CHAPTER 2

‘Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit’: The Woman Poet’s ‘doubt and dread’ of Unconsummated Love

The world waits
For help. Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work,
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.¹

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was impeccable in her judgement in considering the ‘gospel’ of Aurora Leigh as having a resemblance with the compositions of Emmanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish philosopher and mystic. His pivotal assertion that ‘the joys of heaven and eternal happiness are from love and wisdom and the conjunction of these in usefulness’² is what both Aurora and Romney concede at the end of the novel-poem. Aurora is awakened into a Swedenborgian understanding in Aurora Leigh:

…. Art is much, but love is

more.

Art symbolizes heaven, but Love is God
And makes heaven.³

Through a number of rhetorical detours, the poem progresses towards a consummate proclamation of the Swedenborgian ideology with Romney and Aurora appearing at a felicitous conciliation, which offers us with a vision of a New Jerusalem revealing itself through a culminating beatific realization:

… new hearts in individual growth
Must quicken, and increase to multitude
In new dynasties of the race of men;
Developed whence, shall grow spontaneously
New churches, new economies, new laws
Admitting freedom, new societies
Excluding falsehood: HE shall make all new.⁴

Hence Barrett Browning deploys the theme of love by indicating the overwhelming transformation it can usher in society. This act of thematization of a hitherto unconceived metamorphosis through love also entails an underlying significant motif of an intellectual and emotional avant-garde movement in which the poet zealously participates and in the process removes all ‘falsehood’ and distortion that the society is afflicted with. The poet works towards

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⁴ Ibid., p. 539.
heralding a ‘perfect noon’⁵ and therefore echoes the Swedenborgian belief in ‘love’ and ‘wisdom’ and their manifestation in ‘use’:

Love and wisdom without use are not anything; they are only ideal entities; nor do they become real until they are in use.⁶

To Aurora, the fully-bloomed poet in the Ninth Book of Aurora Leigh, art is the abode of God and love ‘makes heaven’.⁷ Love is idealized as an instrument of reformation that has the power to ‘blow all class-walls level as Jericho’s / Past Jordan’,⁸ on the one hand, and on the other, an unthinking form of love is rejected with much disparagement. Earlier, in the Second Book, when Aurora declines Romney’s proposal of marriage, she objects and puts forward a sceptical assessment of women who wilfully and injudiciously accept love as having a noble objective:

.... Women of a softer mood
Surprised by men when scarcely awake to life,
Will sometimes only hear the first word, love,
And catch up with it any kind of work,
Indifferent, so that dear love go with it.
I do not blame such women, though, for love,
They pick much oakum;⁹

The act of picking oakum draws our attention to the exercise of undoing the sewing of old rope that is to be assorted with tar, which in its turn, would be used to fill cracks and seal joints in ships with caulk. It involves a debilitating exertion which causes the fingers to bleed, a kind of

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⁵ Ibid., p. 539.
⁸ Ibid., Ninth Book, p. 539.
activity often assigned to prisoners and dwellers of workhouses. This, according to the poet, is the fateful consequence of women who give themselves away thoughtlessly to love thereby suffering a life of utter subservience and thraldom. Barrett Browning clearly advocates here the idea of ‘most serious work, most necessary work’, but she, on the other hand, disparages the domestic serfdom that often supplements marriage. Aurora, in this sense, does not repudiate Romney’s love, but rather his offer of being an associate worker. She thus breaks in with ‘quiet indignation’:

You misconceive the question like a man,
Who sees a woman as the complement
Of his sex merely. You forget too much
That every creature, female as the male,
Stands single in responsible act and thought
As also in birth and death.¹¹

As a result, Aurora’s later declarations that she had been inconsiderate and heedless in not acknowledging Romney's love earlier seem to be contradictory with such scarcely disguised immoderate remarks of indignation:

O Romney, O my love,
I am changed since then, changed wholly,
If now you'd stoop so low to take my love
And use it roughly, without stint or spare¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 398.
¹¹ Ibid., p. 397.
These discrepant notions of love as a gateway to enslavement on the one hand, and on the other, as the Swedenborgian trinitarian concept of ‘use’ associated with ‘love’ and ‘wisdom’, that a thinking and intellectual woman adheres to, reveal the anxiety of inconsistency in the woman poet, since she realizes Love as both a divine state of human existence and an imminent hindrance to the poet’s aspirations to create. In a letter of 1846, Barrett Browning revealed to Robert Browning:

I did not go out yesterday, and was very glad not to have a command laid on me to go out, the wind blew so full of damp and dreariness. Then it was pleasanter to lie on the sofa and think of you, which I did, till at last I actually dreamed of you falling asleep for that purpose.\(^{13}\)

The London weather being damp and cold, Barrett Browning submerged herself in quiet contemplation and, as a sequel to her thoughts, the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* resulted for which she is so admired, appreciated and honoured. Composed during the period of their courtship, these sonnets move between real experience and dream in the manner in which the poet takes pleasure in her state of trance in rambling between the inexorable reality of London’s tempestuous weather, resembling that of her life, and the fascinating vision of her love for Robert and of his for her. The rubric of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* derives from a two-fold origin. Browning frequently alluded to Elizabeth as ‘my little Portuguese’ because of her swarthy complexion. He was also fascinated by her poem, ‘Catarina to Camoens’, whose subtitle reads thus: ‘Dying in his absence abroad, and referring to the poem in which he recorded the sweetness of her eyes’. Hence, sentiment and emotional fervour are entwined with the rather unusual sobriquet.

Dorothy Mermin and Angela Leighton\textsuperscript{14} have both addressed the predicament entailed in unravelling the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, considering it to be an unequivocal array of autobiographical renditions of artistic candour and truthfulness. Mermin maintains that the sonnet sequence reveals the ‘emotional and intellectual complexity, the richness of reference, the elaborate and ingenious conceits, and the subtle ways in which images are used both for their emotional power and to carry an argument’.\textsuperscript{15} The discernible expressions of sincere and unfeigned love subsume an intellectual pursuit towards a cognitive understanding so as to fathom the depths of love that thematize the sonnets. The poet is here concerned with a philosophical consideration of the entire epistemy of love and with identifying the relation between love and introspection, love and consciousness, love and sensibility, and love and self-knowledge.

Barrett Browning’s conception of love grapples with an insurmountable predicament of the woman poet, analogous to the experience of Aurora: ‘I must analyse, / Confront, and question’.\textsuperscript{16} The *Sonnets* too are nonetheless indicative of a keen insight of the ‘song I struggle to outbear / Through the portals of the sense’.\textsuperscript{17} The contemplation of the woman poet is amply evinced from the initial stanza of the prefatory sonnet:

\begin{quote}
I THOUGHT once how Theocritus had sung  
Of the sweet years, the dear and wished-for years  
Who each one in gracious hand appears  
To bear a gift for mortals, old or young.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets*, ‘The Soul’s Expression’, p. 328.
\textsuperscript{18} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, Sonnet I, p. 318.
The poet was engrossed in her rumination on the ‘antique tongue’ of Theocritus, when suddenly she perceived the enigmatic presence of a mystifying ‘Shape’ uttering in a masterly intonation:

‘Guess now who holds thee?’ – ‘Death’,  
I said. But, there,  
The silver answer rang, .. ‘Not Death,  
but Love.’  

The poetic consternation reveals itself when the musing poet finds it almost impossible to express the voice within:

Look up and see the casement broken in,  
The bats and owlets builders in the roof!  
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.  
Hush, call no echo up in further proof  
Of desolation! there’s a voice within  
That weeps … as thou must sing …  
alone, aloof.

This stifling sensation causes a discomposure in the poet so much so that she has to endeavour hard to give expression to her own voice. The song of love characterized by imperfection and non-consummation precipitates in the anxious poet a feeling of chagrin emanating from what she conceives of as incongruous love:

O Beloved, it is plain  
I am not of thy worth nor for thy place!

19 Ibid., p. 318.  
20 Ibid., Sonnet IV, p. 319.
And yet, because I love thee, I obtain
From that same love this vindicating
grace,
To live on still in love, and yet in vain,..
To bless thee, yet renounce thee to thy
face.\textsuperscript{21}

From these starkly irreconcilable thoughts arises a dilemma in the woman poet, which again seems to be immutable and, at the same time, unfathomable. The malediction of such an ‘unaccomplished fate’ gradually eats into the vitals of the poetic self and its ‘heavy heart’ torpidly goes deep down into ‘thy calmly great / Deep being!’:

My heavy heart. Then thou didst bid
me bring
And let it drop adown thy calmly great
Deep being! Fast it sinketh, as a thing
Which its own nature doth precipitate,
While thine doth close above it, mediating
Betwixt the stars and the unaccomplished fate.\textsuperscript{22}

The poet’s perception of love is nonetheless characterized by ‘the silence’ of her ‘womanhood’ and ‘a most dauntless’\textsuperscript{23} voicelessness. The strength of her sensibilities lies in the ‘muteness’ and

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, Sonnet XI, p. 320.}
\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, Sonnet XXV, p. 323. Poet’s italics.}
\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, Sonnet XIII, p. 321.}
\end{footnotes}
‘whiteness’ of her ‘letters’ lying on a piece of ‘dead paper’.\textsuperscript{24} The poet meditates in tranquillity and feels ‘that doubt’s pain’, wishing her beloved ‘to love me also in silence, with thy soul’\textsuperscript{25}:

My letters! All dead paper, .. mute and
white! –
And yet they seem alive and quivering
Against my tremulous hands which loose
the string
And let them drop down on my knee
to-night.\textsuperscript{26}

The poet, like a ‘vanquished soldier’ yielding ‘his sword’, would ‘lift’ herself from ‘the bloody earth’ and say: ‘Beloved, I at last record, / Here ends my strife.’ She desires to ‘rise above abasement at the word’ and ‘make thy love larger to enlarge my worth’.\textsuperscript{27} Hence, we find that for Barrett Browning love and contemplation are not contrapuntal themes. They stand for each other and in relation to each other and involve a mental activity requiring profound reflection. She perceives love in her thought and ruminates on it till she becomes ‘Perplexed and ruffled by life’s strategy’.\textsuperscript{28} To her, love is possible to be felt ‘without a word’.\textsuperscript{29} But a poetic angst is palpable from what the poet-lover solemnly urges her beloved to do:

IF thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love’s sake only. Do not say
‘I love her for her smile … her look …
Her way

Of speaking gently, …

The poet is certainly apprehensive of love temporal and transient and beseeches her beloved to ‘love me for love’s sake, that evermore / Thou mayst love on, through love’s eternity’.  

Having borne the anguish of the ‘doubt and dread’ of ‘the silver iterance’, she decides to ‘drop a grave thought’ and ‘break from solitude’:

I drop a grave thought – break from
solitude
Yet still my heart goes to thee … ponder
now …
Not as to a single good, but all my good! 

The poet-lover associates love with grief and is of the opinion that grief is more daunting than love’s ordeal. She has grieved so much that to love is almost inconceivable for her. Hence, having awakened from sedate introspection, she earnestly appeals to her lover to open his heart wide for her:

If to conquer love, has

Tried,
To conquer grief, tries more … as all
things prove,
For grief indeed is love and grief beside.
Alas, I have grieved so I am hard to love.

31 Ibid., Sonnet XXXIV, p. 325.
Yet love me — wilt thou? Open thine
heart wide,
And fold within, the wet wings of thy dove.\textsuperscript{32}

The whole intrigue of love is inseparably wrought with ‘doubt and dread’ and the poet is now vocal in articulating the distortion of ‘thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit’, and endeavours to redeem herself from her ‘doubt’s pain’\textsuperscript{33} and the anxiety of un consummated love:

It is that distant years which did not take
Thy sovranty, recoiling with a blow,
Have forced my swimming brain to undergo
Their doubt and dread, and blindly to forsake
The purity of likeness, and distort
Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit.\textsuperscript{34}

The culmination of all the themes embedded in love’s manoeuvre is to be traced in the celebrated forty-third sonnet of the \textit{Portuguese Sonnets}. Here love serves, for the poet, as a means towards reaching ‘the ends of Being and ideal Grace’. Passion, grief, smiles, tears – all epitomize love eternal, love immeasurable and love immortal:

\begin{quote}
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Ibid.}, Sonnet XXXV, p. 325.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, Sonnet XXI, p. 322.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, Sonnet XXXVII, p. 326.
faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints, – I love thee with

the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life! – and, if God

choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.35

In *Victorian Women Poets: Writing against the Heart*, Angela Leighton postulates that Elizabeth Barrett Browning ‘learned early to distrust the iconic postures of romance in favour of a socialized and contextualized account of desire’.36 This is truly characteristic of Barrett Browning’s epistemology of love, where there are indelible footprints of sociological and experiential connotations. Love is rarely non-representational and metaphysical, but is rather a spatio-temporal reality being circumstantial and participatory in nature. Its actors are the mortal beings who either shape it or are shaped by it. As a matter of fact, women in the nineteenth century conceived of love as a clear and palpable reality of experience which more often than not steered towards the institution of marriage and, if not, towards an eventual decline from honour and reverence:

It is this sceptical awareness of the sexual politics of sensibility which marks out Barrett Browning’s poetry from that of her predecessors. Love, in her work, is not a sacred ideal, removed from the contingencies of the world, but is dragged in the dust of that reality which was itself so hard-won an experience and a theme for her.37

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This ‘dust’ of ‘reality’ is felt particularly in Barrett Browning’s ballads which show the hazard involved in irascibility and lack of equanimity in women who, much in the manner of ‘women of a softer mood’, are ‘surprised by men when scarcely awake to life’, and have their lives relegated to picking ‘much oakum’ since upon hearing ‘the first word, love’, they ‘catch up with it any kind of work, / Indifferent, so that dear love go with it’.  

In ‘Bertha in the Lane’ and ‘A Year’s Spinning’, the two female protagonists have been denounced by their lovers who remain non-existent in the poems. In the first poem, the heroine lies on her deathbed and discloses to her sister, Bertha, that her death is ushered by a distressed heart. She had overheard her lover Robert avowing his love to her more attractive sister in the lane. But still her love stands unwavering and she hears the resonance of his footsteps at the door. She eventually dies, being afflicted with the pangs of unfulfilled love. She refuses to admonish either Robert or Bertha for exchanging the word that she ‘heard / What you wished me not to hear.’ She, on the contrary, blames her own imperfection as a woman:

Do not weep so – Dear – heart-warm!

All was best as it befell:

If I say he did me harm,

I speak wild, – I am not well.

All his words were kind and good –

He esteemed me! Only, blood

Runs so faint in womanhood.

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40 ‘Bertha in the Lane’, XXIII, p. 218. Poet’s italics.
‘A Year’s Spinning’ narrates the tale of a deserted woman, a spinner, who bears her lover’s child which has died and whose ‘silence’ makes her ‘groan’.\(^{41}\) She bemoans, in the way the deceased sister in ‘Bertha in the Lane’ does, not to vent her desire for vengeance but to express her dejection about the debility of women harbouring fallacious assumptions of a glorified romantic love. These are the notions that incapacitate ‘women of a softer mood’ who are inevitably driven either to a life of picking oakum, or to death. She is now destined to reach the relentless end with her ‘spinning’ ‘all done’.\(^{42}\) In ‘The Romance of the Swan’s Nest’, the way in which self-deceptive and self-depleting love afflicts is even more poignantly delineated by Barrett Browning through the narrative of Little Ellie, who ‘sits alone / ’Mid the beeches of a meadow, /

By a stream-side on the grass’\(^{43}\) conjuring up an idealistic lover for herself and expressing her somewhat unrealistic dream as an iconic representation of valorous and knightly love of a ritualistic intrigue. In this reverie, she fantasizes herself helping him to have a glimpse of ‘the swan’s nest among the reeds’\(^{44}\). But while she has been journeying in a trance, the swan’s nest becomes forsaken and the eggs morselled into pieces by rats. Little Ellie’s dream of showing her imagined lover ‘that swan’s nest among the reeds’\(^{45}\) has been smashed to smithereens:

Pushing through the elm-tree copse,

Winding up the stream, light-hearted,

Where the osier pathway leads –

Past the boughs she stoops – and stops.

Lo, the wild swan had deserted,

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\(^{41}\) Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘A Year’s Spinning’, IV, p. 302.
\(^{42}\) ‘A Year’s Spinning’, I, p. 301.
And a rat had gnawed the reeds.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, XVII, p. 216.}

Hence, the act of spurious idealization of love results in betrayal and disillusionment in the lives of ‘women of a softer mood’. It is the aftermath of such disenchantment in love that constitutes Barrett Browning’s thesis in these ballads. They show that unthinking love can have drastic consequences both in the lives of women involved in the action as well as on other women associated with them. The sociological aspects are undeniable here and their unbending desire to consummate their lives by interlocking themselves injudiciously in mindless schemes of love thus brings about perilous consequences. In her ballads, Barrett Browning situates love in a ‘male economy of social exchange’ and a stringently defined male power structure. Marjorie Stone thus discerns the concerns of ‘gender inequities’ in Barrett Browning’s ballads in the following manner:

In her ballads of the 1830s and 40s, [Barrett] employs the starker power structures of medieval society to foreground the status of women in a male economy of social exchange, and to unmask the subtler preservation of gender inequities in contemporary Victorian ideology.\footnote{Marjorie Stone, \textit{Elizabeth Barrett Browning} (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 108-9.}

In consonance with Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti too puts forward a stark reflection of a ‘male’ understanding of love in her poem, ‘The heart knoweth its bitterness’:

\begin{quote}
You scratch my surface with your pin;

You stroke me smooth with hushing breath; –

Nay pierce, nay probe, nay dig within,

Probe my quick core and sound my depth.

You call me with a puny call,
\end{quote}
You talk, you smile, you nothing do;
How should I spend my heart on you,
My heart that so outweighs you all?\(^{48}\)

Rossetti’s philosophy of love is conspicuously represented through this poem. It is remarkable for its affirmation of the poetic self and its disparagement of the facile relationships, an enterprise we have found Barrett Browning taking up. The poem quoted above perceptibly shows the way in which disenchantment primarily leads to despair and thereafter demonstrates a transcendence in the condition of the libido when it rises in oneness with Christ.

The speaker in the poem expresses her utmost magnanimity in love, since she longs ‘to pour myself’ and ‘to give’ her ‘whole’. She unequivocally discloses that she possesses multiple urges along with her longing ‘for one to stir my deep’ and ‘to search and sift / Myself, to take myself and keep’.\(^{49}\) She expresses her desire for commensurate reciprocation that was apparently inconceivable in Victorian mores of life. The poem is remarkably discrepant from the notion of love that existed in the period in which it was composed and it starkly departs here from the Barrett Browningesque ‘blood’ that ‘runs so faint in womanhood’. Rossetti here hails womanhood and its profuse energy by boldly declaring: ‘How should I spend my heart on you, / My heart that so outweighs you all?’ She seems completely heedless of the austerity and tyranny of her times and distinctly asserts the immense strength of a woman’s unending love that incapacitates men since their ‘vessels are by much too strait’. Due to this unfulfilment in love, the poet is struck with dejection and directs her energy towards divine union, which shall ‘stir’


her ‘deep’ and ‘search and sift’ her inextinguishable desire to be loved. ‘The doubt and dread’ of unconsummated love leads to her dissatisfaction with worldly love:

Not in this world of hope deferred,
   This world of perishable stuff; –
Eye hath not seen, nor ear hath heard,
   Nor heart conceived that full ‘enough’:
Here moans the separating sea,
   Here harvests fail, here breaks the heart;
There God shall join and no man part,
I full of Christ and Christ of me.\(^{50}\)

Margaret Sawtell, one of the few contemporary reviewers who carefully appraised Rossetti’s devotional poetry and other verses of religious fervour, has demonstrated that the poet has prioritized divine love over human love and this is distinctly evident in Sonnet 6 of the Monna Inominata series. Sawtell, in her book, Christina Rossetti: Her Life and Religion, observes that Rossetti articulates in ‘clear language … that God and His Will matter more than the most passionate, most possessive love that man may conceive, with the corollary, that provided that divine love has priority, one cannot love a friend too much’:\(^{51}\)

Yet while I love my God the most, I deem
   That I can never love you overmuch;
       I love Him more, so let me love you too;
   Yea, as I apprehend it, love is such
       I cannot love you if I love not Him,

\(^{50}\) Ibid., p. 798.
I cannot love Him if I love not you.  

The poet’s artistic consternation is no less revealing in Sonnet 7 and what is significant to her is an equal reciprocation in ‘bonds of love’s liberty’. Few Victorian women would have envisaged the notion of being ‘happy equals in the flowering land / Of love, that knows not a dividing sea’. The contradiction in the poet finds a clear manifestation in the confession: ‘My heart’s a coward tho’ my words are brave –’. Meeting kindles artistic consciousness, but the flame of creativity dwindles with departure from love. Hence, the idea of meditation significantly characterizes Rossetti’s love poetry. She formulates a conception of love that transcends the mortal plane to find a divine existence. We can perhaps see Rossetti as taking a trans-sociological, if not a pro-sociological, stance in love. Rossetti’s thesis is premised on the realization that it is the spiritual love for God, and not the earthly love for man, that can provide the complete fulfilment, ecstasy and solace of equally requited love.

Sawtell maintains that Rossetti abjured her mortal lover because ‘she had arrived at a perfectly clear conclusion – that married love was not for her, that God was still claiming her sole allegiance … once her will was set to that purpose, other loves might have a place, but a very secondary one.’ Having concluded thus, Rossetti still went through melancholy and depression and remonstrated her own self for the feeling of angst she was bearing within her. Contrarily, her later devotional verses demonstrate ‘an ever-growing and never questioned trust in the faithfulness of Jesus, no matter how great the weakness or faithfulness of the beloved.’

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53 _Ibid._, Sonnet 7, p. 297.
54 _Ibid._, Sonnet 7, p. 297.
55 Sawtell, _Christina Rossetti: Her Life and Religion_, p. 85.
56 _Ibid._, p. 85.
Irrespective of the fact whether Rossetti’s life was joyless, irreproachable or righteous, it is interesting to observe its noteworthy happenings and the essential sentiments that mark her poetry. The conspicuous episodes of Rossetti’s life, Stuart Curran attests, provided the thrust to ‘The Convent Threshold’ (1858), a poem in which the speaker relinquishes her worldly love and steps into a convent to redeem herself from and atone for her corporeal depravity:

For all night long I dreamed of you:
I woke and prayed against my will,
Then slept to dream of you again.
At length I rose and knelt and prayed.
I cannot write the words I said,
My words were slow, my tears were few;
But through the dark my silence spoke
Like thunder. When this morning broke,
My face was pinched, my hair was grey,
And frozen blood was on the sill
Where stifling in my struggle I lay.

‘From House to Home’ (1858) is another poem which is described by F. L. Lucas as a poem in which the speaker repudiates all mundane delights and contentment and fervently endures such renunciation but, at the same time, is assured by an arcane voice utterance: ‘You shall meet again, / Meet in a distant land’.

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experienced when she met James Collinson near Regent’s Park and collapsed, being unable to bear the trauma of breaking off from their engagement⁶⁰:

These thorns are sharp, yet I can tread on them;
This cup is loathsome, yet He makes it sweet:
My face is steadfast toward Jerusalem,
My heart remembers it.⁶¹

Rossetti’s relationship with Collinson was perhaps accursed from its very inception. Her earliest poems bear testimony to the theme of love being associated with the idea of renunciation. We find her love-lorn damsels to be distressed and slumbering perpetually under roses, lilies and violets and to have completely endured all the agony of unconsummated love, each transforming thereafter from being an earthly lover to being a lover of God, almost with a sense of redemption and comfort. The ardent religious environment in which Rossetti’s mother and sister Maria lived, might have also contributed to her renunciatory stance in love. This theme is clearly reflected in another poem, ‘A Martyr: The Vigil of the Feast’, written at the age of fifteen:

Alas, alas, mine earthly love, alas,
For whom I thought to don the garments white
And white wreath of a bride, this rugged pass
Hath utterly divorced me from thy care;
Yea, I am to thee as a shattered glass
Worthless, with no more beauty lodging there,
Abhorred, lest I involve thee in my doom.⁶²

Thus C. M. Bowra states in *The Romantic Imagination* that ‘[i]n perfect innocence [Rossetti] would write poems which are to all appearances dramatic lyrics about imaginary situations, but which nonetheless show unmistakable traces of her own feelings and sufferings.’\(^{63}\) Marya Zaturenska, in *Christina Rossetti: A Portrait with Background*, contends that the *Monna Innominata* sonnet sequence is a commemoration of Rossetti’s love for Charles Bagot Cayley, and her renunciation of him is enshrined in the sixth sonnet which combines metaphysics, austerity, love and an obdurate disavowal. For Sawtell, this sonnet gives expression to the poet’s spiritual love for God, but Zaturenska depicts the sonnet as one in which ‘we can almost hear her voice – she is talking to Cayley and not through a book but with the living voice.’\(^{64}\)

*Monna Innominata* is certainly one of the greatest sonnet sequences in the English language and some of the most piquant love poems in English are to be found in it. In comparison with these poems, Barrett Browning’s acclaimed *Sonnets from the Portuguese* sometimes seem effortless and facile. In Barrett Browning, we encounter a woman impassionately narrating under the scorching midday sun, in a place without any trace of shadow or shelter to shield one from the extreme blaze that is seldom bearable. But as soon as we enter the gates of the Petrarchan world of *Monna Innominata*, we are struck by the elegance of the sober and delicate chiaroscuro that lends a tinge of mystery, subtlety and artistry to the entire scene. The saga of beatific love reaches an exalted height after being transformed from the state of worldly emotions to that of spiritual ardour. The second sonnet, ‘They Desire a Better Country’, is perhaps more poignant, stirring and heart-rending than any of the other verses in the series.

\(^{62}\) Ibid., ‘A Martyr: The Vigil of the Feast’, p. 370.
The sensuous and passionate *Monna Innominata* sonnets reveal Rossetti’s unique sense of poetic grace. Her supple mastery of the sonnet form is conspicuous. Her wisdom, her fantasized forlorn maidenhood and the mellowness of her poetry are evident in these sonnets, in which she has infused time-defying love in such profusion so as to transcend the material imperatives of the world. We get in the verses an elegant, subdued and yet passionate fervour. Her sonnets are characterized by an ingenuity that marks her verses as being distinguishably free-standing and discrete. *Monna Innominata* may lack Barrett Browning’s range, but it is certainly individualized by its earnestness, intensity and stately charm. Rossetti pays tribute to Barrett Browning in her unostentatious introduction, where she speaks of ‘a bevy of unnamed ladies “donne innominate” sung by a school of less conspicuous poets’:

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us in lieu of the ‘Portuguese Sonnets’ an inimitable ‘donne innominate’ drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.\(^{65}\)

Rossetti solicits the absent paramour in the first sonnet to come back to her. The resonance of that exceptional utterance in poetry – a woman’s sincere expression of love – comes almost in the manner in which Barrett Browning’s sonnet sequence caught the Victorian intelligentsia unawares, though Rossetti appears slightly grating, yet methodical, with the naive sombreness and piquancy of her apparently simple poems.

The discrepancy between these two poets, so irreconcilable and hence so often correlated, is discernible in their sonnet sequences. Rossetti’s imaginative perspicacity appears to be much

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more adequate and inspirational in mood, more ingenious, subtle and succinct in conclusion, more fervid in expression, more supple in theme and more self-abnegating in significance:

O love, my world is you.

Howbeit, to meet you grows almost a pang

Because the pang of parting comes so soon;

My hope hangs waning, waxing, like a moon

Between the heavenly days on which we meet:

Ah me, but where are now the songs I sang

When life was sweet because you called them sweet?\textsuperscript{66}

In the second sonnet, she desires to reminisce about the earliest hour, the initial occasion of `your meeting me, / If bright or dim the season, it might be / Summer or Winter’:

A day of days! I let it come and go

As traceless as a thaw of bygone snow;

It seemed to mean so little, meant so much;

If only now I could recall that touch,

First touch of hand in hand – Did one but know?\textsuperscript{67}

The subsequent sonnet exhibits an illusion, quaint and picturesque, from which pours forth an irrepressible yearning:

I dream of you to wake: would that I might

Dream of you and not wake but slumber on;

Nor find with dreams the dear companion gone\textsuperscript{68}

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., Sonnet 1, pp. 294-5.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., Sonnet 2, p. 295.
In the seventh sonnet representing love ‘that knows not a dividing sea’, a female sensitivity can well be deciphered, a consciousness that can only be perceived as the woman poet’s doubt and apprehension since she feels that ‘My heart’s a coward tho’ my words are brave – / We meet so seldom, yet we surely part.’ Hence, she seeks solace and contentment in love:

Still I find comfort in his Book, who saith,

Tho’ jealousy be cruel as the grave,

And death be strong yet love is strong as death.69

The ninth sonnet is Christina’s momentous accolade addressed to Cayley. We hear a voice here that gradually becomes placid and reveals a deep sense of suppression:

Thinking of you, and all that was, and all

That might have been and now can never be,

I feel your honoured excellence, and see

Myself unworthy of the happier call:70

Many critics have observed some constituent elements of Rossetti’s biography even in two of her poems entitled, ‘A Sketch’ (1864) and ‘A Venus Seems My Mouse’ (1877). Quite a few critics presume that both the poems allude to Cayley, the paramour of her nubile years. Zaturenska recounts that Cayley had caught hold of a sea mouse while walking across the sands of the coast and conveyed it to the poet in a bottle as a significant offer made to her for her approval of his love, being assured of the fact that she would regard such an act as highly as he did. Presumably, Rossetti composed ‘A Venus Seems My Mouse’ as a memorandum to register her appreciation and gratitude. Zaturenska typifies the poem as ‘full of tenderness and

68 Ibid., Sonnet 3, p. 295.
69 Ibid., Sonnet 7, p. 298.
70 Ibid., Sonnet 9, pp. 298–9.
unaccustomed humour …. Does she not somehow identify Cayley himself with the sea-mouse? The verse, perhaps, is not without evidence:

A Venus seems my Mouse
Come safe ashore from foaming seas …
Which in a small way & [sic] at ease
Keeps house.

...  

Venus-cum-Iris Mouse
From shifting tides set safe apart,
In no mere bottle, in my heart
Keep house.  

Georgina Battiscombe, in an initial work entitled *Christina Rossetti*, also relates the poem, ‘A Sketch’, with Cayley. Battiscombe asserts that although he seems to have been peculiarly unenterprising in love, the verse is ‘affectionate but slightly exasperated’, in which the poet compares her suitor to a ‘buzzard’ and a ‘mole’:

My blindest buzzard that I know,
My special mole, when will you see?
Oh no, you must look at me,

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71 Zaturenska, *Christina Rossetti: A Portrait with Background*, pp. 150-1.
There’s nothing hid for me to show.

I might show facts as plain as day;

But since your eyes are blind, you’d say:

Where? What? And turn away.75

Another biographer of Rossetti, Lona Mosk Packer, postulates in *Christina Rossetti* that the devout Rossetti adored a married man, William Bell Scott, an artist-poet friend of her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Packer presupposes that Rossetti was unaware about Scott’s marital status, but when she became conversant about this, she declined to sustain the relationship. Packer offers the explanation that, for Rossetti, it was an inconsolable experience, associated with remorseful love, that was the origin of intense agony and that is again manifest in many of Rossetti’s verses.76 The poet’s own perception of love becomes clear to us when she strikingly expresses her views in ‘The Face of the Deep’:

> If we analyze love, what is it we love in our beloved? Something that is lovable, … something that kindles admiration, attracts fondness, wins confidence, nourishes hope, engrosses affection. If love arises from a mere misreading of appearances, then deeper insight may suffice to annul it. But if it arises from a genuine, though alas! transitory cause, then a transference of the endearing grace to another might seem the remedy. On earth the hollow semblance or the temporary endowment is believed in and preferred; in heaven the perpetual reality.77

Rossetti’s poems of love are more often than not followed by a thematics of renunciation. The anxiety of the woman poet has its roots in an impassioned renunciation of self-assertion,

conventionally necessitated by lyric poetry, along with a self-effacing abjuration to subside in poetic seclusion and concealment.

Contrary to this, Emily Dickinson, in many of her poetic renditions, is replete with manifest commendations of the paradoxical ecstasies of such an agonizing renunciation. Hence, a number of readers, like Richard Wilbur and others, have considered ‘Sumptuous Destitution’ as the most significant *leitmotif* of her art, as is also evident in the work of Emily Brontë and George Eliot. Simultaneously, Dickinson happens to be an inebriate of *air*, and perhaps since she writes in a trance caused by such inebriation, she is often rapacious, splenetic and covertly or overtly intransigent. The expression ‘sumptuous destitution’ sounds daunting and almost presumptuous since it implies a certain amount of voluptuousness, the term having unequivocal implications though, that she is willing to indulge in, even in her penury. In contradistinction to this, Christina Rossetti and, to a lesser extent, Elizabeth Barrett Browning built their monument of art on a wishful acceptance of material impoverishment. Who else can be as true and unswerving as these women authors who sang of renunciation as necessity’s most exalted and glorious righteousness?

A divergent array of predicaments in describing female selfhood in and through language is demonstrated by Emily Dickinson. Her poems thematizing love are distinguished for their exceptional ingenuity:

I gave myself to Him –

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And took Himself, for Pay\textsuperscript{79}

But a thorough appraisal of such seemingly unpretentious avowals call forth, more often than not, inconsistent interpretations of rejection, paradox or a sincere longing proved unattainable by an inaccessible goal:

\begin{quote}
The Fruit perverse to plucking
But leaning to the Sight
With the ecstatic limit
Of unobtained Delight.\textsuperscript{80}
\end{quote}

When Dickinson speaks in the ecstatic or otherwise anguished first person that she makes use of in her love poems, she is so ambiguous and deceptive as to evade a conclusive explanation, and hence, the poems become conundrums often with two correspondingly possible responses. This is manifested in an acclaimed and contextually relevant poem:

\begin{quote}
Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
Were I with Thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\ldots
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Rowing in Eden –
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Ibid.}, Poem 1209.
Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor – Tonight
In Thee!\(^{81}\)

This ardent poem expresses a yearning for someone whose nearness indicates a threatening and an almost impulsive intemperance as well as an absolute detachment from unsettling upheavals – significances that coherently gainsay one another. ‘Wild Nights should be / Our luxury!’ stimulates a release of forcefulness perceived as a forbidden act of reprobation, but it is completely uncertain whether the ‘luxury’ implies the outburst of a passionate ardour or the assurance of a concealment from it. Corresponding inconsistencies are to be fathomed in the second stanza also: ‘You are “done with the compass” when you are safe at home.’ The exuberance contained in the line calls to mind a relinquishment so consummate that the speaker, in spite of being stranded in the midst of the ocean, is no more anxious about where she exists. Contrarily, the connotation of ‘Ah, the Sea!’ is conjectural. The enigma it evokes centres round the question whether the sea symbolizes her lover or separates her from him. If the tempest and the sea exemplify a passionate vitality by the use of ‘I’, they can seldom clearly illustrate the portents she hopes to overpower. This tantalizing indeterminacy is a characteristic of a more perplexing poem:

The Drop, that wrestles in the Sea –
Forgets her own locality –
As I – toward Thee –

She knows herself an incense small –
Yet small – she sighs – if All – is All –
How larger – be?

The Ocean – smiles – at her Conceit –
But she, forgetting Amphitrite –
Pleads – “Me”? 82

This aphoristic anecdote of the ‘Drop’, encouraged by love to struggle for her own individuality, is designed on an antithesis. The intricate central stanza appears to demonstrate the dilemma of self-expression. If she acknowledges that the ocean, being boundless, ‘is All’, or in other words, if it already subsumes her, how, ‘she sighs’, can she magnify it? She imperiously desires that the ocean should be immeasurable without taking her into consideration. This demand appears grotesquely presumptuous from the point of view of the fact that the sea has consumed more voluminous matters in comparison to what she could do and it is not inappropriate to distinguish it or him as the sea-god, Poseidon, who already has a wife, the sea-nymph named Amphitrite. It may however seem surprising to discover how such an endeavour of self-expression is intrinsically associated with selfless love and the self-submission that comes from it. The reader’s experience of the poem remains one of contradiction. Dickinson’s poems of love remind us of Andrew Marvell’s ‘Definition of Love’ where love is ‘begotten by Despair / Upon Impossibility’.

Such poems on despair may be hailed as some of Dickinson’s most admirable accomplishments. In ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’, despair comes out thoroughly and conclusively:

82 Ibid., Poem 284, p. 203. Poet’s italics.
There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

‘Heft’ implies heaviness, with supplementary associations of dragging, exertion and pressure. The ‘Cathedral Tunes’ become burdensome due to the sombre strain of certitude and demand to be lifted up by the hearers. These suggestions traverse back through a sense of oppression to the winter-afternoon ‘Slant of light’, that is apparently immaculate, yet dispassionate. Dickinson brings these implications together naming them as despair, which she again describes as ‘An imperial affliction / Sent us of the Air –’:

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

Death comes from the distance and, hence, the two share an intimate association in many of Dickinson’s poems, where the non-existence of the lover bears the sensation of death. Distance is impregnated with all possibilities of an impending fatality and such solitude provides the poem with a death-like finality.

Love manifests itself in Dickinson’s poems in multifarious forms. It is perceptible that she loved intently, rapturously and unswervingly in her life. She sometimes loved exuberantly and, at other times, sedately. She also habitually transcended restrictions. She vacillated between one way of loving and the other just in the manner she dithered to determine expressions that would befit a poem. She cruises along effortlessly across widely assorted attitudes, dispositions

83Ibid., Poem 258, p. 185.
and circumstances, creates poetry by the fervour of her imagination, and enacts a vivacious playfulness from an entirely fantasized notion of love. She was indisputably aware of the way in which she could assume the role of a passionate companion, paramour and devotee. She confided to one of her childhood friends, in the concluding year of her life, that she perceived and even ‘this moment knew – / Love Marine and Love Terrene – / Love celestial too –’. She spread her love to every domain of life that she could envisage.

The anxiety in Dickinson arises from the fact of her sustained adherence to a prototype that concedes to a binary hierarchy, where the subject is unquestionably the male and the object female, in spite of the fact that a female speaker speaks in these love poems. This seldom implies that the female persona identifies her subjectivity as male; the speaker here, in fact, tries to strike a balance between the dominant male subject and his female ‘counterpart’ by considering herself as an object. In the following poem, she conceives of a garden, unchanged and yet ‘brighter’, a place where she urges her endearing brother, Austin, to come from the land where he is:

Never mind faded forests, Austin,  
Never mind silent fields –  
Here is a little forest,  
Whose leaf is ever green;  
Here is a brighter garden,  
Where not a frost has been;  
In its unfading flowers  
I hear the bright bee hum:  
Prithee, my brother,  
Into my garden come!  

85 Emily Dickinson, Poem 2, pp. 2-3.
It is language that reinforces the position of the subject and the object, and ushers in the essence of a heterosexual intrigue. This amorous strain, underlying the relationship between the ‘female subject’ and the ‘male object’ (the subversion as is perceivable in the above-quoted verse) is embedded in the patterned metaphorical structure of the poem that is manifestly grandiose and far-ranging. A few familiar comments on the inherent meaning of this interrelationship between romance and metaphor probably indicate the reason why this correlation enhances the dilemma that Dickinson confronts as a female poet. Acceding to the argument of Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst, that subjectivity is comprised of and by language, and that to imbibe language is to concede to the social and cultural norms, particularly those that bear witness to patriarchal authority, the French feminist critic Luce Irigaray debates that the hierarchical taxonomy of a signifier and a signified in language reiterates and underpins the subjugation of women and their treatment as object. Irigaray asserts that metaphor characterizes the edifice of language. It pivots on and propagates a hierarchical system of polarization in which one constituent element possesses the prerogative to determine the other. Irigaray’s views are in accord with the explanations of Sigmund Freud and Lacan that the position of the woman in this metaphorically designed system of language is basically that of absence, of a deprivation, and the components of language that restate the elements of presence and absence actually, in their turn, replicate the reality of marginalization of women. Hence, when Dickinson deploys the theme of subject-object relationship through the use of such metaphor, she virtually anticipates that by which Irigaray was intrigued.

The thematics of romantic love characterizes Dickinson’s early love poems, particularly those that reveal such an ideal of love, expressed with the help of metaphor in which the subject-object relationship receives a vivid manifestation. In her later love poems that were composed several years after her early compositions, and which comprise the verse valentines of 1850 and 1852, and the rhyming end of a letter to Austin in 1851 identified by Thomas Johnson as her second poem, she conceives of ideas as both corroborating and offering a critical assessment of a hierarchical association that lovers share in her earliest poems. In this category of her poetry, the self is considered as nugatory, feeble and womanly and is juxtaposed against an array of authoritative, evidently male, representations, as distinctively expressed in the poem, ‘Mute thy Coronation –’, where the speaker is a ‘meek’ and deferential ‘tiny courtier’ who conceives of herself as being shrouded in the master’s ‘Ermine’ on the event of his coronation. The diminutive steward appropriates herself in the position of the object, and the metaphorical strain of absence in the hierarchical paradigm of romantic attachments is depicted in a manner in which the menial and the exiguous is desired by the powerful and the significant in the initial valentine. But, in other poems composed almost around the same time, Dickinson endorses a subversive assessment of traditional romantic affinities between the male and the female through a concurrent appraisal of the two-fold organization of language and metaphor. Dickinson envisages a relation between the subject and the object that is imperative to both the schemes of metaphor and romantic love, and essentially to those of signifier and signified that language depicts. It is strikingly noticeable that in her efforts to redress this adversarial pattern of language, Dickinson forces language to the verge of inconsequentiality. Her endeavours to untether the binary opposition of subject and object in romantic associations have confronted

89 Emily Dickinson, Poem 151, p. 108.
corresponding hindrances. As a result, one particular section of her poems seems to conform to the design of the traditional love poems, which can be identified in her earliest poems and persists in the later poems like ‘Mute thy Coronation –’, to name just one of them. In this section of poems, the dominant male persona, who embodies the characteristic features both of God and of the father, is portrayed as the sun, whereas the frail and insubstantial female self is imagined as a daisy. This traditional constitution of bipolarization, echoing the conventional male-female relationship found in the earlier love poems, is substantiated only to be later disintegrated. Simultaneously, the metaphor that is rudimentary to such an idea of polarity, and is indispensable to the frame of these stereotypical relations, is nonetheless challenged and undone.

In the love poem, ‘The Daisy follows soft the Sun’, the daisy transposes the ostensible association between supremacy and deference in romantic love, and the metaphor that underpins the design of the poem, along with the relationship it delineates, is unfolded as a misapprehension:

The Daisy follows soft the Sun –
And when his golden walk is done –
Sits shyly at his feet –
He – waking – finds the flower there –
Wherefore – Marauder – art thou here?

The discrepancy between the sun and the daisy, that is essential to their relationship, is metaphorically expressed in a way similar to that in the poem about the Master and the petite courtier. Dickinson tries to draw a parallelism between the daisy and the sun particularly because of a superficial similitude that is evident in the former’s name, the ‘day’s eye’. Such similitude

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91 Emily Dickinson, Poem 106, p. 80.
deepens and the flower, whose very name signifies the eye of the day, is described by an analogy in relation to the sun. The effort to unite the remarkable incompatibility between them exemplifies their romantic enchantment as well as the metaphor that presides over the poem. The discernible image that as the sun draws near the horizon, the daisy ‘follows soft the Sun’ and ‘Sits shyly at his feet’, bears testimony to the way in which both metaphor and intrigue are at function in the poem through language. It is again with the help of such language that the poet creates an artistic delusion, making the daisy resemble the sun and their relationship seem close and affectionate.

As Dickinson steers towards a clearer and more archetypal culmination of a male-female love intrigue, she presents marriage as a ‘soft eclipse’. The speaker here presumes herself as having experienced ‘the Girl’s life’ and rounds off by saying:

This being comfort – then
That other kind – was pain –
But why compare?
I’m “Wife”! Stop there!92

When one assumes the role of a wife, it is imperative for her to ‘stop’. Stopping implies a cessation in the growth of a woman’s life as well as the fact that the poem reaches its finale. Rather than declaring an end to all the apparent contrasts between the conditions of being a wife and those of being a girl, the poem suggests a startling reticence as a substitute for such comparisons.

92 Ibid., Poem 199, p. 143.
Though the language here enforces a peremptory silence, Dickinson seldom stops. She remains in a perpetual pursuit to diversify the confines of the observable, the conceivable and the explicable both in experiential and in linguistic terms, though, for her, feeling the physical reality in her mind is virtually the same as experiencing it by actually living it. The essence of Dickinson’s poetry is constituted of the rapture and gratification of an amorous male-female relationship where the language bears evidence of a metaphor that comprises an indeterminable dilemma of the signifier and the signified. Hence, love evolves as a symbol of a subjugating force underpinned by such a metaphor that augments that force.

If such a restrictive paradigm of romantic love of the opposite sexes calls for a language that is itself oppressive, constraining and, hence, sometimes nebulous, it may seem plausible that such an affinity between women might hypothetically suggest a felicitous form of experience communicated through a more convenient, germane and expressive language.

The individuality that Dickinson puts forward in her letters was perceptibly male as much as being female. Yet, it is sometimes formidable to allow for such a transformation in poems. Dickinson sent 274 poems to Susan Gilbert Dickinson, primarily her friend and subsequently her sister-in-law, apart from 154 pieces of prose correspondence. Such poems and missives are manifestly self-explanatory since they establish a relationship of uniformity as far as the question of gender is concerned or, in other words, unravel an attempt to disrupt the notion of a hierarchical order by specifying a relationship between two women. The language deployed to convey the intricacies of such a kinship is therefore one that is structured on an identical condition of selfhood, rather than a conclusive experience of detachment. The ideological accent in the poems involving two female personae is clearly on equivalence and homogeneity, perhaps reinforcing the sense of a considerable number of Dickinson’s poems as revealing homoerotic
closeness. Seldom can such a consanguinity between two congruent units be categorized as conforming to the demands of a hierarchical strategy, none of them being more pronouncing than the other. However, it is perplexing to note that instead of demonstrating a restful equipoise that such a circumstance may presupposingly foster, these poems are typified by Dickinson as having the problem of no imaginable conclusion because of the specific sameness of the two identities concerned. Poem 642 expresses on the one hand, ‘We’re mutual Monarch’, and on the other, ‘Myself – assault Me’. Consequently, poem 683 reveals the metaphor of ‘the most agonizing Spy’ by saying that, ‘The Soul unto itself / Is an imperial friend – / Or the most agonizing Spy – / An Enemy – could send –’. Other poems concerning two corresponding female figures apparently bear a similar framework and are based not on contrariness and polarity but on consistency and interchangeability, thus often leading to an acute and an overwhelming impasse.

However, there are both conveniences and hindrances in such poems that delineate both the subject and the object as female, as in the case of ‘Like Eyes that looked on Wastes’.\(^9\) Such an approach reveals both the affirmative and the negative aspects of life as well as of language. The penultimate lines of the poem, ‘Neither would be a Queen / Without the other –’, reveal this poem to be an interaction between two female characters, though this poem was not one of those dispatched to Susan. There is, arguably, no possibility of any idea of a hierarchy owing to the fact that none either \textit{is} or \textit{is not} a queen. Yet, a perception of an appalling lack becomes clearly discernible. The poem begins with a sustained analogy between ‘Eyes that looked on Wastes’ and the manner in which the two personae behold one another. There seems to be a corresponding requital of observation among them:

\begin{quote}
So looked the face I looked upon
\end{quote}

\(^9\) \textit{Ibid.}, Poem 458, p. 353.
So looked itself – on Me –

Here the subject-object polarity ceases to exist and their images produce indistinguishable mirror reflections:

But Blank – and steady Wilderness –
Diversified by Night –

Just Infinites of Nought –
As far as it could see –

The poem concludes with a combination of contradictions arising from this reciprocal gaze:

The Misery a Compact
As hopeless – as divine –

Neither – would be absolved –
Neither would be a Queen
Without the Other – Therefore –
We perish – tho’ We reign –

The dearth of a difference makes this ‘Compact’ ‘hopeless’ and from this insufficiency, neither of them can find liberation. The culmination proves to be even more disconsolating since both of them ‘perish – tho’ We reign’. The uniformity in the nature of their being precludes them from transposing their condition of existence, which again appears to be threatened by a situation of stalemate. Metaphor, here, rather serves as an avenue, enabling a kind of circumvention of such a situation of impasse, than merely being a literary device of language.
Both love and poetry bring for Dickinson a calamitous end. Her love poems are seldom considered as objective demonstrations in relation to the form of traditional lyric poetry. In Dickinson, the correlation between God and the ‘lover-bridegroom’ becomes ‘too persistent to be dismissed’ and certainly involves associations of male involvement and female dis-eases. Albert J. Gelpi cogently asserts that ‘love was for her an experience which had something to do with man and something to do with God …. The association of the amatory and, in a loose sense, the mystical – as God becomes lover-bridegroom or lover manifests preternatural or deific qualities – is too persistent to be dismissed’.

Such an experience finds expression in the following poem:

Struck was I, not yet by Lightning –

Lightning – lets away

Power to perceive His Process

With Vitality.

. . . .

Most – I love the Cause that slew Me.

Often as I die

It’s beloved Recognition

Holds a Sun on Me –

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95 Emily Dickinson, Poem 925.
Initially mutilated by an unusual assailant, Dickinson comes out from this ordeal being enthusiastic for more scars. She asserts having undergone such tribulations as could be compared with a mortal assault and eventual death. It is as if she redeems her ‘Power to perceive His Process’, and then takes delight in the reiteration of her death. Though she feels numbed by being deprived of a lover who ‘Holds a Sun’ on her, Dickinson seems defaced in his companionship. As he withdraws from her, his dominance dwindles and she identifies in his retreat the moment of her regeneration.