CHAPTER 3

‘Judge tenderly of me’: The Woman Poet in Quest of Succour in Nature’s ‘tender majesty’

Was not my spirit gladden’d, as with

   wine,
To hear the iron rain, and view the mark
Of battle on the banner of the clouds?
Did I not hearken for the battle-cry,
   And rush along the bowing woods to
meet
The riding Tempest – skyey cataracts
   Hissing around him with rebellion vain?
Yea! And I lifted up my glorifying voice
   In an ‘All hail’; when, wildly resonant,
   … the thunder cried …¹

The most overwhelming literary influence on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s work was that of the Romantic poets, and more specifically, William Wordsworth. She regarded him as the ‘poet-hero of a movement essential to the better being of poetry, as poet-prophet of utterances greater than those who first listened could comprehend, and of influences most vital and

expansive',\(^2\) as she asserted in the *Athenaeum* in 1842. The Romantic poets provided her with the stimulus to create her own theory of poetry emanating from poetic inspiration – her ideology, as she demarcates it with less veneration, residing in ‘the pneumatic character of the poet’s gift’.\(^3\) She puts the matter to Robert Browning in a simplistic manner in a letter dated 17 June 1845: ‘I quite believe as you do that what is called the “creative process” in works of Art, is just inspiration and no less.’\(^4\) It is from a rich traditional literary lineage that the thought of an extrinsic motif in writing, that is able to be put up as a representational impression, occurred to the Victorian poet. Such impressions may be deciphered as a lovely lady, a high muse or merely a spirit of a particular place – a perceivable, exploratory and an inconclusive obsession to subdue the anxiety of intellectual desolation of the Romantic imagination. But Barrett Browning’s use of an imaginative figure to give shape to her inspiration has been widely discrepant from the way in which the Muse had been traditionally conceived and given a literary and intellectual identity, since Barrett Browning maintained a close coherence between her conceptual use of Muse and the members of her own family. She starkly departs from the Romantics, especially Wordsworth, who commemorates Nature as an idealized presence, a nurturing consciousness or an all-pervasive, incorporeal and eternal reality. Barrett Browning, on the other hand, chiefly associates the different images of the Muse with the loved figures of her family with whom she shares a close affinity and, most significantly, with the overarching presence of her father. Such a dominating figure frequents her imagination and torments her poetic consciousness and it is against this invincible father-figure that she undertakes an interminable struggle for self-

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\(^3\) Ibid., p. 251.


Source: [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16182/16182-h/16182-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16182/16182-h/16182-h.htm)
expression. Barrett Browning, being a worthy Victorian daughter of the Romantic forefathers on the one hand, and a compliant daughter to her own father for a considerable forty years of her life on the other hand, predictably brackets together the figure of the inspiring muse and the figure who governed her life, both emotionally and practically, for a substantial part of it.

‘The Tempest’ (1833), an early poem, with the lines from which this chapter begins, is based on an actual outburst of a violent storm which took place in 1826. The poem, which Barrett Browning composed in her twenties, perceptively took off as an ostentatious poetic manoeuvre. The flamboyant, flashy and apparently simulating rhetorical exercise of such a poetic composition offers a distinction between the permeating tranquillity of Nature and the initial turbulence of the storm. From the root of this impending approach of a violent force of Nature, there evolves an essentially important issue of gender disharmony. ‘Nature’, being described as ‘All dumb’, is demonstrated as female, whereas the thunder is portrayed as ‘martial’, a trait that is primarily believed to be associated with maleness. The former is in agreement with the legacy of traditional gender demarcations – timorous, hesitant and phlegmatic – and the latter is evinced as possessing a devastating and unflinching supremacy. This problematic disparity follows from here. Irrespective of the fact of this dumbness of Nature or that of the outrageous intensity and aggression of the storm forming the poet’s thesis, the poem tends to be considered as a Romantic ode, more so due to the conversion of the narrator into a would-be poet. ‘Writing poetry’, Margaret Homans suggests, ‘would seem to require of the writer everything that Mother Nature is not.’  

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It came in power. You soon might hear

          afar
The footsteps of the martial thunder sound
Over the mountain battlements; the sky
Being deep-stained with hues fantastical,
Red like to blood, and yellow like to fire,
And black like plumes at funerals;⁶

These evident Romantic expressions triumphantly lead to the climax of the poem and, most importantly, bring out the anxiety that underlies a creative composition. The beauty of the poem lies in the fact that instead of terrorizing, the thunder stimulates an exalted speech with an equal force. The poem, in a sense, is of course reminiscent of P. B. Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*, exhibiting a speech commensurate with the strength and intensity of the elements. Barrett Browning was discernibly inspired by her Romantic predecessor but, at the same time, she strives to both emulate and contest the latter’s ‘sublime inspiration’ by using an apparently elevated style which, in its turn, can also be attributed to her initial naivety in writing. But the confidence and verve with which she relates the narrative of the storm is indeed a positive manifestation of the ‘anxiety of tradition’ that excruciatingly throbs under creative exertion.

The ecstatic exhortation ‘All hail’ calls forth the inspirational Muse, the forces of which almost collude with the zestful imagination of the poet to produce an energetic and enthusiastic passage reverberating with momentous images. What is worth recording here is the poet’s triumphant assertion of the ‘right to speak’ with a voice as vibrant as that of the thunder:

          All hail unto the lightning! hurriedly

His lurid arms are glaring through the air,
Making the face of heav’n to show like
    hell!
Let him go breathe his sulphur stench
    about,
And, pale with death’s own mission,
    lord the storm!
Again the gleam – the glare: I turn’d
    to hail
Death’s mission: at my feet there
    lay the dead!
The dead – the dead lay there!7

The poet shows courage to convert the ‘gleam’ into a ‘glare’, unlike the Wordsworthian
association of ‘gleams of half-extinguished thought / With many recognitions dim and faint, / And somewhat of a sad perplexity’.8 Barrett Browning’s ‘glare’ implies a devastating end, the
aftermath of which is relentless: ‘The dead – the dead lay there!’

The pitiless conclusion may ostensibly seem to be an exaggerated act of
sensationalization, but it also has to be acknowledged that such annihilating consequences of the
‘thund’rous storm’ can seldom be controverted. The poet revels in transforming the initial
‘dumb’ and inarticulate Nature into a violent and destructible stage for ‘the elemental war’,
implying that the stark and inauspicious consequences, depicted here as death, reflect the

7 Ibid., p. 61.
corollary that follows from the heightened act of speaking. ‘Mother Nature is hardly powerless’, writes Homans, ‘but, enormous as her powers are, they are not the ones to become poets.’ 9 The stormy glare, accompanied by lightning, leads to a similar consequence – death as the finality to everything earthly and corporeal. With this notion of a conclusive eventuality in mind, the poet is urged forth to create – the very act that storms everything to a mortifying dissolution.

The poem traces a subtle correlation between the desire to speak and, through such an act of speaking, an immanent wish to destroy or unsettle the obduracy of a patriarchally defined poetic tradition within which she strains to express her thoughts. Hence, her own ‘anxiety of authorship’10 is intimidated by the cataclysmic debacle of concluding in an all-devouring ‘energy
/ And passiveness, – the thunder and the death!’11 In spite of the fierce rhetoricity of verse, the speaker of the poem is undeniably a woman, a fact that remains unuttered, and it is particularly due to this that certain internal and external hindrances need to be confronted if this woman’s voice is to be heard – a problem that the poem appallingly identifies.

The force of such exalted speech, however, does not conclude in engendering some arbitrary fatality. The poet is awestruck to find ‘the man’ who is ‘familiar’ to her and who is utterly victimized by the tempestuous outburst:

Albeit such darkness brooded all around,
I had dread knowledge that the open

eyes

Of that dead man were glaring up to mine,

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9 Margaret Homans, Women Writers and Poetic Identity, p. 17.
With their unwinking, unexpressive
stare;
And mine I could not shut nor turn away
The man was my familiar.¹²

Behind this idea of the ‘familiar’, there happens to be lurking the repressed idea of the father, a poignantly emotional identification which turns the poet’s literary aspiration into a personal shock. On the one hand, this imaginative ardour calls to mind the echoes of the Romantic cadence which Barrett Browning would contest and, on the other hand, an intensely passionate recognition that brings about a typical male aura which is, in its turn, almost hazardous to confront, as is evident in a letter dated 13 December 1845 in which she says: ‘Only one person holds the thunder.’¹³ Hence this typically ambitious poem, with a starkly Romantic flavour, undertakes to narrate the tormenting struggle of the woman poet striving against a power which she clearly cannot afford to confront since such force constitutes the object of her ‘tenderest and holiest affection’.¹⁴

Thus, ‘The Tempest’ portrays a strange and, perhaps, an unresolvable conflict between the female poet’s straining endeavour to express herself and be heard and her constant inability to resist the impeding, nullifying and coercive male strength which consequently gives rise to her anxiety of creation:

…. When armed
foes

Meet on one deck with impulse violent,
The vessel quakes thro’ all her oaken ribs,
And shivers in the sea; so with mine

heart:
For there had battled in her solitudes,
Contrary spirits; sympathy with power,
And stooping unto power; —

She refuses to be ‘All dumb’ like Mother Nature, and this renunciation of silence urges her to wake forth from her ‘deep unslumb’ring dream’ and assert her ‘glorifying’ and ‘wildly resonant’ voice through poetry. It is the ‘dread knowledge’ of the horrifying consequence of such a confrontation that makes the poet agitated. This is amply exhibited in the following verse:

…. I had borne
Those eyes to scowl on me their living
hate,
Better than I could bear their deadliness:
I had endured the curses of those lips
Far better than their silence. Oh, con-
strained
And awful silence! — awful peace of
death!

There is an answer to all questioning,

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16 Ibid., p. 62.
17 Ibid., p. 61.
That one word – death.\textsuperscript{18}

The speaker resorts to a desire for death and, at the same time, describes its rejuvenating power and solaces herself by saying:

\begin{quote}
\textldots Our bitterness \\
can throw \\
No look upon the face of death, and live. \\
The burning thoughts that erst my soul \\
illumed \\
Were quenched at once;\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

The poet-speaker takes flight from such a death-wish to ‘a nameless thought’ which, she feels, gives ‘a key, / Empowered to open out all mysteries / Of soul and flesh; of man, who doth begin, / But endeth not; of life, and afterlife’.\textsuperscript{20}

Nature, as a mothering presence, heralded the dawn of Romanticism – an ideological creed Barrett Browning certainly subscribes to and she believes Wordsworth to be its greatest propounder. He turns towards Nature with a ‘filial familiarity’ and as ‘trustfully as child before mother’\textsuperscript{21} for his inspiration. The sincere daughter-poet unquestioningly accepts this ethos as her Nature, which is in no way for her a fathering, but a mothering muse.

Barrett Browning’s apprehension becomes unambiguously manifest in the poems which reveal a quest for the essence of Nature. The poet-quester derives inspiration from Nature which

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., pp. 61-2. Poet’s italics.  
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., p. 62.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., p. 62. Poet’s italics.  
she takes to be her muse. However, there is an atypical mystique in her perception of Nature and this indicates her essentially female anxiety of authorship. She chooses the lost garden of childhood as the site of the spirits of Nature. The poem ‘The Deserted Garden’ (1838) describes a secret garden, which nobody remembers, except a lonesome child who plays there. The speaker of the poem, however, is the adult poet herself who, though not certain of the place of her lost childhood, remembers it with a nostalgic passion. What is positively interesting, and sometimes also less intelligible, is the fact of self-polarization between an adult and a child. But this split of poetic consciousness is what the poet-speaker is also mindful of since she feels envy at the child’s joyous nonchalance to the haunting spirits of the garden – a typical indifference which she, at the end, herself approves of. The poem seems to bear the message, perceivably derived from the Wordsworthian ideological notion of recompense, that ‘We draw the moral afterward, / We feel the gladness then’.  

The white roses in the garden still play in the speaker’s mind, but her matured imagination calls forth the mysterious presence of a human:

Some lady, stately overmuch,

Here moving with a silken noise,

Has blushed beside them at the voice

That likened her to such.  

This enigmatic and predominant denizen of the garden cruises along as gently as the resonance of the swaying motion of the leaves and is commensurate with the immaculate whiteness of the roses. However, this mysterious dweller is amply unlike the lady of the garden in ‘The Sensitive

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23 Ibid., p. 258.
Plant’, since the former is far too imperially majestic and narcissistic tending to despise the roses and associate her human sensibilities with the place in comparison to the latter, and hence is not the object of the poet’s quest. Conversely, Barrett Browning’s white lady is evidently waiting for someone to appear – for another human voice to make an analogous correlation between her and the roses. Shelley’s beautiful white lady outsparkles the white roses in elegance and is therefore the natural object of aspiration for the adult male quester. But for Barrett Browning’s speaker, this ‘stately’ lady is not an entity to admire and venerate:

Oh, little thought that lady proud,
A child would watch her fair white rose,
When buried lay her whiter brows,
And silk was changed for shroud! \(^{24}\)

The lady emerges as being too ‘proud’ and self-indulgent and hence is not the desirable ‘object’ to satiate imagination’s longing for ‘the days departed’. \(^{25}\) Both the speaker and the child renounce the seductive lady, whom they do not consider as their creative muse and with whom they can seldom cheerfully saunter. To the child, she is someone extraneous and hence immaterial. The lines ‘It did not move my grief to see / The trace of human step departed’ endorse the innocent nonchalance of the child with regard to death, thereby being only engrossed in the ‘Adventurous joy’ among the verdurous and ‘interwoven’ wild trees, boughs and ‘waxen-white’ roses. \(^{26}\) Here, the speaker perceivably ruminates over ‘a garden long deserted’ within

\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 258.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., p. 258.
which she desperately yearns to seek her solace from the anxious oddities and ‘earthly pain’ of womanhood:

And still I laughed, and did not fear
But that, whene’er was past away
The childish time, some happier play
My womanhood would cheer.

The woman-poet-speaker, hence, would be gleefully and satisfyingly willing to traverse back to her ‘childish bounds’ once again:

It something saith for earthly pain,
But more for Heavenly promise free,
That I who was, would shrink to be
That happy child again.

A second poem about a garden, ‘The Lost Bower’ (1844), is an extended quest romance, with a pulsating resonance of Wordsworth’s ‘Nutting’, with the difference that the latter has as its subject a quester who is a boy poet happening to come across a sister ‘spirit in the woods’, while the former poem has a female quester whose object is conjectural and cryptic. ‘The Lost Bower’ narrativizes a child’s exploration of a concealed natural bower, which indicates the background and context of poetic action. A sustained literary tradition of finding a lady tarrying in the woods reinforces the child’s quest:

And the poets wander, said I,
Over places all as rude:

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27 Ibid., p. 259.
28 Ibid., p. 258.
29 Ibid., p. 259.
Bold Rinaldo’s lovely lady
Sat to meet him in a wood:
Rosalinda, like a fountain, laughed out
pure with solitude.

And if Chaucer had not travelled
Through a forest by a well,
He had never dreamt nor marvelled
At those ladies fair and fell
Who lived smiling without loving in their
island-citadel.

Here, the child fervidly seeks to conform to this traditional notion. She feels attracted towards the enchanting wood where it is arduous to find what the poetic fore-fathers used to discover – a charming lady – an objective correlative to the inspiring muse, who, plausibly enough, resides in such an arcane bower. Hence, the child follows the footsteps of her revered ‘grandfathers’ and enters into the bower, the storehouse of poetic power:

Thus I thought of the old singers,
And took courage from their song,
Till my little struggling fingers
Tore asunder gyve and thong
Of the brambles which entrapped me, and
the barrier branches strong.\(^{30}\)

Both linguistically and connotatively, the significance of the expression, ‘my little struggling fingers’, is the key to the theme of the authorial anxiety concerning the mammoth enterprise of creativity. The child profusely resorts to the ‘thought of the old singers’ and, deriving ‘courage from their song’, confidently tears apart all the entrapments that prevented her art. She stands ‘suddenly astonied’ to have discovered the place of her heart’s content and feels profoundly indebted to her poetic ideal, Wordsworth: ‘I was gladdened unaware.’\textsuperscript{31} The place, both commodious and courteous, more resembles a garden than a wood. It is as if nature has enabled her to trace out an Eden where she can joyfully create, in short, a place which liberates her from all mundane hazard and toil. It is as if the bower has come down to her as a bounteous tribute to her artistic industry. With this rather ingenious description of the primordial locale of the Edenic garden, the poem is implicitly transformed from being an ordinary narrative into a quest allegory.

After making her way into the garden, the child desires to find, like ‘the old singers’ of the bygone days, some ‘spirit in the woods’ that unmistakably represents the figure of a lady:

\begin{quote}
Oh, a lady might have come there,
Hooded fairly like her hawk,
With a book or lute in summer,
And a hope of sweeter talk,—
Listening less to her own music than for
footsteps on the walk!\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

The anxiously straying poet encounters one of the damsels in the wood, who she expects would stir up a dream of love. But she is disillusioned in the sense that she unequivocally realizes that

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 265.  \\
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 266.
\end{flushright}
this remarkably quaint lady belongs to some other poet’s imagination, may be to that of Chaucer or of Aristotle, but not to her poetic thought, since she listens ‘less to her own music than for footsteps on the walk.’

This leads the child-poet to diverge from the path indicated by her poetic predecessors. She now ventures for a different spirit from whom she might derive the desired effulgence of inspiration:

Down to floor and up to ceiling
Quick I turned my childish face,
With an innocent appealing
For the secret of the place
To the trees, which surely knew it in
partaking of the grace.  

Being unsuccessful in kindling her imagination that could have been achieved had she encountered the lady, she turns her ‘childish face / With an innocent appealing / For the secret of the place’ which she feels will provide her with the much-yearned-for literary emancipation to create in reciprocation to her intellectual quest. She wonders whether there are other forms of charm or conjuration which she can experience from ‘nature’, ‘the work of Dryad’ or ‘the house of fairies’.  

As she ‘sate listening’,  she felt the inexhaustible store of strangeness in the wood:

So young muser, I sate listening

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32 Ibid., p. 266.
33 Ibid., p. 266.
34 Ibid., p. 266.
35 Ibid., p. 266.
To my fancy’s wildest word.

On a sudden, through the glistening
Leaves around, a little stirred,
Came a sound, a sense of music, which

was rather felt than heard.\textsuperscript{36}

The ‘sense of music’ initially appeared to her to be familiar, unceremonious and conventional, and hence she describes it as ‘rather felt than heard’ perhaps by her Romantic forerunners. But still her quest continues and with this apparently quotidian music, a ray of hope is created afresh which liberates her poetic soul, craving for inspiration, to achieve literary expression. The child-poet is enraptured to feel a mysterious presence within this new-found bower:

\begin{quote}
Softly, finely, it enwound me;
From the world it shut me in, –
Like a fountain, falling round me,
Which with silver waters thin
Clips a little water Naiad sitting smilingly
within.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

She, to her utter jubilance, discovers the ‘secret of the place’ which actually consists of the ‘little water Naiad’ emanating from ‘a fountain’ ‘with silver waters thin’. The end of the Victorian daughter’s quest is in finding herself comfortably housed within the bower of her own thought, where she can freely imagine. The ‘young muser’ meets, to her heart’s ease, her own muse, who sits impishly, smiling within.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 266.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 267.
Once again, in this poem, the ‘young muser’ undertakes a sojourn in quest of a literary muse, much in the manner of her poetic forefathers, and she discovers her imaginary ship that requires to be anchored in a new harbour. There is no disillusioning figure of any mystic enchantress, no coquettish lady of tantalizing beauty, no hysterical expectation of love. Instead, there is only the poet herself inside the bower replete with nondescript leaves and flowers. Yet, from these seemingly unimpressive surroundings, evolves the enamouring music leading to the birth of a self that is intensely assertive. The quest concludes with an affirmative declaration:

         Henceforth, I will be the fairy’
         Of this bower not built by one;
         I will go there, sad or merry,
         With each morning’s benison,
         And the bird shall be my harper in the
         dream-hall I have won.38

Hence, the ‘young muser’ comes out triumphant, having both ‘lost’ and ‘won’ – lost the bower and won ‘another open’ ‘In God’s Eden-land unknown’.39 The bower of poetry, where she primarily entered in a way she was taught by her old masters, may seem deserted, but what she truly realized is that her own creative expression can suffice in the description of her muse:

         Till another open for me
         In God’s Eden-land unknown,
         With an angel at the doorway,
         White with gazing at his Throne,
         And a saint’s voice in the palm-trees,

38 Ibid., p. 268. Poet’s italic.
39 Ibid., p. 269.
singing – ‘All is lost … and won!’

The idea that is predominant in this felicitous reappraisal of quest romance is the perfect manifestation of a subject and an object in the poem’s characteristically flowing imagery of the bower, music and water, all of which form the constituent elements of its structure. Intelligibly enough, it is by composing poetry that the daughter-poet recreates the bower, emblematic of the art that is there in the self-supporting representation of a ‘little water Naiad sitting smilingly within’. The poem can be considered, in other words, as a self-projection of the poet, with the latter reigning over the new-found, reconstructed bower as ‘the fairy’, overpowering the other ‘Mystic Presences of power’ haunting the woods.

In her most ambitious novel-poem published in 1856, *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning deals with the theme of a curious representation of Nature as the appalling depiction of a mendicant entombed in a box, with a ghastly image of a leathery tongue affixed in the throat, until resurrected by a Christian revelation, which led to the unification of all life – both hidden and discovered. The poet who bases her/his art on Nature, yet disregards man, actually abjures her/his commitment to unravelling Nature. Barrett Browning believed that both city and countryside are equally befitting environs for poetry and anyone despising the city and prioritizing the countryside as a sufficient context for poetic composition ultimately only distorts the coherence and harmony of all experience. Barrett Browning, with all certitude, considered herself to be affiliated to Nature in spite of primarily being an inhabitant of a town.

Barrett Browning’s poetry, moving forward from *An Essay on Mind*, is replete with admonitions relating to the disparagement of cities by poets. The need for an apposite enquiry of

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humankind profoundly motivated her. ‘The Poet’s Vow’ had the objective to establish the fact that, ‘The teachings of the heaven and earth / Should keep us soft and low’.41 What was supremely important to her was a proper consideration of humanity and a poet should derive the greatest encouragement from mankind, and not necessarily in the picturesque and unfrequented countryside. To her, it is quite effortless to revert to savouring the myriad forms of delight that natural beauty has to offer, but the poet’s task does not entail any superficial enterprise, since she is required to retire from ‘... the coarse / town-sights / To count the daisies upon dappled fields / And hear the streams bleat on among / the hills / In innocent and indolent repose, / While still with silken elegiac thoughts’.42 Barrett Browning, with remarkable distinction, departs from her poetic precursors by contending that a poet’s appropriate ingredient comprises ‘common ugly human dust’ rather than silver cascades and moonlit mountain tops. But, since many poets have moved away from aptly considering humanity in their poetry because of its supposedly gruesome associations, their poetry has remained devoid of a towering sense of elegance and passion and has reduced to have been fettered only to a flower that is either a lily or a rose. What they perhaps have failed to realize is that, it is actually the emaciated destitute who embodies the heaven and the flowers, objects that they fruitlessly look for as they try to propel the impoverished out of their way.

Barrett Browning maintained that Nature shrinks to a huge extent if there is a dearth of the noble virtues of compassion, benevolence and a sublime state of mind, all of which are distinctive attributes of a poet. She favours seclusion which proves to be effective in giving

expression to the natural imprints of the mind with the greatest candour and integrity. The poet’s kinship with nature has perhaps found consummate expression in the following verse:

None ‘muse on nature with a Poet’s eye’,
None read, but Poets, Nature’s poetry!
Its characters are traced in mystic hand,
And all may gaze, but few can understand.\(^\text{43}\)

Nature is always an elevated theme for poetic compositions and such poetry dwells in the contemplative mind of the poet and receives articulation through his art:

For Fancy teacheth Memory’s hand to
trace
Nature’s ideal form in Nature’s place.
In every theme by lofty Poet sung
The thought should seem to speak, and
not the tongue.\(^\text{44}\)

Though Barrett Browning endorsed the idea of Nature as bearing the mother image, a recognizable characteristic of Romantic thought, her anxiety concerning the predictable diminution of womanhood due to repudiation of Nature finds unambiguous utterance in the following manner:

Nature, excluded, savagely brooded,

Ruined all queendom and dogmas of

state, –

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Then in reaction remorseful and
mild,
Rescues the womanhood, nearly eluded,
Shows her what’s sweetest in woman-
ly fate –
Sunshine from Heaven, and the
eyes of a child.\textsuperscript{45}

The poet’s fundamental appreciation of Nature is articulated in the following poignant
cogitation:

\ldots Nature comes sometimes
And says, ‘I am ambassador for God.’

At another point in the poem, the poet feels the nature within her and derives creative strength
from the multitudinous natural visions and their immortal beauty:

I was glad, that day;
The June was in me, with its multitudes
Of nightingales all singing in the dark,
And rosebuds reddening where the calyx
split.
I felt so young, so strong, so sure of God!\textsuperscript{46}

Thus did Barrett Browning acquire poetic vigour from feeling Nature within herself – an invigorating sensitivity that allowed her to brave the struggle between herself as a woman-poet and the world outside that is resistant to her creativity:

The merest grass
Along the roadside where we pass,
Lichen and moss and sturdy weed,
Tell of His love who sends the dew,
The rain and sunshine too,

To nourish one small seed.47

Christina Rossetti was not a fervid follower but, of course, a reader who studied the Romantic poets with great circumspection. Unlike Barrett Browning, Rossetti’s work betrays almost no indebtedness of intellect and ideology to her poetic forefathers. On the contrary, her poetry unveils itself as an authoritative therapeutic to what she conceived of as the erroneously understood religious and political values. However, the Romantics she considered as most significant include a luminous array of ‘sublime’ thinkers such as Coleridge, Blake, Wordsworth and Keats.

Rossetti was poetically akin to Coleridge and this artistic affinity was more intense and sincere than argumentatively essential, systematically organized and evidently circumstantial. They both partake of an aesthetic and ideological premise, gleaned particularly from Coleridge’s prose rather than his poetry, that underpins this poetic alliance. This aesthetic position is constituted of the Tractarian doctrine of Analogy, which thematizes Rossetti’s poems and prose

compositions. This theory bases itself on the philosophical assumption that behind all natural phenomena there is the existence of the divine and that God is camouflaged by myriad natural visions and perceptions. This is what Rossetti expostulates in *Seek and Find*:

> All the world over, visible things typify things invisible … common things continually at hand, wind or windfall or budding bough, acquire a sacred association, and cross our path under aspects at once familiar and transfigured, and preach to her spirits while they serve our bodies.\(^{48}\)

Since Rossetti’s poetry thematically serves as a corrective to the secular Romantic ideologies of her poetic ancestors, ‘Consider the Lilies of the Field’ can be considered as an apposite illustration. The poem envisions the doctrine by lending it a poetic mode, claiming that ‘Flowers preach to us if we will hear’, and it exemplifies the principle with references to the rose and the lilies which declare emphatically: ‘Behold how we / Preach without words of purity.’ According to the implications of the poem, it is certainly true that Rossetti did express stern scepticism about the philosophical, idealistic and secular constructs of nature existing in a considerable portion of Coleridge’s poetry as well as in Wordsworth’s.\(^{49}\) Nevertheless, the essentially ontological arguments crucial to Romantic poetry are also pivotal in Rossetti’s verse, but her work is more conspicuously associated with Tractarian theology, which Rossetti tacitly offers as a restorative to the unfounded secular metaphysics conceived by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The speaker’s alienated self in ‘Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood’ yearns for unification with the divine as is reflected in the gleeful objects of Nature. Mortality is a despicable inevitability and the speaker seeks solace in the natural

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elements around him. He consequently partakes of the Mayday carnival with the birds that ‘sing a joyous song’, the frolicking lambs, and the ‘happy Shepherd boy’. Wordsworth envisages the concept of liberation of the self as a desire for emancipation from self-incarceration and as a meditative integration with Nature that is attained by his speaker who, by virtue of bearing a philosophically curious mind, achieves a faith that overpowers death. Rossetti departs from such an idea by rescinding it as a ‘foolish fancy’, since she is perceptibly agnostic regarding the equivocal images of ‘celestial light’, ‘clouds of glory’ and ‘mighty waters’. She avows the significance of dissociation from ‘the merrymaking crew’ of the world in order to consequently succeed in achieving beatific liberation.

Rossetti thus counters the possibility of a wedlock between mind and Nature that, as Wordsworth professes, will engender a secular Elysium. Her speakers dedicate their energy towards being transformed into brides of Christ. In ‘Paradise’, Rossetti furnishes an immaculate notion of a secularly human transcendentalism. To her mind, Paradise is almost idealistically utopian, whose sight can only be experienced in a phantasmagoric dream:

Once in a dream I saw the flowers
That bud and bloom in Paradise;
More fair they are than waking eyes
Have seen in all this world of ours.\(^50\)

Like many of Rossetti’s poems, this poem employs lavish Keatsian depictions of Nature – ‘the perfume-bearing rose’, bird songs ‘like incense to the skies’ and ‘glassy pools’ – to depict a life hereafter which is starkly dissimilar from the experiential one. Rossetti firmly presumed that ‘perception’ thrives only in Heaven, where the predicament of alienation can be overcome, and

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this hypothesis constitutes ‘Paradise’ which again directly impugns Wordsworth’s anti-conformist philosophical understanding and her riposte is all the more persuasive in delineating the afterlife as a corporeal and empirical certainty:

I hope to see these things again,
But not as once in dreams by night;
To see them with my very sight,
And touch and handle and attain:
To have all Heaven beneath my feet
For narrow way that once they trod;
To have my part with all the saints,
And with my God.  

The above verse faithfully portrays Rossetti’s theological conviction that stands in a defying encounter with Romanticism and seeks to transpose, both religiously and as a result poetically, the Romantic ideological conception of Nature. Her use of natural metaphors generates and corresponds to diverse Biblical referrals and allusions and she deviates in envisaging the physical reality of Nature as a proclamation of the glory of God. Nature, to this devout poet, is a repository of various forms and patterns. In the poem, ‘Balm in Gilead’, Rossetti enunciates her sentiments in strict Christian incantation:

Heartsease I found, where Love-lies-bleeding
Empurpled all the ground:
Whatever flowers I missed unheeding,
Heartsease I found.  

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51 Ibid., p. 216.
It is noticeable here that ‘Heartsease’ and ‘Love-lies-bleeding’ are incongruous descriptions for a solitary flower. Rossetti deliberately associates two incompatible characteristics with the same object to establish her Christian theological standpoint that it is through endurance that solace is achieved. Love entails suffering in the form of heart’s ‘bleeding’ from which the poet derives an empurpling ‘heartsease’. We feel that she brackets together the idea of suffering she undergoes as a woman poet and the solace she derives from subjecting herself to such an ordeal. This almost conjures up the idea of the Christ who withstood stupendous agony to demonstrate that God typifies love, and the metaphor of majestic regality signalled by the expression ‘empurpled’ strengthens this Christian typology. The analogy that can be said to function here is that all torturous experience, including that of romantic loss, may eventuate personal ease and contentment, just as Christ’s hardship and affliction resulted in the redemption of the human race. The poet narrativizes the tale of suffering by deploying the analogical illustrations drawn from Nature.

An analogical derivation that characterizes the poem, ‘Balm in Gilead’, is discernible also in one of Rossetti’s sonnets, ‘It is not death’, where she conceives of artistic silence as a begetter of suffering for the poet. She gleans hope and vigour to sing from such typological and analogical dialectics. The Biblical incongruity arises when the poet declares, ‘It is not death, O Christ, to die for Thee’, since both the deaths, literal and figurative, are emblematic of the restoration of human life. Rossetti derives from this biblical antithesis an analogy inspired by Nature: ‘Nor is that silence of a silent land / Which speaks Thy praise so all may understand.’ A corresponding, yet a converse, frame of reference arises out of the way in which Rossetti deduces the following:

Death is not death, and therefore do I hope:

Nor silence silence; and I therefore sing

A very humble hopeful quiet psalm,

Searching my heart-field for an offering;

A handful of sun-courting heliotrope,

Of myrrh a bundle, and a little balm.\(^53\)

Rossetti recognizes that though the anxiety of authorship torments her soul, it is her poetry that endures all adversaries, both Nature’s silence and death. Her hope emerges from this paradoxical belief that ‘Death is not death’, ‘Nor silence silence’, and the ‘field’ of her ‘heart’ searches to find an embalming effect through a bundle of ‘myrrh’ – another imagery of Nature that palliates her anxious authorial stance.

Rossetti’s implicit desire to achieve this ‘humble hopeful quiet psalm’ is recorded most strikingly throughout the whole corpus of her Nature poetry which, in totality, builds up within two discretely diverging traditions. In an article entitled ‘Christina Rossetti: The Devotional Poet and the Rejection of Romantic Nature’, Catherine Musello Cantalupo distinguishes these two traditions as ‘typological’ and ‘Romantic’. She expatiates on this distinction in the following way:

By “typological” nature poem, I mean a poem that reads nature as Christian exegetes have traditionally read the Bible: nature contains “types” or symbols of divine attributes and divine “messages”. This view of nature differs significantly from that of the high Romantics in this respect: the Romantics believe in a goal of communion with nature since they see nature as informed by a benevolent spirit (immanence). They have infinite hope in human constructiveness, but they concede that constructiveness and joy finally

depend on the individual’s, and society’s, proper sustaining and ordering relationship to nature. Religious allegorists believe in human constructiveness too, but as a free gift from God, a God much greater than his created nature (transcendence). For religious allegorists, the significance of nature is that God concretely reveals himself through the multitude of signs; nature provides a set of antitypes or analogies.\textsuperscript{54}

Rossetti’s puzzlement about the Romantic contemplation of nature emanates from her fervid allegiance to this creed of analogy. Recognizably, she feels herself to be epistemologically very curious and perturbed – a trait she acquires from the Romantics: ‘How do subject and object meet in a meaningful relationship? By what means do we have a significant awareness of the world?’\textsuperscript{55} Rossetti has occasionally taken up the procedure of deciphering Nature and the elements constituting it, together with the transformations in her experience of Nature and her sporadic poetic expressions, in the manner of Wordsworth and Shelley. The quintessential discrepancy lies in the way in which the poets perceive what Nature actually epitomizes.

In her major poems, Rossetti clearly presents an expostulation on Romanticism, an effort that evolves as a perceptive assessment of the movement and that provides an exegesis on life and the predicaments of her Christian belief and certitude. Her poems do benefit from the Romantics, the introspective elucidation of natural spectacles being primarily concerned with Romantic subjectivity. But this impetus towards the subjective alienated self is eventually triumphed over by the Christian point of view. The philosophy of Nature is in dissension with the analogical postulation to the extent that on the one hand, divinity is deeply embedded in the fabric of the Romantic poet’s Nature, and on the other, divinity is silhouetted by the Christian concept of Nature. But the Christian construct of Nature as a ‘sacrament’ is easily disorientated

by a reference to pantheism and therefore needs to be scrupulously distinguished from it. In Christian theology, the sacramental dogma of Nature is significantly concerned with the working of a ‘grace’, which involves the mind to discern, identify and believe in the presence of a transcendental God. The Romantics perceived Nature to be replete with the sense of the divine so much so that God is inseparably associated with the idea of Nature and man’s self-enlightenment. Unlike Wordsworth, who believes Nature to be a source of development of the poet’s mind and sometimes also studies her as the reification of the soul, as well as a form of perpetuation of his own existence, Rossetti theorized Nature as emblematic of divine wisdom and knowledge. This disparity in thought has significant corollaries. For instance, the Romantics discover a ‘never-failing principle’ in Nature, as Wordsworth proclaims in the following lines:

O Nature! Thou has fed
My lofty speculations; and in thee,
For this uneasy heart of ours, I find
A never-failing principle of joy
And purest passion.\(^{56}\)

Wordsworth’s urge to identify the inspiration he derives from Nature as a prerogative and his conviction that only Nature is the origin of the revival of the ‘godhead’ in the anxious poet, can barely be demarcated as ‘sacramentalism’ since it does not involve the action of an intervening grace affiliating humanity to God through Nature. On the other hand, Rossetti does not idealize Nature, which coupled with her human nature, appears to be fallen, and only partially rejuvenated by ‘grace’. She, being a self-conscious poet, is also fervently perceptive of the consequences of a fallen nature and of the chasm between Nature and divinity. She correlates

this associative logic to the doctrine of analogy in *Letter and Spirit* when she alludes to ‘the inadequacy of aught temporal to shadow forth that which is eternal’.  

Rossetti’s investigation of Nature entails a ‘principle of joy’ and she is circumspect to identify it unfailingly. Her thematization of Nature differed conspicuously from the Romantic ideology since Rossetti inhibited the rabid allurement of Nature for the fear of fetishizing her. She firmly contended that God is wholly transcendental, not intrinsic and immanent, and Nature, being a possible impediment to spiritual communion, has seldom any role to perform. It is mainly dissociation that she is concerned with, and not a unified alliance. This anti-Romantic contention of dissociation typifies a religious standpoint of Nature that is both magnanimous and traditionally conservative and hence appears to be a stringent form of austerity. In Rossetti’s view, deification of Nature is a perplexing desecration which shows the culpability of the age and this position she convincingly asserts in *The Face of the Deep*. She was unequivocally reacting against the Romantic penchant for fetishizing Nature and the self. She thus observes that ‘A world of mere opinions and mere fancies, of daydreams and castles in the air, is antagonistic to the true and substantial world of revelation, and is more hollow and unavailing than was Jonah’s gourd’.  

In *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti describes Nature from two points of view – as a pattern and as an origin of vitality, and it is the second view that Rossetti disavows. The paradise is ‘spread out above all humankind as an open scroll’ declaring the ‘Glory of God’,  

but Nature is not so considerably essential in comparison with the significance of ‘heaven’:

Looking forward to this [heaven], what terrestrial sight is worth hankering after because of beauty or majesty? It will pass by and be no more seen; no, nor peered after ….

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grieved and grudged because I could not betake myself to a vantage ground whence to watch an eclipse: the grief might have been simply blameless, but the grudge proved that I was in a double sense loving darkness rather than light.⁶⁰

Intelligible enough from the literal and metaphorical implications of the passage is the indubitable segregation that Rossetti makes between the natural and the spiritual. The expressions, ‘beauty’, ‘majesty’, ‘hankering’, ‘grieved’ and ‘grudged’, have Romantic associations but they also reflect Rossetti’s experiential stance. Primarily, she pines for Nature, but subsequently she desires to have a glimpse of that ‘terrestrial light’ which is ‘worth-hankering’, and the grief of not being able to ‘betake’ herself is exacerbated by the denial of Nature’s transcendental beauty. She derives the elixir of life from heaven, and in the act of diminution of the glory of Nature she actually reveals her dilemmatic ‘double sense’ about ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ and her absolute discomfiture as to the fact that she loved ‘darkness rather than light’, thereby polarizing Nature and heaven and, consequently, demystifying the former and glorifying the latter.

This discrepancy between Romantic and natural metaphysicality and the Christian respect for detachment and self-abnegation is also reflected in ‘The Thread of Life’ and ‘An Old World Thicket’, where Rossetti impugns Romantic suppositions and values.⁶¹ The ideological dichotomy prevalent in Rossetti’s nature poems actually reveals two different selves of the poet, both of which are evidently religious. One eulogizes God through a clear perception of prototypical Nature, employing both exultant and dismal images, and the other is *compos mentis* and inhibits self-intimidation. She questions, objects and strives to acquiesce in the conformist

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⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 231.

⁶¹ In *Christina Rossetti* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963, pp. 320-4), Lona Mosk Packer suggests 1877 as a possible date for these poems and discusses Rossetti’s reading of Wordsworth’s ‘Intimations Ode’ and Coleridge’s ‘Dejection’.
credence. These two attitudes are mutually restrictive and essentially symbolize typological and Romantic patterns of contemplating Nature.

Hence Rossetti’s poetry is replete with this equivocation of attitude towards Nature. In Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poems, a pulsating and vivacious Nature is closely comprehended, but not assayed and appraised. The state of being distanced from Nature is experienced as an intense form of dispossession and destitution. Rossetti’s speakers endure a similar separation from Nature, but at the same time are anxious of Nature’s reigning supremacy. Her poems demonstrate a polemical thesis which constitutes a process of self-deliberation, and its denouement is noticeable in a belief in an ineffable experience of divine transcendence. To her, association with Nature may be a hindrance to spiritual maturation and, hence, dissociation is imperative.

In concordance with Romantic thought, Nature is an impeccable symbol of the reality of God’s presence and is a mode of synthesis with the transcendental. Coleridge hence exclaimed about Chamouni: ‘Who would be, who could be an Atheist in the valley of wonders!’ But Rossetti conceives of Nature as taciturn and disentangled and eventually as an impediment to the much-yearned-for experience of unification with God. For her, the indisputable truth is neither Nature’s tranquillity nor the poet’s inflectional nuances, but her own certitude and love for Christ and her sincere self-oblation. Rossetti presumes that in contradistinction to the inevitability of the essential being, the strength of the psyche is concealed in its uniqueness of being immortal and infinite. In the following portrayal, the immutability of the soul is affiliated with Nature’s unfolding magnificence and eventual decadence:

Ever mine own, while moons and seasons bring

From crudeness ripeness mellow and sanative;

Ever mine own, till Death shall ply his sieve;63

In *The Face of the Deep*, Rossetti professes:

The antitype determines the type, not this that …. It is pious to contemplate autumn, winter, spring, summer, as emblematical of our dear Lord’s death, burial, resurrection, ascended glory; but to treat these as if they were a parable of those, is to deny the faith.64

As it is evidently perceivable, Rossetti does not contravene the fact that Nature, considered as ‘the type’ and as determined against the ‘antitype’, may actually reflect a spiritual enigma. But she is also reactive to the non-conformist dogma that informs the metaphysical and the inexplicable. Rossetti is passionate about whisking past the physical manifestations of Nature in order to perceive God through Christ. The task of the poet is to disseminate the benevolence of her soul to the world through faith and love.

Hence, we find that Rossetti develops a poetics of Nature that transcends itself from its association with the corporeal natural reality and elevates her soul to unite with God, wherein she finds the ultimate solace from her anxiety of creation. The materiality of the mundane world could not assuage her unease and provide her with the necessary relief and assurance. She primarily feels allured by the Romantic ideology of meditating on Nature and her myriad forms of beauty, but later she inconsolably seeks communion with the divine. She recognizes that Nature is God’s work and believes that the female poet’s power lies deeply entrenched in the strength of reverencing and glorifying the sacred, often thought to be her renunciatory pose, which again may be seen as the sublimation of her imagination from the palpable and the

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tangible to the transcendental – a process of complete ‘desensorization’ of the natural world and an exaltation to an idealistic world of the spiritual and the eternal:

An Everywhere of Silver
With Ropes of Sand
To keep it from effacing
The Track called land.  

Emily Dickinson’s scholastic cognition of language, however, is best exhibited in her contemplation of this natural and experiential world. The enthusiasm with which Dickinson celebrates Nature – the spectacles and the manifestations – was, as the expressions corroborate, a concern of such immense importance as to impinge on the poet’s thought and understanding. She proves to be most accomplished in depicting the way in which she observes things. She examines both the deep-seated investigations of avant-garde poetry and those of the conventional lyric. She closely considers both ‘the Outside’ and the ‘in’ of objects and tries to demonstrate the correlation between the two. She substantiates the presence of the beholder and occasionally enables her/him to perceive the objects s(he) visualizes. We do find that she takes delight in the manifestations of Nature and reveals them through her verses.

The lines cited above from Poem 884 invoke almost an absolutely joyful sensation. The poet does not approve of the silvery ‘everywhere’ which suggests a mysterious mode of silence. There is an imperturbable serenity in the moon-blanchèd landscape with the placid water in the midst and with a consciousness that peace is ephemeral. But the objects are nonetheless a part of

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66 Ibid., Poem 1097.
the natural reality. ‘In a poem of this sort’, as Ezra Pound remarked of his own imagist verse, ‘one is trying to record the precise instance when a thing outward and objective transforms itself or darts into a thing inward and subjective’.

Dickinson’s mode of versification was most venerated by the propounders of the Imagist Movement, which had a constructive influence on the progress and development of modern poetry. Her representation of the humming-bird, distinguished for moving twice as swiftly as other birds, is often adduced as a remarkable prototype of explanatory writing:

A Route of Evanescence
With a revolving Wheel –
A Resonance of Emerald –
A Rush of Cochineal –
And every Blossom on the Bush
Adjusts its tumbled Head –
The mail from Tunis, probably,
An easy Morning’s Ride –

In addition to the above illustration, Dickinson’s observation of a humming-bird has found expression in the following manner:

Within my Garden, rides a Bird
Upon a single Wheel –
Whose spokes a dizzy Music make
As ‘twere a travelling Mill –

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67 Ezra Pound’s classic imagist poem, ‘In a Station of the Metro’, consists of two lines. The first draft of the couplet, according to Pound, was thirty lines long. See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), pp. 184, 197.

68 Emily Dickinson, Poem 1463.
But He, the best Logician,
Refers my clumsy eye –
To just vibrating Blossoms!
An Exquisite Reply!69

The aura of human individuality, inherent in imaginative writings, is primarily subdued in the richly embellished revelation of the ‘Resonance of Emerald’, an expression metaphorizing the iridescent, sonorous and alacritous humming-bird. Hence, the quick-witted reflection of the observer is astonishing and as felicitous as an acknowledgement of the midget bird as the representation itself. Both the bird and the beholder gradually dissolve into silence, resigning with vibrating resonances that fill the landscape. There is no other poem that Dickinson was so selective about sharing with her correspondents. It appeared first as a poem associated with the oriole and the essence of thought – ‘I … hope they are not untrue’ – in a letter to Helen Hunt Jackson in 1879.70 In early 1880, the poet dispatched a transcription of the poem to her friend and neighbour, Mrs. Edward Tuckerman, who was also the wife of the Professor of Botany at Amherst College and the sister-in-law of Frederick Tuckerman, himself a poet. In November 1880, Dickinson shared it, along with three of her other poems, with the perspicacious solicitation – ‘Reprove them as your own’ – to Thomas Higginson. She also communicated a copy to Mabel Loomis Todd in October 1882 and to Thomas Niles in April 1883.71

69 Ibid., Poem 500.
Writing in the nineteenth century, Dickinson maintained a quotidian and succinct pattern in spite of making sporadic utterances at times. In a poem delineating the bat, to take an example, she enunciates without explicitly mentioning the object thus: ‘His small Umbrella quaintly halved / Describing in the Air / An Arc alike inscrutable / Elate Philosopher.’ She has not merely glimpsed the bat, but she has keenly contemplated on the palpitating animal with all its idiosyncrasies. She takes careful heed of the fact that the bat’s sonority is so acute in its pitch that it becomes inaudible to the human ear and also that it can fly even in darkness. The sincerity of expression and the ecstasy of creation in a perplexing world are the imperatives to compose poetry on the part of an enraptured onlooker who neither thrusts upon us a grave depiction of the bat, nor conceals the creature from the reader. Hence, transforming it into an idealized personification would be to elevate both the bat and the poem over the accepted modes of thought and representation in imagist poetry.

A poem Dickinson once christened as ‘a chill Gift’ (the poet included the poem as ‘a chill Gift – My Cricket’ in a letter of mid-March 1883 to Thomas Niles) brings together the subtleties of the images with the exuberance of the one who partakes of the sedate pageantry of Nature:

Further in Summer than the Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive Mass.

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72 Emily Dickinson, Poem 1575.
Remit as yet no Grace  
No Furrow on the Glow  
Yet a Druidic Difference  
Enhances Nature now\textsuperscript{74} 

The departing ‘Summer’ gives rise to a deep thought and a ‘Druidic Difference’ that, in their turn, enable the poet to portray the season with its myriad reflections by way of employing stark visual images. The squawking of ‘the Birds / Pathetic from the Grass’ and the innumerous unfamiliar aphids and microbes constituting ‘A minor Nation’ are phantasmagoric in their mysterious audibility without being visibly present. The sensory effect of the poem is predominantly aural, with the reverberating sounds decisively appealing to the human ears. These are petty resonances – unostentatious onomatopoeic tones – yet they are in tune with the natural environs, the resounding vibrations of which are at once tranquil and fretful. By way of experiencing this multi-echoing choir, it is possible to presuppose that August is gradually on the decline. The bucolic faith consists of the idea that when such sounds are heard for the first time, frost is going to be six weeks away. The intensely simmering twelfth hour and the chirpy cicadas ‘Pathetic from the Grass’ will herald the winter, along with its snowy associations and other modes of a tranquil existence, which is, in its turn, analogous to the plaintive strains of the ‘spectral Canticle’ enhancing ‘Nature now’.

The essence of Dickinson’s nature poetry is that her verse exhibits a blend of an experienced Romantic inner perspicacity and scrupulously perused empirical natural spectacles and occurrences, a mélange which enables her to create beyond elementary and ornate poetry.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., Poem 1068.
The impeccability of language describing the ‘Winter Afternoons’ is surprising in that it voices the enigmatic theme of impermanence of life:

There’s a certain Slant of light,
Winter Afternoons –
That oppresses, like the Heft
Of Cathedral Tunes –

... ...

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

We feel that the strain of such incandescence, sprinkled throughout the winter sky, is equally weighty as the ‘Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes’. In spite of the fact that both the ‘Slant of light’ and the ‘Heft’ are not onerous, they are certainly repressive, since they portray ‘a certain Slant’ and ‘Tunes’ that actually augur the grim ordeal of seclusion and along with it an indubitable cosmic placidity. The ‘listening landscape’ seems to prognosticate ‘the look of Death’ in ‘the Distance’. The imagery of the poem, in its entirety, is a depiction of the experience of life, the reclusivity of the very being of man, and it is a testimony to the fact that all metaphorical typifications of the

universe are nonetheless sublime, yet gainsay the fact that human sensory perceptions can envisage the reality beyond death.

Dickinson preferred realistic details of portrayal of the beatific magnificence of Nature, using unorthodox and sometimes outré personifications. She imagines ‘An Antiquated Tree’ being treasured by the crow in ‘Corporation Coat’\(^\text{76}\) or she affirms that ‘Glass was the Street – in tinsel Peril / Tree and Traveller stood –’, but contrarily states that ‘Hearty with Boys the Road – / / Shot the lithe Sleds like shod vibrations’\(^\text{77}\) (Poem 1498). She enunciates with equivalent verve:

A Bird came down the Walk –
He did not know I saw –
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw[.]\(^\text{78}\)

Dickinson writes from the stance of an onlooker and develops the object, which is ‘A Bird’ in this poem, with personifying traits of an individual and bestows upon ‘him’ a distinctive attribute to which the poet herself also responds.

Several other images and visions of natural phenomena do enamour her and the uniqueness of her verses on Nature is that such spectacles also conspicuously articulate the lively enthusiasm with which such natural objects are invested. The reader feels effortlessly driven towards interpreting the phenomenon of sunset rather as a light that is ‘sparkling’ or ‘fading’ than as something redundant. She records the impressions of a momentous American sunset, presenting it as being in semblance with an itinerant band of circus men who had wrapped up their tents and ‘dissolved’ ‘utterly’ to some other country:

\(^{76}\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 1514.
\(^{77}\) *Ibid.*, Poem 1498.
\(^{78}\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 328, p. 261.
I’ve known a Heaven, like a Tent –
To wrap its shining Yards –
Pluck up its stakes, and disappear –
Without the sound of Boards
Or Rip of Nail – Or Carpenter –
But just the miles of Stare –
That signalize a Show’s Retreat –
In North America –

No Trace – no Figment of the Thing
That dazzled, Yesterday,
No Ring – no Marvel –
Men, and Feats –
Dissolved as utterly – 79

Dickinson revelled in experimenting with apparently unexceptional, but ethereal, experiences such as a golden sunset. Her witticisms and her ingenious repartee are exceptionally singular and free from the callowness and insufficiency of premature composition:

I never told the buried gold
Upon the hill – that lies –
I saw the sun – his plunder done
Crouch low to guard his prize. 80

She almost poetically marauds the terms and questions: ‘Whether while I ponder / Kidd will sudden sail –’. 81

Hence, in spite of the fact that Dickinson may ostensibly seem to repudiate the existence of a transcendental divine identity, her reflections on the impermanent objects of Nature do give

79 Ibid., Poem 243, pp. 175-6.
us the perception that she works towards mortalizing the visions of the phenomenal world in order to construct a cosmic identity and demonstrate its stupendous glory and sublimity. She does indeed frolic among such familiar and undistinguished sights and surroundings and, in the process of metaphorizing them, leaves an implicit supplication for some space in the midst of the natural world in which she can create. She arduously remains in quest for meaning and neither accedes to the singularity of purport nor to the implications of human existence. It is this ceaseless interplay of multitudinous teleological variables existing behind this perpetual flow of human life that bewilders the poet and she rationalizes her puzzlement and strives to discover new meanings by moving from one object to the other, be it the cheerful cricket, winter afternoon, a golden sunset or the forest floor. This constant process of relocation precipitates anxiety in the female poet who earnestly solicits consolation and relief from the scruples and disquiet of authorship. We see Dickinson departing from the Romantics, both ideologically and thematically, since she neither glorifies nor idealizes Nature in the manner her Romantic predecessors did, nor does she present a magnanimous poetic self that resigns completely from natural sights and sounds and submits to the Supreme Saviour, in the manner in which Rossetti does.

In her seminal work, Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë, and Emily Dickinson, Margaret Homans has traced the Wordsworthian thesis of ‘feminization of nature’ and the idea of ‘Mother Nature’ as ‘the object of poet’s love’ and ‘the necessary complement to his imaginative project’:

William Wordsworth’s feminization of nature is the most obvious example of sexual polarization in the literary tradition that would have shaped women poets’ conception of poetry. When nature is Mother Nature for Wordsworth, she is valued because she is what the poet is not. She stands for a lost memory, hovering just at the edge of consciousness,
of a time before the fall into self-consciousness and into subject-object relations with nature, whether that original unity took place in earliest infancy or, fictively, before birth. As the object of the poet’s love, Mother Nature is the necessary complement to his imaginative project, the grounding of an imagination so powerful that it risks abstraction without her.\textsuperscript{82}

This Romantic presence of a ‘mother’ in the Nature the poet aspires to poetize is actually perceived as ‘a son’s mixture of devoted love’, but more significantly, as ‘resistance to the constraints, she would place on his imaginative freedom’.\textsuperscript{83} But, at the same time, this also tends to indicate that she would be nothing above and beyond what he desires her to be. The origin of the notion of matriarchy can be traced in the manner in which Homans does:

“This matriarchy is generally described as originating in the worship of fertility, in which the earth is a mother goddess and all nature, including humanity, is her creation and her domain.”\textsuperscript{84}

The question that arises here is the agreeability of the idea of sustaining such a matriarchal pattern, whether fictive or historically factual, of women being truly considered to be commensurate with, or superior to, men in actual parlance in competence and authority. There is an essential incongruity between the reality of women’s experiences and the theme of ‘matriarchization’. The maternal conception of Nature, as pioneered by Wordsworth, and its deification can barely be taken to be in reconciliation with the real everyday happenings in the lives of women.

Hence, the proto-realist Dickinson, in her poetry, was following the tradition of literary practice formulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson\textsuperscript{85}, a convention that perhaps outdistanced

\textsuperscript{82} Homans, \textit{Women Writers and Poetic Identity}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{83} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{84} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 13.
Wordsworth’s reverent observations of Nature. Emerson was, in truth, more egotistical in contrast to the British Romantic philosophers, but his magnification of this poetic stance proved felicitous for Dickinson, the female-poet-inheritor. His self-subsuming theorization takes a nugatory stance of the idea of the ‘non-self’ and this has convenienced Dickinson’s poetics, since she is not resisted by the corresponding implacable and ‘mythical’ metaphor of the female individual self and her hopes and aspirations. Liberated, as Emerson’s self-inclusive thought is, it adopts an asexual stance since the notion of this almost austere inclusivity unequivocally entails an exclusion from any cognizable idea identifiable by sexuality. It is Dickinson’s use of rhetorics, rather than her portrayal of Nature as mother with ‘tender majesty’, that brandishes her femaleness and underpins her rage and restlessness as a female poet, allowing her to construct an evolutionary poetics of Nature that not merely departs from, but stands in stark distinction to the epochal ‘Mother Nature’ engendered by the Romantics, who responded to the son in a way that the daughter’s voice remained unheard and inconsequential:

\begin{quote}
This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me –
The simple News that Nature told –
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see –
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen –
Judge tenderly – of Me\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{86} Emily Dickinson, Poem 441, p. 340.
Dickinson took up this theme of the hitherto peripheralized and unuttered song of the daughter-poet by contemplating a hermeneutic construct that, through apparently atypical and unorthodox metaphorization, transubstantiates the objects of the natural world which, in their turn, thus emerge as a poetic correlative to the ideal and transcendental world.

Dickinson, thus, professes a new poetics, departing noticeably from both Barrett Browning and Rossetti, in which she refuses to perceive art as a primary imitation of phenomenal events or as the process of invocation of a creative muse through inspiration, that was traditionally believed to be something true to the poet’s imagination. Instead, she understands it as a palpable human progression from genesis to extinction in which the poet acts as the ‘sublimator’ of the natural objects she sees and experiences. The artist is required to have the necessary education and skill to perform her artistry and, hence, it is the craftsman as the performer of her task who wrings ‘The Attar from the Rose’.  

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87 Emily Dickinson, Poem 675.