority ..., they attempt to enclose her in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of her self – that is, of her subjectivity, her autonomy, her creativity.\(^4\)

It is such a demeaning and immuring portrayal of her potential that she has to battle against. Gilbert and Gubar depict the struggle of the woman writer comprehensively:

Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading of *her*. In order to define herself as an author she must redefine the terms of her socialization. Her revisionary struggle, therefore, often becomes a struggle for what Adrienne Rich has called “Revision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction … an act of survival.” Frequently, moreover, she can begin such a struggle only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible.\(^5\)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* seeks to make this ‘revisionary struggle’ her theme and hence is more prone to critical inquiry than any of her other works. This exhaustive novel-poem ostensibly appears to be ‘a gift to feminist criticism – the story of a woman’s successful struggle to become an independent poet, full of “women’s” imagery.’\(^6\) The poem immaculately accords with the métier of the woman writer and the mores and chores of the lives of women in early feminist critical scholarship. It is particularly worth mentioning here what Elaine Showalter affirmed in an acclaimed essay that ‘gynocriticism’ or the study of women’s writing was the apposite concern of feminist literary research.\(^7\) However, since its genesis, there

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has been a perturbation and unease regarding the poem’s lack of political justifiability. The arguments pivot around two spheres: firstly, the relatively formalized representation of the working class as preposterously reprobate and iniquitous, with the exception of the righteous Marian Erle, and secondly, Aurora’s consequent acquiescence in marrying her cousin Romney Leigh, whose initial proposal of marriage she had repudiated vehemently in Book II owing to her poetic vocation.

Gilbert and Gubar’s segment concerning *Aurora Leigh* in *The Madwoman in the Attic* reckons the feminist perspective contained in the poem as being circumscribed not by its delineation of the working class, but by the denouement brought about by the actuality of marriage. They explicate Aurora as espousing ‘an ethic of service’, Marian Erle being ‘the particular agent of Aurora’s education’:

The particular agent of Aurora’s education is Marian Erle, a “woman of the people” who functions as a sisterly double, showing her the way to act and suffer, first by loving and serving Romney, and then by (not quite intentionally) sacrificing her virginity for him.

Consequently, Romney’s impaired vision does not depreciate his patriarchal ascendancy over Aurora at the close. Underlying this traditional finale to lend the relationship a marital shape, a concealed insubordination is traced in Aurora’s daunting ambition to pursue the noble end of art and give her womanhood an expression hitherto unconceived. Hence, the poem can be perceived to accord with the dual signification that is often ascribed to Victorian women’s writing: of an ostensible acquiescence on the one hand, and a covert ire and exasperation, on the other. The inaccuracy of the conventional texture of the culmination of the poem is elucidated as an

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imperative complaisance imposed on women authors by Victorian patriarchal standards. However, Barrett Browning’s ambitious ‘Künstlerroman in blank verse about the growth of a woman poet’\(^\text{11}\) appears to demonstrate both the layers of import explicitly without taking recourse to any imagery or symbolic figuration.

Deirdre David’s book, *Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot*, reinstates the political chord of Barrett Browning’s poetry. David, in her chapter titled ‘Defiled Text and Political Poetry’,\(^\text{12}\) emphasizes her political contemplation and her animus against socialism. Barrett Browning here emerges as a ‘traditional intellectual’,\(^\text{13}\) summoning up an apotheosized antiquity and discoursing from a transcendent pedestal shorn off all class consciousness. But a stifling Victorian sensibility of being a woman does not authorize her to speak but actually leads her to solicit a male prerogative. This explanation keeps a perfect concord with David’s contention that Victorian women intellectuals were jeopardized by the overt polarization of their social roles, as women and as intellectuals, and were endeavouring hard to assert sway and supremacy in a patriarchal milieu. Hence, through the verse, ‘Never flinch, / But still, unscrupulously epic, catch / Upon the burning lava of a song / The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age’,\(^\text{14}\) Barrett Browning ‘catches upon’ – with force and epic grandeur – the ‘woman question’ through a cogent, persuasive, overwhelming and unVictorian-like dominance of being a woman on the one hand, and a poet on the other. The poet alludes to the image of the matriarch to evoke the image of a ‘nursing

\(^\text{11}\) Ibid., p. 575.
\(^\text{13}\) Tess Cosslett ed. ‘Introduction’ to *Victorian Women Poets*, p. 18.
mother”¹⁵ – ‘Behold, – behold the paps we all have sucked!’¹⁶ –to reveal her art that reflects the throbbing life of her age:

…this is living art,
Which thus presents and thus records
true life.¹⁷

*Aurora Leigh* puts forward the consummate and most vehement exegesis of the ‘woman question’ in mid-Victorian literature. The poem mingles Romantic and Victorian themes to work out the poet’s intent, ‘my heart’s life throbbing in my verse to show / It lived.’¹⁸ Several ideas converge in the poem and *Aurora Leigh* reveals itself as a confluence of intertwining motifs of gender disharmony, class belligerence, the correlative ideas of art and politics and themes debated by the English and other European savants. Cora Kaplan puts it brilliantly:

The longest poem of the decade, it is, to use another ‘woman’s figure’, a vast quilt, made up of other garments, the pattern dazzling because, not in spite, of its irregularities.¹⁹

*Aurora Leigh* comes between two very unequivocally political books, *Casa Guidi Windows* (1851) and *Poems before Congress* (1860), that deal much more tactlessly than *Aurora Leigh* with the insurgent avant-garde questions of 1848 and post-1848. Barrett Browning was profoundly enthusiastic about social and political concerns of the day and was predominantly a poet in pursuit of issues like slavery, the distress of the poor, the anxiety of a repressed national identity and the predicament of the social condition of women. *Aurora Leigh* is the most comprehensive exposition of the last theme. The overwhelming success of her earlier poem,

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‘Lady Geraldine’s Courtship’, decidedly motivated her to continue to write. It is concerned with a theme that was pivotal to a majority of the women novelists of the day – the prowess of women in determining their own companions without the consent of kith and kin as well as of society. *Aurora Leigh* deploys this as a cognate issue and puts forward its thesis on the question of marriage and its appropriateness for women with a profession, especially with writing as their vocation. Barrett Browning’s foremost commiseration was reserved for women who created art.

The proscription concerning women’s involvement in intellectual pursuits as writers or speakers was in serious jeopardy of being conclusively contravened in the mid-nineteenth century as an increased number of erudite and cultured women were making their presence felt as creative artists, social reviewers and ameliorators. Cora Kaplan delineates the problem of the age in the following manner:

The oppression of women within the dominant class was in no way as materially brutal as the oppression of women of the working class, but it had its own rationale and articulation. The mid-century saw the development of a liberal ‘separate but equal’ argument which sometimes tangled with, sometimes included the definition of women’s sphere and the development of the cult of true womanhood. The publicity given on the woman question hardly dented the continued elaboration of mores and manners which ensured that daughters were marriageable, i.e. virgins. Patriarchal dominance involved the suppression of women’s speech outside the home and a rigorous censorship of what she could read or write.20

That was precisely the reason why all the significant women writers were susceptible to, as well as perceptive about, accusations of ‘coarseness’. Barrett Browning was considered as ‘coarse’ by her critics and other women. Sexual defilement was the reprehensible and unwarranted sacrilege, even in one’s thought.

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Writing, being an intellectual exercise, was specifically a domain where women were reprimanded from making any ambitious assertion. In Kaplan’s expression, in ‘an age characterized by the importance of the popular press as the place of ideological production and the spread of female literacy, it was of prime importance to warn women off questioning traditional sexual morality. Public writing and public speech, closely allied, were both real and symbolic acts of self-determination for women.’²¹ This has precisely engendered the woman writer’s debilitating anxiety of creativity and Barrett Browning asseverates, through Aurora, the words ‘I write’, four times in the initial two stanzas in Book I of *Aurora Leigh* in order to proclaim, accentuate and narrate women’s experience and achieve self-expression. The poet takes up such a faculty of expression as a form of professional endeavour and uses the first-person narrative to sound a clarion call to all printing women to voice the ‘story’ of their ‘better self’²² through the act of writing in a resiliently foregrounded masculine literary authority.

Writing is an industry that calls for artistry and proficiency, requiring ‘Long green days / Worn bare of grass and sunshine, – long calm nights / From which the silken sleeps were fretted out … with no amateur’s / Irreverent haste and busy idleness / I set myself to art!’²³ *Aurora Leigh* steps in, though inconclusively, as a dialectic on all inhibited ideas. The first-person narrative voice of a significant poet perceptibly contravenes a conspicuous reticence that women writers were expected to observe on such restricted themes by the connoisseurs of elevated art in Victorian England.

Barrett Browning discernibly identifies the predicament and lends a female voice to the protagonist, who eventually develops into a poet. Aurora’s memoirs endorse a comprehensive

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²³ *Aurora Leigh*, Fifth Book, p. 453.
explanation of the confraternity of women and the evolution of a poet. Her repudiation of Romney’s proposal for marriage reveals her consciousness of commitment towards her calling as a poet. The third and the fourth books are replete with multiple trifling details of the would-be-poet’s quotidian life. The Fifth Book is of central concern, consisting of an extensive demonstration of the poet’s enterprise. Barrett Browning has ensconced Aurora as an artist in the first half of the poem and hence, within the rubric of the narrative, the poet could digress from the theme of the woman poet’s attempt at self-definition to that of Marian Erle, a working-class maiden, and Lady Waldemar, Marian’s conniving victimizer. Aurora carves out a niche for herself by virtue of possessing a vocation and hence can be recognized with more convenience and appropriateness than by way of the relationships, either consanguineous or emotional, that she shares with the other characters in the poem. It is a female poet who speaks authoritatively and Barrett Browning voices her opinions and convictions on political issues and on questions related to art and culture, a domain almost forbidden for women to participate in. In the confrontation between poetry as a higher form of art and social politics, it is to poetry that Romney’s utopian socialism consequently yields. The theoretical implications of arcane dogmas remain unrealistic so far as social reform is concerned. It is poetry, an ideology represented by Aurora in the poem, that evolves as a positive instrument of social transformation through ‘inspiration, Christian love, individual expression’, and that eventually outwits the preposterous socialistic ideals and political discourse, deceivingly promising revolutionary reforms. The female authorial pen carving out a new egalitarian society constitutes the Barrett Browningesque thesis in Aurora Leigh, thus seeking to replace the staunchly masculine notions of social reformation. The entire project, since it is led by Aurora, may acquire a feminized overture, but it is this unavoidable feminine reconstruction of the society that Barrett Browning aims to achieve.

as the ultimate social good. The peripheralization of women authors and their restriction from social participation cause the anxiety and apprehension of creativity but once this stifled voice makes itself heard, it can usher in a reformatory benevolence. Indeed, Barrett Browning reformulates the traditional belief in male dominance on the socio-political stage by making the female voice the ultimate harbinger of social beneficence.

Through the encounter between the female ideal of poetics represented by Aurora and socialistic discourse upheld by Romney, reminiscences about the early Barrett and Browning missives, ‘each vying for the position of humblest lover and weakest poet’, come to mind. It was a ‘competition’, notes Helen Cooper, as to who should sit at whose feet.’ Equally noteworthy is the backdrop of such ‘competition’ set up in the poem, *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora unequivocally asserts, ‘I’m an artist, sir, / And woman’, and pellucidly defines her poetic intention by emphasizing: ‘I’m plain at speech, direct in purpose’ and ‘I use the woman’s figures naturally.’ Despite the fact that she stands as ‘Woman and artist’, her unique conception of a woman’s understanding of love consists of the self-effacing experience brought about by her social and cultural masters. This experience of being a woman and the enterprise she undertakes of experiencing womanhood by being an artist, hence, in no way entail a disparagement of the significance of an artist, but rather an endeavour to reformulate the idea of artistry. Aurora strives assiduously to mature into a complete woman and artist. Standing on the brink of twenty years, she perceives herself to be incomplete, but is ‘credulous of completion’. Her pertinacity

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27 *Aurora Leigh*, Eighth Book, p. 523.
in being consummate in both her roles lead her to realize the fact, at thirty, that the artist’s instinct can barely be assuaged by an ‘imperfect woman’:

Passioned to exalt

The artist’s instinct in me at the cost

Of putting down the woman’s, I forgot

No perfect artist is developed here

From any imperfect woman.30

She realizes from her extensive experience of life, which has its inception in her mother’s portrayal and its culmination in her affirmation of love for Romney, that in the process of defining herself as an artist who comprehends ‘all the high necessities of Art’,31 she has actually ‘wronged’ her ‘own life’32 as a woman, which is her quintessential being. She feels ‘vilely proud’33 and she dauntlessly asserts her commitment and fortitude as a woman who refuses to be like the rest:

I would not be a woman like the rest,
A simple woman who believes in love
And owns the right of love because she loves,
And, hearing she’s beloved, is satisfied
With what contents God: I must analyse,
Confront, and question;34

33 *Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 534.
Aurora savours the taste of ultimate autonomy when she comes across the news of the burning down of Leigh Hall, her ancestral home, bequeathed to Romney who lived in it. The property was burned to ‘a great charred circle, where / The patient earth was singed an acre round’. The blinding of Romney due to the shock and his being ‘out of nature’, ‘a man, upon the outside of the earth’, indicate that Aurora ceases to be the object of Romney’s observation, a situation reminiscent of Barrett Browning’s perception of female subjectivity in Sonnet XLI in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*:

… thy divinest Art’s

Own instrument didst drop down at thy

foot,

To hearken what I said between my

tears, ..

The poet also evidently magnifies here the image of the female muse governing the male poet. The search into the hitherto unexplored possibilities for a proper representation of the poet and the muse, initiated at the conclusion of ‘A Vision of Poets’ and proceeding through *Casa Guidi Windows*, is accomplished in *Aurora Leigh*. The denouement in the book ostensibly leads to a predictable and customary culmination of the union of Aurora and Romney, entailing a matrimonial relationship between two intellectual equals. What is, however, less perceptible is that Romney apotheosizes Aurora as his muse and this act of embodiment causes a transfiguration of the stereotypical, somewhat even patterned and formulaic, epilogue of the poem into a subversive finale bearing far-reaching implications. A conventional male poetic

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35 *Aurora Leigh*, Eighth Book, p. 522.
36 *Aurora Leigh*, Ninth Book, p. 534
37 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, p. 327.
tradition puts forward the discourse of a male poet struggling with his poetic predecessor for the approbation of the muse. Here, Aurora had to strive with the traditional conceptions of a woman, envisaged in the characters of the ghoulish Lady Waldemar and the virtuous Marian, for securing the grace and benevolence of this male muse. Romney, therefore, intensifies and problematizes the undeniably existent authorial predicament of the woman poet. Joanne Feit Diehl discerns this disquietude and perplexity of the woman poet as rudimentary to the position of the nineteenth-century woman poet:

For Rossetti and Barrett Browning as well as for Dickinson, the precursor becomes a composite male figure; finding themselves heirs to a long succession of fathers, these women share the vision of a father/lover that surpasses individuals. And so for them the composite father is the main adversary. 38

The male poet constantly remains in conflict with his ‘composite father’ to win the favour of ‘the image of the fecund if idealized or distant muse’. The woman poet’s apprehension rests in the fact that for her both the muse and the precursor are the same male figure. This is quite evident in Barrett Browning’s ‘A Drama of Exile’ where the grandeur of Miltonic verse looms large over the progenic verse. Diehl recognizes the dilemma of Barrett Browning in her interpretation of ‘A Musical Instrument’ (Last Poems, 1862), where the poet alludes to the ‘great god Pan’ who laughs ‘as he sits by the river, / Making a poet out of a man: / The true gods sigh for the cost and pain, – / For the reed which grows nevermore again / As a reed with the reeds in the river’. 39

Diehl identifies this scepticism as appearing discrepantly in Barrett Browning, Rossetti and Dickinson. The idea of the ‘composite male figure’ is cynically demonstrated in the verse of Barrett Browning and is also a predominant theme in Dickinson’s poetry.

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Barrett Browning diverges from Emily Dickinson in conceiving of the muse as what Cooper identifies as ‘one in the gender/power economy who bears a position analogous to the one the female muse holds in relation to the male poet.’ She departs from the individualistic father/lover categorization of the muse and envisages a puerile infant instead of a reticent paramour. In the poem ‘Isobel’s Child’, the poet privileges the child over his mother, yet she presents the muse as being an object in confrontation with fatal consequences:

The lady with a grandeur spread
Like pathos o’er her face, – as one
God-satisfied and earth-undone.

The babe upon her arm was dead!

In spite of the fact that the son of the serf desires to possess the authoritative supremacy of the master, the mother entombs him ‘beneath the reedy ground’ and thus gainsays all possibilities for the child to attain that position. Barrett Browning conceives of a little child as the muse in Casa Guidi Windows who goes on singing, ‘O bella libertà, O bella!’ Surprisingly enough, the poet brings into context her ‘blue-eyed prophet’ whom she has, as a matter of fact, borne as her child:

Young children, lifted high on parent
souls,

Look round them with a smile upon
the mouth,

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40 Helen Cooper, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 186.
42 Ibid., p. 186.
And take for music every bell that tolls;44

Diehl contends that ‘for the male poet, the birth of a poem fulfills his maieutic impulse; he becomes both midwife to and mother of his art’.45 When the poet feels her ‘own child’s coming life before’,46 she conceives both her son and her poetry and this sole act of conception demands ‘courage’ and ‘patience’47 which are but ‘sacrifice’48 and the poet affirms that ‘sacrifice is offered for and to / Something conceived of.’49 We can thus say that it is this sacrificial act that here fulfils the poet’s ‘maieutic impulse’ and she mothers both her son and her poetry. The muse, in Barrett Browning, plays a significant role since her ‘two-months’ baby’50 sleeps in peace far away from ‘the world’s baseness’,51 ‘not being yet defiled’.52 The undefiled and immaculate child breathes purity and innocence into the ‘bitter things’53 the poet writes about, since her ‘soul is bitter for your sakes / O freedom! O my Florence!’54

Paula Bennett postulates in her consideration of female creativity that Bloom’s proposition of the ‘anxiety of influence’ is ‘at best only indirectly relevant’ to the struggle of the woman poet:

The woman writer’s principal antagonists are not the strong male and female poets who may have preceded her within the tradition, but the inhibiting voices that live within herself – voices emanating out of a consternation that in fulfilling her destiny as a poet,

44 Casa Guidi Windows, Part II, p. 373.
48 Ibid., p. 363.
49 Ibid., p. 363.
50 Ibid., p. 365.
51 Ibid., p. 365.
52 Ibid., p. 365.
53 Ibid., p. 363.
54 Ibid., p. 363.
she will be forced to hurt or fail those whom she loves …. Her struggles, in short, are not literary but part of life.\textsuperscript{55}

The way in which Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti acknowledged and responded to Barrett Browning problematizes Bennett’s supposition that the anxiety and apprehension of the woman writer is not proportionate to the influence of overpowering forefathers. Moreover, Barrett Browning’s struggle seemed to be more associated with an unfamiliarizing and proscribing tradition of poetic ‘grandfathers’. Hence, this anxiety of the woman poet is convincingly ‘literary’. Gilbert and Gubar’s revisionistic approach towards the Bloomean model of the ‘anxiety of influence’ as the ‘anxiety of authorship’ is significantly pertinent here.

While examining multiple manifestations of Barrett Browning’s ‘anxiety of authorship’, emphasis also needs to be laid on the remarkable ‘audacity’ of authorship that her works between 1820 and 1844 unfold. Her audacity as a woman poet brings her in close proximity to the male Romantic ‘strong poets’, though it is a fact that some Romantic women writers too demonstrated an astounding ‘authorial self-confidence, even arrogance’.\textsuperscript{56}:

Barrett Browning furthermore resembles the male Romantics, however, in being obsessed by poetic origins and a sense of belatedness; and like them, she begets herself as a poet through bold acts of creative ‘misprision’ or misreading. In keeping with Bloom’s model, her works upto 1844 also enact a ‘primal scene of instruction’ among the progenitors who both fostered and inhibited her own creativity.\textsuperscript{57}

It is perhaps this dual act of nurturance and inhibition that possibly impaired her creativity and led her to avow in \textit{Casa Guidi Windows}:

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[55]{Paula Bennett, ‘\textit{My Life, a Loaded Gun}: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics’ (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 66.}
\footnotetext[56]{Anne Mellor, \textit{Romanticism and Gender} (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 8.}
\end{footnotes}
For me who stand in Italy to-day
Where worthier poets stood and sang
before,
I kiss their footsteps, yet their words
gain say.\(^\text{58}\)

In Barrett Browning’s deliberation of the ‘various mind expressed in various forms’\(^\text{59}\) in An Essay on Mind, we comprehend an elaborate exploration of a problem that discourses on mind where ‘Morality’s deep waters span / The shores of Genius and the paths of Man!’\(^\text{60}\) Barrett Browning seems intrigued by the question of the way in which considerations of gender impinge on the maturation and subtleties of a genius. She begins the poem by contemplating that ‘Since Spirit first inspired’ and ‘dust weighed Genius down’, ‘Th’ ambitious soul her essence hath defined, / And Mind hath eulogized the powers of Mind.’\(^\text{61}\) But, if ‘Genius’ is weighed down by the ‘dust’ of the body of a female creator, then the stern patriarchal lineage of Victorian art and culture is somewhat impugned and, poetic identity being uncompromisingly male, the pursuit of self-definition is ineluctably contradicted. When she was only eleven, Barrett Browning had optimistically averred in the ‘Preface’ to The Battle of Marathon: ‘Now, even the female may drive her Pegasus through the realms of Parnassus, without being saluted with the most equivocal of all appellations, a learned lady.’\(^\text{62}\) In course of time, when she published An Essay on Mind, she was twenty and betrayed less aplomb so that she could elude ‘the most equivocal’ critical acclaim and become more circumspect in camouflaging her sexuality, a fact that makes it difficult to identify the gender of the erudite young poet. Having defined the ‘essence’ of her

\(^{59}\) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, An Essay on Mind, p. 32.
\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 32.
\(^{61}\) Ibid., Book I, p. 31.
‘ambitious soul’, we perceptibly discern a grisly dereification of this essence in ‘The Vision of Fame’, with which Barrett Browning’s 1826 volume culminated:

Alas, alas! I wended home,
    With a sorrow and a shame –
Is Fame the rest of our poor hearts?
    Woe’s me! For THIS IS FAME

In her Poems of 1844, as well as in the succeeding editions, ‘The Soul’s Expression’ was published as the most significant sonnet since it enunciated a cardinal attribute of the ideology that underpinned her artistic thought. She cogitates on ‘that dread apocalypse of soul’ in the manner she does in ‘The Development of Genius’. She envisages the apocalyptic denouement to be characterized by ‘the thunder-roll / Breaks its own cloud’, and wishes to articulate the unfathomable chasms and kisses unhindered. Hence, it seems grotesquely ironical when the prefatory lines of the poem – ‘With stammering lips and insufficient sound / I strive and struggle to deliver right’ – are adduced by critics as Barrett Browning’s imperfection in her own artistic craftsmanship.

Another of Barrett Browning’s most zealous 1844 poems, ‘A Drama of Exile’, demonstrates her unconcealed association with two authoritative predecessors, Milton and Byron. Her emendatory endeavour to cast Paradise Lost in the shape of ‘A Drama of Exile’ is, to a large extent, conspicuous in her portrayal of Eve as well as of Lucifer. The ascendancy of this tradition is hence perceptible in Barrett Browning’s self-explanatory handling of the Miltonic theme in her poem, from Adam’s perceptual stance rather than from Eve’s. Barrett Browning

63 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘The Vision of Fame’, p. 60.
narrates Adam’s experience that follows his excommunication from Eden. In his despondency at being ostracized from the land of interminable bliss in his years of senility, Adam repeatedly speaks in terms of ‘I’ and ‘we’ in the 168-line verse on ‘Adam’s farewell’, without any discernible allusion to Eve. Her revisionary approach to the poem makes Barrett Browning unwrap her verse in a manner resembling a dramatic monologue that positions itself in correlation to other Victorian dramatic monologues depicting languishing and reclusive individuals. The Barrett Browningesque effort of reappraisal of the Miltonic epic, however, to a certain extent, heightened the positioning of Adam as a pivotal point in the perhaps much-known-and-accepted conventional scheme of things.

At the very outset of the ‘Preface to the Edition of 1844’, Barrett Browning evidently makes her epic aspirations clear by obtrusively proclaiming a ‘sense of trespass’ that Bloom claims is present in all the poets (post-1740) who simulated Paradise Lost including Blake, Wordsworth and Byron. The poet substantiates this ‘trespass’ astutely in the ‘Preface’:

… with a peculiar reference to Eve’s allotted grief, which, considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood, and the consciousness of originating the Fall to her offence, appeared to me imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man.

Barrett Browning’s ‘anxiety of authorship’ becomes conspicuous ‘when the excitement of composition had subsided’ and she ‘felt afraid of my position’, since the subject she was dealing with depicts ‘the new and strange experience of the fallen humanity, as it went forth from Paradise into the wilderness’. She further enunciates her consternation by admitting:

I had promised my own prudence to shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps. He should be within, I thought, with his Adam and Eve unfallen or falling, – and I, without, with my EXILES, –
I also an exile! It would not do. The subject, and his glory covering it, swept through the gates, and I stood full in it, against my will, and contrary to my vow, till I shrank back fearing, almost desponding.\textsuperscript{65}

The problem of anxiety of authorship emerging from gender becomes convoluted in the composition and the mode of narration in ‘A Vision of Poets’. The poem is written by a narrator in the third person who bears a nebulous, unrecognizable and indeterminate existence and whose presence is distinguishable only towards the culmination of the poet-pilgrim’s phantasmic experience of progressing towards the altar wondering ‘if a listening life did run / Through the king-poets, one by one / Rejoicing in a worthy son.’\textsuperscript{66} This anonymous narrator acquires a momentous significance in the ‘Conclusion’ which sculpts the denouement of the narrative. Here (s)he recognizes the footprints through a forest and confronts the poet’s son, who being bequeathed with his father’s artistic perspicacity, relates the tale of the latter’s death along with his succeeding renown.

The dichotomous relationship that the woman poet shares with the pilgrim-poet becomes as significant as to lead us to consider the implicit nuances suggested by the poem’s title. The connotation of the expression, ‘a vision of poets’, indicates both the vision and the devoted, unswerving and aspiring poets who experience such a vision. The woman poet’s deliberate and apparent absence from the poem translates her position of subjugation to the male poetic line of descent into an agonizing reality for her. Though the visionary sojourn of the male pilgrim-poet is narrated, the apprehension of the poet herself becomes evident when she supplicates thus:

He fell before the angel’s feet,

Saying – ‘If what is true is sweet,

In something I may compass it.

‘For, where my worthiness is poor,
My will stands richly at the door,
To pay shortcomings evermore.

‘Accept me therefore. Not for price,
And not for pride, my sacrifice
Is tendered!’

It appears as though the anxiety of the woman poet finds expression through the more traditionally acknowledged impersonation of a male poet. Hence, as a daughter, though she feels disinherited, being bereft of that poetic power which supposedly belongs to an array of formidable male poets, her creative angst requires utterance through her pilgrim-poet, thus making her peripheral position more pronounced and poignant:

It is the very scope attempted by Mrs. Browning that prevents her from holding the place I would give to Christina Rossetti. So much of Mrs. Browning – her political ideas, her passion for reform, her scholarship – simply carries her into the sphere of the masculine poets, where she suffers by an unfair comparison.

For a considerable amount of time in her life as well as thereafter, Barrett Browning occupied not only a significant position in the distinguished line of Victorian women poets, but she was considered to be the best among them. However, a considerable number of critics who draw parallels between Barrett Browning and Rossetti appraise the latter poet to be more exalting.

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67 Ibid., p. 171.
Source: [www.archive.org/stream/shelburneessayss03moreuoft/shelburneessayss03moreuoft_djvu.txt](www.archive.org/stream/shelburneessayss03moreuoft/shelburneessayss03moreuoft_djvu.txt)
Amelia Marjorie Bald in *Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (1923) affirms that ‘Christina’s soul was like a radiant texture, its colours flashing and quivering as if some hidden life were rippling through its folds. Mrs. Browning’s soul was of the same colour, but in a paler shade, and woven of plainer threads.’\(^{69}\) Alexander Hamilton Thomson, the author of *Cambridge History of English Literature* (1916), contends that Rossetti was more significant than Mrs. Browning in the euphony and mellifluity of verse.\(^{70}\) The author of *Leaders of the Victorian Revolution* (1923) also classes Rossetti as the greatest woman poet of the nineteenth century.\(^{71}\)

A majority of the critics, who correlate Christina Rossetti with Elizabeth Barrett Browning, talk about Rossetti’s femininity, often perceived as ‘passivity’, as her most revered attribute and as something that is commonly deficient in the works of the other women poets of the time. Barbara Caine\(^{72}\), in her deliberation on Victorian feminism, emphasizes the divergent set of propositions put forward by the nineteenth-century feminists. In discussing Rossetti’s stance on feminism, Caine’s position is particularly significant in highlighting how problematic it was for women striving for women’s rights to conceive of each other as constituent members of the self-same insurrection. It was more perplexing than we can perhaps conceive of to discern a corresponding tenor underpinning the writings of a female author and those of her potential contenders. Rossetti was exceptionally debilitated since she lacked a resolute social and financial endorsement, a support that an umpteen number of suffragettes savoured. She had to solicit the benignity of the publishers and had to traipse with apprehension in order to refrain from affronting her brother, William, on whose beneficence she and her mother relied. William


appeared considerably to have been inadvertent or perhaps had preferred to be insouciant regarding Christina’s affiliation with the Langham Place Circle. Under such circumstances, she would inevitably have disconcerted him had she acquired a publicly acclaimed position on the Woman Question. To be precise, Rossetti was cast in a milieu that perceptibly did not acknowledge her audacious feminist stance.

Hence, being an artist, Rossetti fathomed the genesis of ‘the individual desire for immortality in the creative personality’\(^7\) less in art and more in docile compliance. For this reason, she acquiesced in the idea that women were intrinsically subordinate as artists and, as a result, endeavoured to meet the most exalted Victorian ethic of a pietistic and self-righteous Christian. Rossetti’s art reifies the dissension between artistic fecundity and the apprehension of irreproachable conformity, a condition that admonished women to ‘keep silent’. In this way, Rossetti does not accord with the aesthetic paradigm of the artist creating art solely for art’s sake. She did not concede to this perception not only because of woman being portrayed in the Bible as unassertive, but primarily because the course of her own introspective, cogent and rational thinking steered her to arrive at far-reaching and subversive deductions when she contemplated the question of women’s right to equality, both in the Church and on the issue of suffrage. Rossetti expresses her dilemma in her rejoinder to a pamphlet written by Augusta Webster, the poet, and printed by the Women’s Suffrage Society:

Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges? Not arrogating to myself but most earnestly desiring to attain to the character of a humble orthodox Xtian, so it does appear to me; not merely under the Old but also under the New Dispensation. The fact of

the Priesthood being exclusively man’s, leaves me in no doubt that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes: and if not all, then a selection must be made and a line drawn somewhere. – On the other hand if female rights are sure to be overborne for lack of female voting influence, then I confess I feel disposed to shoot ahead of my instructresses, and to assert that female M.P.s are only right and reasonable. Also I take exceptions at the exclusion of married women from the suffrage, – for who so apt as Mothers – all previous arguments allow for the moment – to protect the interests of themselves and of their offspring? I do think if anything ever does sweep away the barrier of sex and make the female not a giantess or a heroine but at once and full grown a hero and giant, it is that mighty maternal love which makes little birds and little beasts as well as little women matches for very big adversaries.74

Correspondingly, however, the question of conspicuous manifestations of gender discrepancy caused an artistic consternation in Rossetti. She remained excruciatingly aware that men were preferred irrespective of the circumstances of their being artists or being brothers in the familial lineage. The widow, in her short story ‘The Waves of this Troublesome World’, indoctrinates her daughter Jane about ‘her business, calls her her right hand and little forewoman, yet feels perhaps a secret preference for Harry, so like his grandfather’.75 It is perhaps for this reason that the female speaker in at least one of Rossetti’s poems wishes she ‘were a man’:

It’s a weary life, it is, she said: –
Doubly blank in a woman’s lot:
I wish and I wish I were a man:
Or, better than any being, were not.76

75 Christina Rossetti, Commonplace, A Tale of Today: And Other Short Stories (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1870), p. 328.
Rossetti’s angst arose from her awareness of being discriminated against when she found herself in such situations in which her brother Dante Gabriel was facilitated with both money and time to nurture his creative talents while she was not only conspicuously distanced from such literary engagements, but was also forced by circumstances to once work as a governess, an occupation in which she proved to be a failure. She once corresponded with Swinburne, narrating her unsuccessful pursuit, saying: ‘I myself feel like an escaped Governess for had I only learnt my lessons properly at the proper age I too might have taught someone something, – and doubtless I should have had to do so.’

Rossetti was heedful of the time absorbed in the daily domestic responsibilities that women are imperatively prescribed to carry out. In *Time Flies*, she deliberates on such diversions that emerge from within the self and are the consequences of ‘wilfulness’ and ‘interruption’ arising from extraneous sources. An avant-garde woman artist, imparting counsel to her readers, may explain the modes in which such interruptions can be allayed, but Rossetti, being a Victorian woman artist, enunciates to her readers that ‘the occupation may be willful, while the interruption must be Providential’. That the prescriptions concerning women’s performance of household chores were disconcertingly austere was evident from what is testified in one of the most acclaimed Victorian books of social and behavioural guidance for women which maintains that a woman ‘has no business to be so far absorbed in any purely intellectual pursuit, as not to know when water is boiling over on the fire’. The sole reason for a possible comfort in the midst of such oppressive circumstances was a malady. Several women writers including Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning remained afflicted with physical infirmities for a considerable

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77 Quoted in Lona Mosk Packer, ‘Swinburne and Christina Rossetti: Atheist and Anglican’ (*University of Toronto Quarterly* 33, October 1963), p. 39.
period of time in their lives. Religious piety epitomized the Victorian notion of an ideal woman, in which she was required to renounce her sense of self and relinquish her life to the service of others. The Victorian conception of woman was indistinguishably analogous to the Victorian impression of a duteous Christian, at all times being responsive to the demands of others. It is for these reasons that any woman who was considered reprehensible for committing such a sacrilege as being so ‘absorbed in any purely intellectual pursuit’ as to let the water boil over, eventually underwent the peril of becoming vulnerable to a greater transgression than the remonstrance of her husband.

The anxious correlation between woman as an artist and woman as a self-righteous Christian is noticeable in Rossetti’s engagement with the idea of obedience. She affirms in Letter and Spirit that ‘Whatever else may be deduced from the opening chapters of Genesis, their injunction of obedience is plainly written; of unqualified obedience, of obedience on pain and death’. 80 Earlier also, in The Face of the Deep, Rossetti had stated that ‘Obedience is the key of knowledge, not knowledge of obedience’. 81 Consequently, Rossetti asserts this in the book by way of a prayer that alludes manifestly to the interconnection between the first woman and the sin that precipitated the catastrophic end of humanity:

O God All-Wise, let us not be as our mother Eve who thought to hanker after good knowledge denied, when in truth she hankered after evil knowledge kept back. 82

This theme of the Fall of all humankind brings us close to the fall of Laura in Goblin Market from the rubric of sisterhood. But before analyzing the work, it is perhaps pertinent to appraise

82 Ibid., p. 16.
another poem that may be said to act as a ‘bridging’ link between her initial representations of wisdom and perhaps the most important poem that she composed before she began her voluntary service at the St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in 1859.\(^{83}\)

In ‘From House to Home’,\(^{84}\) Rossetti endeavours to understand the process by which women can partake of expiation. In ‘The Lowest Room’, the close affiliation between the younger sister and Christ rests on a dichotomous concept of the sister bearing a Christ-like role on the one hand, and the position that she is necessitated to take on by her social situation by way of marriage, on the other, in spite of the idea that the husband symbolizes the appearance of Christ. In ‘From House to Home’, Rossetti unravels the predicament by coalescing the figure of the redemptive sister with that of Christ and repudiating the male figure thoroughly. This effort implies that the poem is a link between Rossetti’s previous representations of wisdom and the portrayal of Christ as female in *Goblin Market*.

In a phantasmic dream experience, and in ‘a tedious numbing swoon’,\(^{85}\) the female speaker has a glimpse of a woman entangled between earth and heaven, who encourages her with a calamitous illusion of beatific recompense for her endurance and renunciation. This delusion is conspicuously delineated in, and is the progenitor of some of, Rossetti’s most telling devotional poetry but as a response to the essentiality of a breathing and sedulous religiosity, it actually indicates a state of privation and, hence, is calamitous. In order to embody Christ’s endurance in a female figure, Rossetti has brought in the female martyr of her previous poems who, having dissociated her lost soul from the spatio-temporal reality of the corporeal world, is now incapable of establishing an association with the felicity and enchantment of the mundane world that she

\(^{83}\) The date is taken from Rossetti’s voluntary work from Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: A Literary Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1994), p. 218.

\(^{84}\) ‘From House to Home’ was composed on 19th November, 1858.

has relinquished, constituting the blossoms, fruits, frogs and caterpillars, i.e. all that Rossetti cherished and was passionate about.

This re-emphasis on female spirituality provides us the background to fathom the theological perspective of *Goblin Market*. This reading ratifies the poem’s peroration, ‘there’s no friend like a sister’, as an annunciation of female spiritual resilience and ascendancy, the religious authority of female rites and sacraments of domesticity overturning the sovereignty of the Church, and, most significantly, the representation of Christ as a female disabling the obdurate restrictions of gender concerning the divine. Not being further obfuscated by the familiar idea of ‘hope deferred’, the consecrated experience of female spirituality of the sisters in *Goblin Market* may be read as a stance of supremacy, and seldom one of acquiescence and resignation to a repressive social stipulation. As Jan Marsh comments, ‘By denying gratification, the ascetic soul triumphs over desire, and is no longer in thrall to the senses. Contentment thus comes, paradoxically, from self-denial.’ It is remarkable that at no point in the poem is the sense of recrimination present in any form. Moreover, the poem is worth noticing insofar as its conspicuous absence of implications of female sacrilege, contrition or penance is concerned. Indications of depravity, impiety and profanation are particularly affiliated with the goblins, and there is no presage whatsoever of chastisement for any of the women if they cast their glance on them or consume their fruit, except for a premonition that ‘their evil gifts would harm us’.

Laura’s degeneration therefore indicates her decline from sisterhood. The poem tells us that, ‘Her tree of life drooped from the root’, her feminine elegance and exuberance dessicate, and she is no further able to partake of the womanly pursuits. It is pertinent here also to search

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for the ‘fruit’ that allured Laura into surrendering her virtues of womanhood to the lascivious goblins. The lush and richly embellished Pre-Raphaelite niceties of description usher in a reiteration of the fall of Eve as Laura succumbs to the enticement of the lethal fruit. The image is intimately analogous with a proscribed sexual experience and is discernibly situated at the juncture of convergence between an oppressively male goblin world and a female poet’s perception of a woman’s artistic enterprise. Recognizably, the poem itself is conspicuous by its concentrated mass of detours interspersed with intertextual suggestions and implications. However, the way in which the fruit impinges on Laura formulates the basis of our present investigation, a survey that is perceptibly theological in nature. As soon as Laura capitulates to the self-indulgent enchantment of the succulent fruit and devours it, she is transported to a domain marked by the crafty impropriety of the indubitably male goblins, and is rendered incapable of engaging in the vigorous female preoccupations within the milieu of sisterhood. In the process of being beguiled by the goblins, Laura is inveigled into yielding the restraint and sway over her womanhood, thus lending herself to easy elucidations by the authoritarian male mind, as she avariciously consumes the fruit. Subsequently, she is merely reduced to a lewd object of a later Pre-Raphaelite painting, Dante Gabriel’s ‘Jenny’, a pleasurable marionette of male fancy: ‘Not as she is, but as she fills his dream’. Lynda Palazzo draws the analogy:

By yielding a lock of her hair, symbol of her womanhood, Laura also becomes as dead to her physical and spiritual self as Magdalene and Maude, both of whom were able to see themselves only from a male perspective: Maude a thwarted Keats, frustrated spiritually and broken physically, Magdalene a barren, unsexed nun.

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Such a decline from womanhood so as to be physically and spiritually dead is as good as acquiescing in the Victorian male’s appraisal of a woman’s essential being and endorsing the conventional pattern of social behaviour prescribed by Victorian patriarchal standards. Laura certainly represents the wailing Eve in ‘Shut Out’. Rossetti has comprehensively reinterpreted the fatal transgression of Eve from the perspective of the social and religious vilification of women that she painfully observes around her. She endeavours nonetheless to assert, at least tangentially, that male despotism needs to be understood as the primordial blasphemy.

If such male gender-bigotry is the begetter of woman’s suffering, there is an irrefutable quandary in acceding to the significance of a male representative who might well be partaking of such suppression. This has caused many feminists, like Mary Daly,\(^\text{91}\) in her anti-Christian spell, to renounce Christianity. Rossetti’s ingenuity in contemplating a ‘female saviour’, within the matrix of the Christian theological ethos, capacitates her to earn her living by writing poetry within the existent Ecclesiastical tradition without relinquishing her rectitude and acting to challenge women’s subjugation vigorously. Juxtaposing Eve’s incrimination with Laura’s ignominious devouring of the lethal fruit of the goblins, Rossetti bestows the wise life-restoring actions of Christ on Lizzie, an act which is an unequivocal reflection of the fact that the discrepancy of gender is not more significant than the benevolence of redemption. She infuses in Lizzie such essential qualities, consummate, immaculate and unimpeachable in themselves, that serve as an invulnerability against spiritual emasculation and corporeal retrogression. Lizzie, therefore, epitomizes Christ insofar as these benign attributes of a redeemer are concerned, the distinctly recognizable traits that are ineluctable for bringing about Laura’s deliverance include industry, exuberance, fecundity, love (‘The Lowest Room’), compassion and spiritual virtue.

\(^{91}\text{Mary Daly, }\textit{Beyond God the Father} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); \text{Mary Daly, }\textit{Gyn-Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
(‘From House to Home’). With the help of these supreme virtues, Lizzie is accomplished enough to usher in a transformation in the condition of Laura’s physical and spiritual enslavement to, and fetishism of, the goblins and bring about a rejuvenation of her body and soul.

Lizzie, being stirred by her sympathetic pity for the moribund Laura who has shrivelled under the enthrallment of the pernicious fruit, sets forth to save her by procuring for her a different savour of such a fruit for which she yearns. For obvious reasons, the goblins resist her efforts to take the fruit away since it serves as their sole weapon to entrap another victim. Hence, they peremptorily command her to consume it instantaneously. The moment she rejects their insinuating offer, they inflict upon her a vehement assault in the shape of an emblematic rape, thus implying the physical denigration a number of women at Highgate might have grievously endured:

Lashing their tails

They trod and hustled her,
Elbowed and jostled her,
Clawed her with their nails,
Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking,
Twitched her hair out by the roots,
Stamped upon her tender feet,
Held her hands and squeezed their fruits
Against her mouth to make her eat.92

Lizzie resists all their aggression rigidly with the strength of her unpretentious virtues of beneficence and virginity, thus proving the vigour of her womanhood which triumphed over the

malevolent goblins making them debilitated and insignificant. They flee away, leaving behind fruit mush and sap on her body which she can carry back undamaged for Laura. The fruit of the goblins borne by Lizzie brings not death, but a revitalized life for Laura. The impact the fruit has on Laura is reminiscent of Christ’s acts of rejuvenation chronicled in the Gospels, especially those of ousting the demons. Laura prances, squirms, collapses and becomes insensate. She wakes up next morning revived with new life, strength and profusion, virtues that constitute the wisdom of sisterhood.

The epilogue of the poem, in commemorating the accomplishment of Lizzie and her feat of sisterly expiation, entrones the sister as a saviour and friend, in a Christ-like manner, to the defenceless, to the children and to the women. The conclusion is thus perspicaciously focused on the emancipation of the vulnerable, the unprotected and the dispossessed, thereby unveiling women’s experiences. In the presence of children around them, Lizzie and Laura convey the implications of strength and dependence in the bond of sisterhood:

“For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands.”93

Rossetti seeks solace in this unwavering attachment of sisterhood by establishing Lizzie as the transcendental liberator who not only champions the predicament of the transgressive woman, but who also serves to assuage the poet’s anxiety concerning her creativity by exorcizing the

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93 Ibid., *Goblin Market*, p. 20.
diabolical goblins of the male literary market and heralding the most excruciatingly won ‘fiery antidote’\(^{94}\) of an unadulterated feminine literary tradition.

In consonance with such a tradition, Emily Dickinson in her zealous accolades on other women authors, extolled their authority, which implies that writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë are assimilated into the spiral of her own artistic perception. But Vivian Pollak, at the same time, puts forward the instance of Dickinson portraying Barrett Browning as the ‘purveyor of illicit experience, as witch and magician.’\(^{95}\) But the emotion Dickinson attached with Barrett Browning is evident in Poem 312:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Her – “last Poems”} & - \\
\text{Poets – ended –} & \\
\text{Silver – perished – with her Tongue –} & \\
\text{Not on Record – bubbled other,} & \\
\text{So divine –}^{96}& \\
\end{align*}
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Joanne Feit Diehl examines Dickinson’s poetic thought as such a ‘performance of influence’ which ‘leads us to a provisional formulation of a paradigm that applies more generally to nineteenth-century women poets as they seek independence from powerful male precursors.’\(^{97}\) Hence, for Barrett Browning, Rossetti, as well as for Dickinson, the predecessor evolves to become a composite masculine character and they find themselves descendents of an extensive line of forefathers who emerge as their antagonists. Hence, it is true that Dickinson’s creativity

\(^{97}\) Joanne Feit Diehl, *Dickinson and the Romantic Imagination*, p. 15.
was more often than not unequivocally encouraged by the women writers of the time whom she regarded as members of an authorial sisterhood and in whose works she took great interest. She took part in their success and gained resilience from them. It is worth mentioning here that Dickinson shared her works with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert Dickinson, more than with anybody else during her lifetime. Emily cared for Susan’s opinions, but did not always adhere to her recommendations. In spite of her literary association with a protective sisterhood, the poet expresses her consternation regarding the yearned-for, yet minatory, male figure that possesses the authority either to devastate or to bestow life on the poet:

I am afraid to own a Body –
I am afraid to own a Soul –
Profound – precarious Property –
Possession, not optional –

Double Estate – entailed at pleasure
Upon an unsuspecting Heir –
Duke in a moment of Deathlessness
And God, for a Frontier. 98

Emily Dickinson appears to have completely departed from Walt Whitman here. The subsuming strain and the effusion contained in his ‘I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul … The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue’ 99 posits the greatest contrapuntal stance to Dickinson’s proscriptions, retrogressions and abjurations.

However, Dickinson’s art, in many ways, betrays distinctive cultural tendencies that are quintessential and even axiomatic.

‘Own[ing] a Body’ or the poet’s predicament of reification, a theme that this poem puts forward, is the pivotal philosophy that marks Dickinson’s poetry. A significant array of invincible themes converges in her work. These include the concerns of identity that almost compulsively make her anxious. They encompass her identity as a woman poet, but the probability of, and the aspiration for, its ‘embodiment in a text’ through language appears exceptionally equivocal due to a number of associated considerations such as, ‘her identity as a woman, both in terms of inhabiting a woman’s body and of womanhood as a figure for the body; her religious identity, in a broad metaphysical context of ambivalence towards material and temporal embodiment; and finally her identity as an American, in terms of definitions of selfhood as these have peculiarly taken shape within the history of the United States’.

What is primarily noticeable in Poem 1090 is the dilemma and intransigence that mark its theme. As is often the case, any Dickinson text becomes more nebulous as one endeavours to decipher it. This element of textual profusion, unpredictability and heterogeneity in her poetry is efficaciously brought out in the following manner:

This textual obduracy is, in many ways, in itself a central Dickinsonian subject. Dickinson poems require the closest textual attention. They cannot easily be cited as evidence in an argument, since closer textual work almost always uncovers further readings and implications not easily resolved or subsumed into a summary statement. This is the case both within and between Dickinson texts. It is one of the first tasks of Dickinson criticism exactly to acknowledge and consider this textual multiplicity in

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101 Ibid., pp. 129-130.
Dickinson’s work, but less as indeterminacy or open-ended ambiguity or (only) aesthetic play than as the deployment and mutual confrontation between personal and cultural forces that are deeply at stake for her.\textsuperscript{102}

Talking about such a cultural undercurrent, it is certainly difficult for the woman poet to continue with the flow of her creativity unhindered, and even uninfluenced, by the powerful male writings and, more importantly, those of her male literary predecessors. Within such an existing as well as a pre-existing masculine cultural framework, the woman poet has to encounter all the elementary, corporeal, legitimate and living circumstances as constituent elements comprising her life, death and the genesis of her artistic craftsmanship. Righteousness and incorruptibility are not a component of Dickinson’s poetic self. Her poems provide a discourse on the inhibited occurrences in her life – the pivotal stages of time that are irretrievable. Initial experiences constrict her domain of a prospective enterprise. Exploring the period of her girlhood, Dickinson recollects no haven of approbation for herself. Indoctrinated to consider children as extinct humans who must acquire benevolence before they can be exonerated from culpability, she bears the sense of being expelled and proscribed from the \textit{a priori} plausibility of such a state of bliss. She departs from the Romantics in not reminiscing about the ‘visionary gleam’ forgotten in the course of evolution, since she has seldom been allowed to experience it. When Dickinson imagines an Elysian ecstasy, anxiety betokens her consciousness. In one of her letters towards the close of her life, she wrote: ‘In all the circumference of Expression, those guileless words of Adam and Eve never were surpassed, “I was afraid and hid Myself”.’\textsuperscript{103} For this reason, Dickinson’s poems have often been correlated with William Blake’s \textit{Songs of Innocence and Experience}, but the contrast allows for an irrepressible incongruity. Dickinson voices her

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 130.

thoughts only about experience. Conversely, the poems which endorse an illusion of innocence are recognizably her most blistering observations. Discerning the sombre paradoxes, Clark Griffith comments that the poems that adopt an impersonation of innocence do so as a facade. It is through such contradictions and ironies, the ingenuous certitude is impugned.\textsuperscript{104}

Sentiments reflecting anxiety constitute Dickinson’s perception of human experience. The trepidation that she encounters while envisaging the inception of any prospective delight, emerges from an existing domain of cognition, a premonition that might be considered as the agonizing aggregate of the assurance life is expected to certify. Her scepticism of nature and her seclusion from mother and God emanate from this premeditated non-existent irreproachability; it hinges on an enlightened cognizance of the possibilities of trauma brought about by experience. In the core of this chiefly passionate strain, death and a prompt criticism of the divine law are ingrained:

\textit{The life doth prove the precept, who obey shall happy be,}
\textit{Who will not serve the sovreign, be hanged on fatal tree.}

The perception of this reality discernibly harps on the chords of impending death:

\textit{The worm doth woo the mortal, death claims a living bride,}
\textit{Night unto day is married, morn unto eventide;}\textsuperscript{105}

Dickinson withstands the angst of an imminent jeopardy that constrains her to desist before acceding to circumstances of conceivable happiness as well as anguish:

\textsuperscript{105} Emily Dickinson, Poem 1, p. 1.
Come slowly – Eden!
Lips unused to Thee –
Bashful – sip thy Jessamines –
As the fainting Bee –

Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums –
Counts his nectars –
Enterds – and is lost in Balms.\textsuperscript{106}

She feels anxious since, to her, a receptive utterance –if inspiring and fascinating –is significant; else she apprehends that she might have to forfeit the impulse of perseverance that is needed to create. The voice of a transcensdental being primarily stimulates her and makes her conscious of her quiescence. This realization coalesces with both the spheres of her art and death. But this association is seldom congruent, ‘for words themselves at once “enchant” and “infect” her’\textsuperscript{107}:

They carry a lethal potency akin to the attraction of death, which offers a solution to life’s mysteries and the erotic satisfaction of sacrifice, giving one’s self to an inscrutable lover. But death renders the soul silent, and communication between the dead and the living proves impossible.\textsuperscript{108}

Dickinson’s anxiety arises from the dilemma between the enchantment caused in her by death when she endeavours to forestall the malaise brought about by her experience of reality, and the consternation she feels from the debilitating reticence it prescribes.

As has been noted earlier, for Dickinson, the poetic precursor is a composite male figure whom she invokes, rather than obviates, in her act of creation. It is this invincible antecedent force that corroborates her conception of the muse. This identification between the poetic

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., Poem 211, p. 148.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p. 18.
forefather and the muse simultaneously confounds and compulsively untangles her ‘anxiety of influence’. The muse acquires significance and his ascendancy is enhanced through this similitude. Hence, Dickinson’s muse strikingly differs from that of the Romantics including Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley. Their muse is represented by the conventional image of an immaculate deity, who is a distant identity, conspicuously distinguishable from the poetic forefathers, who were sometimes fanciful forebears also. When Dickinson conceives of her muse as male, she is apprehensive of her own virile strength and avoids him with extreme disquietude, on the one hand, and desires to court him, on the other:

We shun it ere it comes,
Afraid of Joy,
Then sue it to delay
And lest it fly,
Beguile it more and more –
May not this be
Old Suitor Heaven,
Like our dismay at thee?\(^{109}\)

Dickinson here delineates a characteristic instance of dramaturgy, wherein ‘it’ may allude to a phase of time, a paramour, or an imaginative spur.

An intensified anxiety overwhelms Dickinson when she acquiesces in a possible transposition in the subliminal consciousness, having experienced a change from her own condition of selfhood to that of a more formidable source of poetic inspiration. This psychic metamorphosis brings forth an apprehension that the docile obedience that she had proscribed may return if she abases herself to the male muse. This disquietude results in Dickinson’s

\(^{109}\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 1580.
scepticism and her equivocal reactions towards the alien interloper in her poems. The poet experiences so intense a strain that she is prone to forsake her poetic aspirations and the faculty of performance. However, as a consequence of her encounter that is marked by patient resignation, comes the accomplishment of an exultant poet that is expressed through the following verse:

I would not paint – a picture –
I'd rather be the One
Its bright impossibility
To dwell – delicious – on –
And wonder how the fingers feel
Whose rare – celestial – stir –
Evokes so sweet a Torment –
Such sumptuous – Despair –

Nor would I be a Poet –
It's finer – own the Ear –
Enamored – impotent – content –
The License to revere,
A privilege so awful
What would the Dower be,
Had I the Art to stun myself
With Bolts of Melody!  

Language, in this case, demonstrates the force of desire and dismay that informs Dickinson’s perspective of self-sufficiency of the poet and the uncertainty associated with poetic autonomy.

\[110 \text{Ibid.}, \text{Poem 505.}\]
She affirms her individuality without any dependence on a governing male figure, though she appears to be perturbed by the possibility that she might be enfeebled as a consequence of which she would be rendered too powerless to create. Her poems vacillate between these two ends and hence the discord continues to remain entangled and finds articulation in her later poems:

Growth of Man – like Growth of Nature –
Gravitates within –
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it –
Bit it stir – alone –

Each – its difficult Ideal
Must achieve – Itself –
Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life –

Effort – is the sole condition –
Patience of Itself –
Patience of opposing forces –
And intact Belief –

Looking on – is the Department
Of its Audience –
But Transaction – is assisted
By no Countenance – \(^{111}\)

Evidently, these poems seldom allude to the theme of poetic creation, but the tendencies they reveal encompass the whole gamut of Dickinson’s life and her experiences. The métier of the poet constitutes one of her cardinal considerations not only for the sole reason that she devoted her life to creating poems, but also due to the fact that she recognizes the faculty of the poet as

\(^{111}\) Ibid., Poem 750.
having a sublime position above the corporeal world and the artistic enterprise as having a divine reverence. She asserts her prerogatives by saying: ‘I reckon – when I count it all – First – Poets – Then the Sun –’.\footnote{Ibid., Poem 569.}

Dickinson joins the poetic tradition of perceiving the creative task as sharing similarities with the process of the birth of a child. She foregrounds the real experiences that such a course entails, though she does not associate the biological reality with poetic conception. At the same time, she emphasizes the pangs of physical challenges attendant upon artistic impregnation.

Dickinson manifestly endeavours to assume a male authority, perhaps because she perceives herself to be the one who has to hold back for the male. She adopts both masculine and feminine personas so as to embolden herself and to evade the perils of supine submission. How much she subscribes to a male identity understandably depends on the magnitude of her anxiety. In some poems, this masculine figure, be he God or father or a precursor poet, seems so inaccessible that he seems almost implausible, whereas in others, their supremacy perspicuously remains inherent. Such conceptualization posits its own uncertainty, since Dickinson is anxious about a disintegrated self over which she possesses limited sway. Such an association may be deleterious. It is pertinent to mention here that in a letter to Louise and Frances Norcross, Dickinson designates herself as ‘brother Emily’ which she uses as her signature.\footnote{The Letters of Emily Dickinson, No. 367, early October 1871, Vol. 2, p. 490.} In another letter to Edward Dickinson, she alludes to the counsels given to her by her mother when she was ‘a Boy’.\footnote{Ibid., No. 571, about 1878, Vol. 2, p. 622.} Her ‘Chiefest Apprehension’ lies in the possibility of proving ‘insufficient’ in meeting the expectations of the stupendous task of her authorship:

Lest I should insufficient prove
For His beloved Need –

The Chiefest Apprehension

Upon my thronging Mind – ¹¹⁵

Another cause that precipitates Dickinson’s anxiety is her compulsion to confront this male master residing within, so that she may gain the necessary strength to expostulate against the angst that an encounter of two concealed identities brings about. She contemplates forbidding him primarily due to the adversarial elements of the forceful ‘other’ within her. But the attempt appears to her to be insurmountable:

Of Consciousness, her awful Mate

The Soul cannot be rid –

As easy the secreting her

Behind the Eyes of God. ¹¹⁶

Whenever the conditions of selfhood and otherness in her conjoin to form one unified poetic self, it authorizes her to assume the distinguishable supremacy that she was once empowered with. This unification of the split self enables her to overwhelm the intimidating constraints that she feels within herself. Once she has gained the ability to reassure herself, she repudiates such a masculine other with a peremptory remark: ‘Art thou the thing I wanted? / Begone – my Tooth has grown – ’ ¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Emily Dickinson, Poem 751.
¹¹⁶ Ibid., Poem 894.
¹¹⁷ Ibid., Poem 1282.