CHAPTER 4

‘Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven?’: Female Ire and the Poetics of the Religious

One of the most ardent female champions of women’s rights has said that it is high time that the woman’s side of religion should be heard from the pulpit, that men have too long had the monopoly, and have set the masculine aspect of Christianity too exclusively and persistently forward. Begging the lady’s pardon, I cannot but think that the exact contrary is the truth. To me, judging from the sermons I have heard and read, and the devotional books I have examined, it is precisely the feminine way of regarding theology, and not the masculine, which is in the ascendant amongst us …. The broad fact is that a negative and unprogressive faith is usually taught, and that by all schools alike. The shibboleths may vary in accent, but they are all pitched in the treble cleff, and one does long for the mighty bass of a masculine theology.¹

In the above-quoted passage, the author R. W. Littledale tries to convince the male reader that women would have been accepted as being far more affable had they been educated in religion and spirituality, as such knowledge would have helped to save them from those fastidious and facetious charges from which they never could virtually retrieve themselves. To put it more appropriately, ‘women often jar against the sensitive nerves of men’.² Tradition has ever defined domesticity as being a woman’s domain with utmost stringency. The need is to distort the uni-accented shibboleth of an ascendant masculine theology and associate divine wisdom with her domestic role. Littledale in The Religious Education of Women is clearly apprehensive about the concept of the feminine in theology – a factor which Lynda Palazzo

² Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. 37.
argues with consummate appropriateness as ‘what promises to be a document on women’s religious emancipation is ultimately oppressive’. Christianity had such a high-pitched male overture that it had virtually driven critics, to whom the fallacy did not wholly belong, to infer that the idea of the feminine can be, we hardly realize with what extent of the perception of subjugation, associated with ‘inferiority’ and ‘weakness’.

What Littledale understands as ‘the feminine way of regarding theology’ is regarded by Palazzo as ‘simply a projection of the way the male-dominated Church would like women to relate to theology’. But what we see here is that the so-called ‘virile’ Church did not limit its masculine preachings to only what or how women would perceive theology, but set up a societal framework at large which would unconditionally be governed by such a ‘male’ concept of divinity.

It is true that Littledale was sympathetic in his attitude to women’s grievances in theosophical matters, to be precise. More so, the ambition surrounding ‘the feminine way of regarding theology’ is clearly evident when he maintains that such a belief ‘is in the ascendant amongst us …’ He asserted with a radical tenor that to confine the ideology of Christianity within narrowly defined masculine bounds is to develop ‘a negative and unprogressive faith’.

Hence, his disposition can, with undoubted correctness, be referred to as being contrastive of that of most of the well-known High Church figures. He goes on to maintain that the religious education imparted at the time was tyrannously unilateral in the sense that it deprived women of ‘wholesome and harmonious development’ and hence ‘the purpose of God’ is deliberately

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3 Ibid., p. 37.
4 Ibid., p. 38.
5 Ibid., p. 38.
counteracted and threatened.\(^6\) Palazzo substantiates the problem by putting it aptly in the following manner:

… stripping a prospective convent sister of ties of affection and of possessions is repressive and ‘is an effort to crush out the affections and the ties of association’ in themselves necessary to avoid ‘selfism’ and to promote ‘altruism’.\(^7\)

In a discussion on the right to religious education of women, the Miltonic reverberation of ‘He for God only, she for God in him’ remains unconflicted, reflecting femininity as a part of the image of God. With this divine feminine image in mind, Littledale claims that women ‘should be strong, true, liberal, wise, and just’. He also felt the importance of them having the ‘capacity trained into practical efficiency and decisiveness; like the noble portrait in the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs’.\(^8\)

In an interesting study entitled *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis*, Ruth Jenkins refers to a movement which evolved from the exclusion of women from divine and ‘sacred authority’.\(^9\) It ‘attempted to resurrect the female aspects of God’, and prognosticated even ‘a female messiah, tapping the historic privilege Christianity had given the oppressed to challenge the world’.\(^10\) The wealth of significant critiques on the issue also includes Florence Nightingale who borrowed from the Old Testament prophetic tradition, ‘revised the incarnation to include female oppression’,\(^11\) and went to the extent of urging

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\(^7\) Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology*, p. 37.
\(^8\) Quoted in Palazzo, p. 37.
‘potential female prophets to herald the coming of a new Christ, “perhaps a female Christ” ’.\textsuperscript{12} She was a disbeliever of the established masculine doctrine of religion and hence accused the Church of England as having distorted ‘the character of God’.\textsuperscript{13} This ideology eventually led her to give birth to her own ‘liberation theology’\textsuperscript{14} concerning the sanctity of devoting oneself to nursing. The work of J. Ellice Hopkins is nonetheless reminiscent of what our present concern is constituted of. She reclaimed ‘female sacrality through the sisterhood in her work among London’s prostitutes’. She found ‘spiritual relief’ in being able to ‘undermine the male monopoly on the administration of the sacred’ ‘by identifying personally with Christ in her mission to rescue desecrated womanhood’.\textsuperscript{15} Hopkins emerged as another ‘foremother of contemporary Christian feminism’\textsuperscript{16} in her attempt to ‘re-enact’ and ‘redeem the role of Christ’\textsuperscript{17} particularly at a time when women were excluded by the Church from priestly activity.

Given this historical backdrop, we can revert to the theme of religion as an expressive mode to ventilate feelings of anxiety of authorship. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s earlier poetical attempts revolved around religious as well as social themes. Initially it was Evangelical Christianity that interested her and she began to write poetry as a religious pursuit. The poet’s mind wishes to free itself amidst the hills and their ‘pleasant freshness’ in ‘A Sea-Side Meditation’. The ‘thymele of Nature’ allows the poet to be oblivious of the anxieties of life and artistic hardship. The ‘sea’ in the poem is sternly tranquil and glorious and liberates the poet’s soul to achieve magnanimity in congruence with the hugeness of the ocean. Poetry, to Barrett

\textsuperscript{13} Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{14} Jenkins, Reclaiming Myths of Power, p. 63.
\textsuperscript{15} Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. xiv.
\textsuperscript{17} Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. xiv.
Browning, can scarcely be an artistic construct evolving from the ‘pandemonic walls of sense’. She regrets that ‘we love this bondage’ of ‘everyday’s event, and want, and wish’ and ‘enchain our deathless part, constrain our strength, / And waste the goodly stature of our soul’. The poet seems to be absolutely certain in realizing the fact that ‘we love’ the ‘bondage’ of temporal life and are eager to cling to the ‘sordid and unholy thing’. This is how she stresses the way in which we tend to depart from the truth of God’s creation and she boldly carries out her inference by saying that even human thought is reduced to ‘a mechanism of spirit’. The sea resembles the unbounded span of the human soul which only the poet is capable of liberating from the ephemeral. Life exists as a ‘sublime’ text, which is impregnated with the ‘magnific store’ of poetry. The sea, we feel, when we examine and sense the poet’s intention, exists as an indeterminate entity which evokes the underlying strain of the religious. The anxiety is subtly evident in the expression ‘corporal feebleness’ which debilitates dreams and even human thought. She raises the issue in the following manner:

Else should we be like gods; else would
the course
Of thought’s free wheels, increased in
speed and might
By an eterne volution, oversweep
The heights of wisdom, and invade her
depths:

And, hereafter comes the most fundamental of all philosophical inquiries:

So, knowing all things, should we have
The epistemological investigation culminates in the unassailable logicality of the theme encapsulated in the sceptical ‘For is not Knowledge power?’ The anxious poetic mind realizes the vainness of the struggle with flesh and shrinks almost into an apprehensive consternation.

Another earlier poetic rendition of the religious is entitled ‘The Image of God’, which is characteristically prologued by ‘I am God, and there is none like me’ which derives from Isaiah (xlvi.9). The poem clearly begins with apostrophizing the ‘glorious sun’, the inextinguishable fire of which can be assuaged by clouds and its ‘fiery wrath’ be impugned by sages on the one hand, and eagles, on the other. Hereafter, the poet brings the ‘bounteous earth’ into context, referring to the various ‘forms of beauty’ and ‘sounds of mirth’ with which it is intrinsically and inseverably associated with. But, in spite of such a fascinating association of multifarious natural constructs and sounds, earthly magnificence is subject to calamitous decay and degeneration brought about by despicable worms. The transience of natural phenomena is expressed in the following manner:

Thy golden harvests stay
For seed and toil – thy power shall pass away.

The insatiability of the deathless soul lies in the reality of ‘sin, and shame, and agony’ that ‘within thy deepness lie’. The poet glorifies the mighty soul which is capable of unconceivable suffering and grief of a regal magnitude, which, in its turn, is constituted of the torturous unease

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of being displaced from a masculinized artistic tradition associating divine wisdom with male perception. We get a subjective strain in the following lines:

Then art THOU like to God;
Thou, who didst bear the sin, and shame,
and woe –
O Thou, whose sweat did flow –
Whose tears did gush – whose brow was
dead and low?²⁰

Expressions like ‘sin’, ‘shame’, ‘sweat’, ‘tears’, ‘grief’ and ‘love’ do, without any attempt of delimiting the scope of the context, genderize the mind of the reader by subtly drawing her/his attention to the precariousness and uncertainty of the poetic vocation, especially when the artist is a woman.

‘Idols’ is another illuminating instance of such anxiety which the poet expresses with a sudden jerk, which not only stirs her, but also the readers, with the shock of realization of the preposterousness of worship of idols. It is true that the theme adopted here has a distinguishable subject matter that deals with idolatry. The poet is unequivocally endeavouring to seek a divine sanctuary, since she speaks with resentment at the initiation:

How weak the gods of this world are –
And weaker yet their worship made
me!
I have been an idolator
Of three – and three times they be-

trayed me!

Initially the poet was enamoured by the varying manifestations of nature and the beauty ‘In bowery earth and starry heaven, / In ebbing sea, and river gliding’. But she could barely associate her sensory experience with her experiences and emotions emanating from such aesthetic allurements. The mind reverts to the divine so much so that the poet exclaims: ‘Fame! – Beauty! – idols madly chosen – / Were yet of gold; but thou art STONE!’ The callow and naive worship of idolistic forms brings within the poet a realization of its intensely unrewarding experience later. She endeavours hard to seek emotional and artistic solace:

Lord! take mine heart! O first and fairest,

Whom all creation’s ends shall hear;

Who deathless love in death declarest!

None else is bounteous – famous – dear.²¹

This psychological and intellectual succour is no less sought in another religious outpouring called ‘Hymn’. The poet arduously contends that, ‘Since without Thee we do no good, / And with Thee do no ill’, she would make her earnest appeal to the Almighty thus: ‘Abide with us in weal and woe, – / In action and in will.’²² The two ideas envisaged in ‘action’ and ‘will’ are intrinsically indicative of the assiduous task of writing poetry, as Barrett Browning, in her Preface to the first edition of ‘An Essay on Mind’, defines the poetic task as ‘the enthusiasm of

²¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘Idols’, p. 76.
²² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘Hymn’, p. 76.
the understanding’.  

She yearns to be enlightened with ‘the light of truth’ which is, significantly enough, ‘More welcome than the sun’ to her, when ‘By hours of day’, ‘our feet / O’er hill and valley run.’  

The ‘light of truth’ is undeniably predominant in all her artistic attempts, since to her, ‘Poetry is essentially truthfulness; and the very incoherences of poetic dreaming are but the struggle and the strife to reach the True in the Unknown.’  

‘Man’s experience’ is fraught with religion, and ‘religion’ to Barrett Browning implies the truth of the ‘intercourse between God and the human soul’ and poetry is ‘expressive’ of this ‘exalted state’ of humanity.  

It is in tune with this philosophy that the poet thus concludes the poem with the following:

Abide with us, abide with us,

While flesh and soul agree;

And when our flesh is only dust,

Abide our souls with Thee

It was during the 1830s that Barrett Browning was unswervingly composing a large number of poems with regard to religious themes and motifs and a reference to her whole corpus of religious poems would possibly deviate us from the main theme of the angst of an author who is both a woman and a poet by vocation. The hallmark of the poet is faithfulness and the momentous enterprise she undertakes is wrought with unflinching truth and integrity:

We dealt with books, we trusted men,

And in our own blood drenched the pen,

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24 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘Hymn’, p. 76.
26 Ibid., p. 80.
As if such colours could not fly.  

The conscious poetic self becomes solemn and contemplative in ‘A Sabbath Morning at Sea’. The poet bathes in the luminescence of the glorious morning with ‘the new wondrous sight’ of the ‘turbulent’ ‘waters’ around her and the ‘impassive’ ‘skies’ over her. Here we are offered an image of a pre-meditated self who is now ‘quiet from emotion’. The portraiture of such ‘magentic quietude’ reveals the sedate and the imperturbable soul of the delineator as ‘sky and sea made mighty room / To inaugurate the vision’. The sacred morning is touched by a divine effervescence radiated from the sun and kept unprofaned by the earth. The ‘self-guarded’ and ‘self-doubted’ voice of authorship rings with comparatively more obvious transparency:

Away with thoughts fantastical!

I would be humble to my worth,

Self-guarded as self-doubted:

The poet derives consummate artistic pleasure and delectation amidst ‘nature’s fixed benignities’. She yearns sincerely to experience ‘an endless sabbath morning’ to keep the inextinguishable fire of poetic creation ever burning.

The sincerity of the poet’s inner self pours out touchingly in ‘The Soul’s Expression’, striving hard to ensure that the poetic voice be heard. The problem here is the struggle to make an utterance and give expression to the dreams, thoughts and feelings that she experiences within:

With stammering lips and insufficient sound

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28 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘My Heart and I’, p. 566.
I strive and struggle to deliver right\textsuperscript{30}

The verse gives us a feeling that there can barely be a better enunciation reflective of the apprehension associated with female authorship. We derive, without effort, that the words ‘strive’ and ‘struggle’ do not merely bear the significance of intellectual unease and discomfiture, but also set the theme of the poem in the later part where we find this apprehension to turn into a positive fear of the catastrophic utterance which will bring about the destruction of the flesh and the dreadful ‘apocalypse of the soul’. The mind of the woman poet yearns to soar high ‘from the dark edges of the sensual ground’ to the ‘mystic depth and height’ of ‘the infinite’, with grandeur and majesty befitting of such a magnificent elevation.

The magnanimity of the seraphic soul of the poet lies in the act of forgiving the ‘haughty world’ with all the audacious wrongs it has inflicted on her mind, which is heavily laden with worldly woes – that are still unable to perturb the poetic song – both of sorrow, since ‘earth is low’, and of joy, because ‘heaven is high’. Whether it is the ecstasy of creation or the despondency of intellectual sterility, the seraphic song continues in ‘The Seraph and the Poet’.\textsuperscript{31}

The work of Elizabeth Barrett Browning which is considered as the \textit{magnum opus} of the \textit{Poems} of 1844 is ‘A Drama of Exile’. ‘Critics found it lacking in unity, coherence, and emphasis, and they pronounced it a dismal failure.’\textsuperscript{32} It may seem to be true since the treatment of a theme, as enormous and magnitudinal as that of an epic, appears somewhat ‘tenuous’\textsuperscript{33} and attenuated, but the artistic intention of the poet is remarkably candid and unequivocal as she expresses it in the ‘Preface to the Edition of 1844’:

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\textsuperscript{30}Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘The Soul’s Expression’, p. 328.\\
\textsuperscript{31}Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘The Seraph and the Poet’, p. 328.\\
\textsuperscript{32}Radley, \textit{Elizabeth Barrett Browning}, p. 68.\\
\textsuperscript{33}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 68.
\end{flushright}
My subject was the new and strange experience of the fallen humanity, as it went forth from Paradise into the wilderness; with a peculiar reference to Eve’s allotted grief, which, considering that self-sacrifice belonged to her womanhood, and the consciousness of originating the Fall to her offence, appeared to me imperfectly apprehended hitherto, and more expressible by a woman than a man.\textsuperscript{34}

Though Barrett Browning took pleasure in the theme of the ‘exile’, in ‘the experiences and sorrows of Adam and Eve as they wended their solitary way out of Eden’,\textsuperscript{35} she clearly severed herself, both in treatment of the theme and in her position, from the exalted poetic acumen of Milton:

I had promised my own prudence to shut close the gates of Eden between Milton and myself, so that none might say I dared to walk in his footsteps. He should be within, I thought, with his Adam and Eve unfallen or falling, – and I, without, with my EXILES, – I also an exile! It would not do.\textsuperscript{36}

Later she indicates her ‘own responsibilities’ and clearly distinguishes between Milton’s poetic genius and hers:

… since I bear, of course, my own responsibilities. For the rest, Milton is too high, and I am too low, to render it necessary for me to disavow any rash emulation of his divine faculty on his own ground; while enough individuality will be granted, I hope, to my poem, to rescue me from that imputation of plagiarism which should be too servile a thing for every sincere thinker.\textsuperscript{37}

A similar strain of poetic sincerity of the powerful verse fable, \textit{Goblin Market}, reveals to us a poet for whom religion was not only an impassioned conviction but also a way to vent her authorial distress and perturbation. The profound religious strain in Christina Rossetti’s poetry

\textsuperscript{35} Radley, \textit{Elizabeth Barrett Browning}, p. 68.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 102.
affiliates the temporal world to the supra-real domain of human existence. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) undertook the venture of publishing a majority of those poems which her brother William had meticulously identified and designated as ‘Devotional Poems’ in his edition of her *Collected Poems*. The SPCK also published three comprehensive volumes of Rossetti’s prose – *Called to be Saints* (1833), *Time Flies* (1885) and *The Face of the Deep* (1892). Accumulating the poems formerly published along with the prose works, the SPCK brought out *Verses* in 1893. In 1904, William chronologized the order of the *Verses* and with this emerged the *Poetical Works*. Much later, David Kent in 1979 pointed out that the collection was categorized into eight sections demonstrating Rossetti’s own perception of a distinct thematic unity. His contention, however, was that importance should be given to the logicality of the sequential order rather than an arrangement according to chronology. The former kind of study is more significant in religious scholarship on Rossetti, since certain strategies and motifs recur as she almost takes delight in a discernible structure of liturgical studies. It is quite perspicuous in Rossetti’s poetry, generally speaking, that the speaker impassionedly engages in a verbal and devotional conversation with the Lord. We often find the poet to ruminate upon the significance and implication of Christ’s sacrifice and the connotations attached to death and the life beyond. Celebration of a particular holiday, followed by enunciations of such a theme or a Biblical text, is also often noticeable in her religious renditions. The poems are nonetheless Victorian in their religiosity, piety and devoutness and, of course, reflective of what we are in this study primarily concerned with – the anxiety and exertion of authorship.

Apparentiy self-abnegating and self-immolating, Rossetti’s poems exhibit an inadequate literary and artistic ingenuity and craftsmanship. Critics sometimes find her to be perfunctory, cursory and superficial, without perhaps the desired metaphysicality in her verses. Her longing
for Jesus is often paraphrased as her desire for union with a man. In spite of these criticisms, along with others related to her repressed or frustrated sexuality as well as hysterical and unpredictable emotions, Rossetti’s religious lyrics also often seem anticipatory and, for obvious reasons, circumlocutory and periphrastic, with the speaker reiterating the same desperate argument with a familiar impetuosity, thereby calling for a habitual and perceivably strategic model of representation. We can barely afford to miss the series of imagery that involves the dissolution of everything, the arrival of the apocalypse or its looming large with an impending sense of apprehension, the evolution of a New Jerusalem and the streaming of the souls upwards into the luminescence of a pellucid and lustrous heaven. The poet persona watches, weeps and prays, being always wakeful and yearning for rest. The anxiety seems to be nonetheless manifest in the speaker’s earnest and true endeavour to find a way to consume time and thus hope for an abrupt reversal whereby all losses will be redeemed.

Yet it seems that the carefully manoeuvred topography and the unshirking and, at times even monotonously, inflexible stance of the speaker reveal something more than the despondency of the author’s literary creativity. The acute sense of personal loss results from stoic endurance and the anxiety of restitution of the woman writer’s right to create. Rossetti’s literary mode of self-effacement helps her to carve out a distinctive and inimitable self both as a woman and as a poet. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out, Rossetti belongs to a constellation of women poets who, from Anne Finch’s day onwards, have nurtured an ‘aesthetic of renunciation’, substituting suffering and self-abnegation for the ‘self-assertion lyric poetry traditionally demands’. They emphasize the deep austerity of asceticism that influenced Rossetti’s choices in art and life; in this, she differs crucially from her two great contemporaries,

Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson. Barrett Browning consequently and noticeably substitutes an ‘aesthetic of service’ for an ‘aesthetic of pain’, with the poet-speaker, Aurora Leigh, achieving a ‘reasonable compromise between assertion and submission’.\(^{39}\) Dickinson, on the other hand, though living in reclusion as a nun, becomes voracious and as mentioned by Gilbert and Gubar with appropriateness and precision, the poet becomes ‘greedy, angry, secretly or openly self-assertive’\(^{40}\) in the reflection of the poetic self in verse. In contrast to the Dickinsonian outpouring of remarkably flagrant poetics, Rossetti in her aesthetics remains devoutly unswerving and veracious amidst relentless pain and impoverishing destitution. She ventilates her artistic discomposure and distress by depicting broken vows and futile and unyielding hopes, a premature process of degeneration and unproductive growth. We find her lyric persona and the subjects of her poetic narrative submissively awaiting a life of being positioned in ‘the lowest place’, maintaining a stoic stance against an unrewarding and unappeased desire. If the question of lyric self-assertion of the nineteenth-century woman poet is to be considered, the paradox of the whole matter lies in Rossetti’s creation of self by renouncing and abjuring the self and her invention, through religious versification, of a language that her literary contemporary, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, bequeathed her with. By offering to us almost a dramatized form of some literary and scriptural conventions through her poetry and by inflating the renunciatory position which actually thematizes her poems, Rossetti nevertheless remains extremely severed and alienated, yet intensely self-possessed. She has, nonetheless, magnanimously relinquished everything since seldom is anything in this world ‘enough’. The element of self-solipsism is quintessential in her in the sense that she possesses immense and indefatigable endurance until the end when her resolution to see and be seen ‘face to face’ shall

\(^{39}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 575.

\(^{40}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 564.
positively be gratified. ‘This everlasting face to face with God’ her contemporary, Barrett Browning, also nevertheless struggles to achieve. Rossetti presents an ever-observant self to an all-beholding God who does not recognize, even now, with the passage of time, her pristine and immaculate self:

Lord, didst Thou know that I was following Thee?

I weak and small
Yet Thy true lover, mean tho’ I must be,
Sinning and sorrowing – didst Thou see?
O Lord, Thou sawest all.41

In religious poetry, the theme of gender – who ‘sees’ and who is ‘seen’ – is in a sense precluded. The lyric speaker, who ruminates on an image of a suffering and transfigured divinity, and at the same time proffers an unworthy and a despicable self, is necessarily unassertive, quiescent, supine and passive, possessing a consciousness that disparages or abnegates her own powers, being at times an unmoved ‘stone’, as Rossetti avows in ‘Good Friday’:

Lord Jesus Christ, grown faint upon the Grass,

....

Thy love of me sufficed
To load upon Thee and make good my loss
In face of darkened heaven and earth that shook: –

In face of earth and heaven, take Thou my whole
Heart, O Lord Jesus Christ.42

At other times, she reveals a ‘female’ sensitivity awaiting God’s will. But the thematics of sight, due to the reason that it involves a contemplative gaze upon a face, belongs also to a secular tradition, where it has attained a definite, unequivocal and fixed gender categorization. From Sidney through Keats and Shelley to Dante Gabriel Rossetti, the poet cogitates as a male ‘seer’ who gazes upon a beloved – or an impassive, tranquil, imperturbable and serene, even an appalling, female face. This face responds to his look or does not, acts as a speculum of his soul or does not. In any case, it is always an ‘object’ of thought and creativity. A woman poet, hence, inevitably becomes prey to the anxiety of fragmentation of her artistic consciousness into an observer and an observed. Characteristically, she assumes both the roles, becoming the observer and the observed, the witness of the reification of self and very often a visual object bearing the reified self. Rossetti’s sense of self can perhaps be seen as anticipatory of Simone de Beauvoir’s description of the experience of the self as object and other.43 This alienated experience of the self can be perceived as heightened by the actual experience of being looked at. Beauvoir’s metaphor of the self was echoed by the art critic, John Berger, when he describes woman as being schismatic between the roles of the surveyor and the surveyed. The surveyor in the woman poet observes the surveyed in order to typify and demonstrate how the whole self is to be treated. In so exemplifying herself, the woman poet turns herself into an object, devoid of the capability to visualize and perceive, and most distinctly and specifically into ‘an object of vision: a sight’.44

Religious poetry, thus, seems to be a poetry of alienation, the watching self conscious as well as

42 Ibid., ‘Good Friday’, p. 436.
agonized by its cleft and a painful rift from a distant and perhaps inaccessible God. Hence, in Rossetti’s devotional poetry, the pattern of Christ’s life and death provides the immaculate correlation for the self, sequestrated as an object of vision:

It is the Voice of my Beloved that saith:

“I am the Way, the Truth, the Life. I go
Whither that soul knows well that followeth” –
O Lord, I follow, little as I know;
At this eleventh hour I rise and take
My life into my hand, and follow so,
With tears and heart-misgivings and heart-ache;\textsuperscript{45}

The aesthetics of renunciation, sprinkled all over Rossetti’s verse, cannot also be denied as transcending and hence transnarrativizing both the ‘aesthetic of pain’ and its trivialization and superficialization in lesser poets by endorsing an immaculate and timeless background and an emblematic motif for self-abnegation. By becoming both the observer and the observed, both the circumspective watcher as well as the ‘watched at’, Rossetti triumphs over the despondence, despair and impassivity intrinsic in the renunciatory stance. Religiosity in Rossetti aspires to reach to a novel magnitude when she remarks in her letter to Margaret Junkin Preston in the following assertive tone: ‘It is most blessed variety from the prevalent tone of the day when one finds distinct Christianity in combination with intellect, and finds it not ashamed to assert itself.’\textsuperscript{46} Hence, there can be little doubt that the religious standpoint Rossetti adopted differed greatly from the characteristics of the age she was writing in, inasmuch as she acknowledged the

\textsuperscript{46} Christina Rossetti, \textit{The Letters of Christina Rossetti} (e-version) ed. Antony H. Harrison (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2006), Letter 504, 27December, 1872. All Christina-Rossetti letters quoted subsequently in this chapter are taken from the following e-Source: \url{http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu:8080/crossetti}
power of the intellectual acumen required for artistic expression and assertion. At another place, we sense the poetic anxiety and dismay evolving from the archetypal gender discriminations that lay down prescriptions in regard to ecclesiastical positions of Priesthood. What can more vividly articulate the palpable perturbation and agitation Rossetti felt within herself than the following reflection in Letter 750 to Augusta Webster in 1878?

Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges? Not arrogating to myself but most earnestly desiring to attain to the character of a humble orthodox Xtain [sic], so it does appear to me; not merely under the Old but also under the New Dispensation. The fact of the Priesthood being exclusively man’s, leaves me in no doubt that the highest functions are not in this world open to both sexes: and if not all, then a selection must be made and a line drawn somewhere.

We are compelled to feel that the clarity and precision of the idea manifested in this comment is barely found in the poet’s verse, which lends itself to a metaphor of devout renunciation.

Reverting to the question of the anxiety of authorship in women writers, a comparison between Rossetti and Barrett Browning proves them to be starkly divergent from each other, since the latter wished to triumph over the stoic attitude, that ushered in the pose of death, in order to reinstate the beautiful open face as a woman’s own and to substitute the power of voiceless and unuttered representation by the power of living expression. In Aurora Leigh, the poet-protagonist encounters and exults over a series of misrepresenting and simulating facades in order to unearth from Marian Erle’s resurrection and revival a ‘true’ face and from living ‘death’, a corroboration of her new and enlightened poetics. For Rossetti, however, a woman’s ‘true’ face remains melancholic and wistful as well as transitional and hence ultimately undepictable and therefore not present in art. It seems that Rossetti approbates the renunciatory pose as her
defence against the falsifying masks of a woman, the feigned images which cause the poet’s creative anxiety:

Let not the waters close above my head,
Uphold me that I sink not in this mire:
For flesh and blood are frail and sore afraid;
And young I am, unsatisfied and young,
With memories, hopes, with cravings all unfed,
My song half sung, its sweetest notes unsung,
All plans cut short, all possibilities,
Because my cord of life is soon unstrung.

Was I a careless woman set at ease
That this so bitter cup is brimmed for me?
Had mine own vintage settled on the lees?\(^\text{47}\)

Discontent and disavowal of the contemporary social movements also become evident and pronounced in her letters, in one of which she expresses her concern to Augusta Webster about the cause of Christianity being impeded by such existent upsurges:

I do not think the present social movements tend on the whole to uphold Xtianity [sic], or that the influence of some of our most prominent and gifted women is exerted in that direction: and thus thinking I cannot aim at “women’s rights”.\(^\text{48}\)

Rossetti, indeed, shows herself to be religiously concerned and engaged, and adopts the theme as one of her most important poetic techniques, in a manner as if she draws all her relief and consolation through her attitude of self-oblation to the Lord, the Saviour: ‘Teach me, the unique


\(^{48}\) Christina-Rossetti Letter 751, 1878.
truth & [sic] blessedness of Christianity.' She also did not fail to express her deep reverence for the sacramentality of religion as well as for the ‘men and women’ who have adopted a life of the religious: ‘I do revere those exaltedly pious persons whether men or women who are fit for the monastic life: only I do not myself lay claim to such a gift.’ The New Testament provides a much-desired succour to her drooping renunciatory self and serves as a stimulus to her thought and imagination to create prose and verse:

All I am doing is reading and thinking over part of the New Testament, writing down what I can as I go along. I work at prose and help myself forward with little bits of verse. What I am doing is (I hope) for my own profit, nor do I in the least know that it will ever become an available “book”. At present, as you may divine, I am not likely to draw much upon the simply imaginative.

Rossetti, with a remarkable consciousness, becomes nonetheless didactic when she reflects in one of her letters in the following manner: ‘I further think that a simple tribute of Faith, Hope, and Love to our Adorable Lord is not least valuable in our own day of widespread, undermining, highly cultivated infidelity.’ She consolidates the theme of faith and certitude further by saying that, ‘To me it seems that our sole duty [sic] towards the Bible is to obey its teaching in faith’ and she substantiates her belief by laying a prominent claim on trust in God: ‘However, our stable resource in such difficulties seems to me to be to put our trust in God: “Let God be true, and every man a liar”.

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49 Letter 910 to William Rounseville Alger dated June 1, 1881.
50 Letter 914 to Caroline Maria Gemmer dated July 4, 1881.
51 Letter 1448 to Theodore Watts, November 22, 1886.
52 Letter 1756 to Miss Newsham, July 4, 1890.
53 Letter 1847 to Caroline Maria Gemmer, January 20, 1892.
54 Ibid. Letter 1847.
Rossetti’s devotional poetry has led to the upsurge of a stereotype of critical thought that saw her as remaining passive in her acceptance of religion. William Michael Rossetti’s account of her Christianity reads:

The dominating element in her daily life – and perhaps the one which makes it hardest for us in the twentieth century to feel close to her – was religion; religion of an old-fashioned bitter and constant struggle for spiritual perfection, that elevated Duty and renunciation above all, that circumscribed and directed her daily ways.  

If a study of Rossetti’s poems is made from the essentially and critically favoured stance of a conventional renunciation of the material and a hailing of the spiritual, we can also find an apparently passive, yet persistent, attitude in her persuasion of ‘female spiritual empowerment’.  

In Rossetti’s first major poem in 1847, ‘Repining’, the much-thought-of renunciatory position of the poet is disturbed since it shows the way in which young girls were firmly fastened by the shackles of religious extremism which not only caused dispossession and deprivation of their guileless and unpretentious physical exuberance, but also kept them obsequious and acquiescent as they struggled hard for redemption, inveigling them scrupulously through that which is, according to the poem, ‘a feminine strength – spirituality’. Being equipped with a proper linguistic form to grapple with theological questions, Rossetti, as rightly asserted by Palazzo, deploys ‘the language of late Romanticism’ to depict the ‘cruel religious indoctrination’ of ‘the undefined longing of the young girl’ for her ‘long-awaited lover and guide’. The girl in the poem exudes rapturous ecstasy in the hope of the enchanted moment to come, which we find is circumvented by a set of horrifying happenings: a village is destroyed by an avalanche, sailors drown, families are burnt alive and the moans and sighs of languishing soldiers fill up the

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56 Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. 3.
57 Ibid., p. 4.
58 Ibid., p. 4.
surroundings and offer sumptuous feasts for the carrion crows. Rossetti thus intends to emphatically underline physical torment and persecution:

Ghastly corpses of men and horses
That met death at a thousand sources;
Cold limbs and purifying flesh; \(^{59}\)

But the girl fails to perceive the terrorizing affliction and pain and yearns to retreat to the vigour and bliss of her own world which beckons her:

“What is this thing, thus hurriedly
“To pass into eternity?
“To leave the earth so full of mirth?
“To lose the profit of our birth?
“To die and be no more? To cease,
“Having numbness that is not peace?
“Let us go hence; \(^{60}\)

Much to the girl’s dismay and disappointment, the much-desired and the much-longed-for guide ‘answers not’ to her exigent imperatives, and the poet startles the reader by making the latter a witness to the atrocity entailed in her terminating ordeal and surrender:

She knelt down in her agony:

“O Lord, it is enough;” said she:

“My heart’s prayer putteth me to shame;
“Let me return to whence I came.

“Thou, Who for love’s sake didst reprove,
“Forgive me, for the sake of love.”\textsuperscript{61}

Rossetti’s wilful accession of the doctrine of renunciation can be so interpreted as being an assertion of a woman’s spiritual needs, whereby she gains spiritual strength, thus foregrounding her spiritual superiority over men. The women asseverate tellingly their spiritual fortitude and endurance as martyrs in the face of a catastrophic conflagration:

- What was man’s strength, what puissance then?
- Women were mighty as strong men.
- Some knelt in prayer believing still,
- Resigned unto a righteous will,
- Bowing beneath the chastening rod,
- Lost to the world, but found of God.\textsuperscript{62}

Rossetti’s anxiety with regard to religion, particularly male symbols in Christianity, seemed almost unmistakably to derive from what Sue Waslin describes as male ‘hegemony over the externalization process, itself a linguistically, mediated phenomenon’,\textsuperscript{63} which threatens to neglect female symbols and bestows absolute power to the male symbols in Christianity. Hence, artistic self-expression may incur the wrath and anguish of a stern male God for being against the process of internalization of ‘the very values which lead to their oppression’,\textsuperscript{64} thereby perpetuating the strictly contoured masculine religious ideals. Rossetti’s endeavour to employ religion as a poetic thematics, in actuality, helps her in constructing a feminist religious tradition

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p.556.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., pp. 554-5.
\textsuperscript{64} Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. 13.
in the guise of a disconsolatory and renunciatory poetic texture. The poet seeks a divine elevation beyond everything temporal and evanescent – ‘beauty’, ‘youth’, ‘rest’ and ‘ease’. The contemplative poet thus sings:

And youth and beauty die.
   So be it, O my God, Thou God of truth:
   Better than beauty and than youth
   Are Saints and Angels, a glad company;
   And Thou, O Lord, our Rest and Ease,
   Art better than these.

Why should we shrink from our full harvest? why
   Prefer to glean with Ruth?\textsuperscript{65}

In another poem written in 1849, ‘A Testimony’, there is an apparent initial endorsement of the doctrine of renunciation. Taking the position of ‘the Preacher of Ecclesiastes’, the speaker accentuates the masculine language used to voice the ‘vanity of vanities’ theme also echoed in a poem called, ‘One Certainty’:

Vanity of vanities, the Preacher saith,
   All things are vanity.\textsuperscript{66}

Rossetti echoes the same theme in ‘A Testimony’ declaring that the entire phenomenon of creation is preposterous and human pursuit is vacuous and inconsequential:

All things are vanity, I said:
   Yea vanity of vanities.

\textsuperscript{66} \textit{Ibid.}, ‘One Certainty’, p. 66.
The rich man dies; and the poor dies:
The worm feeds sweetly on the dead.
Whate’er thou lackest, keep this trust:
All in the end shall have but dust.67

One of Rossetti’s poems written in January 1856, ‘Shut Out’, illustrates the fact of women’s exclusion from natural and spiritual delight which enables them to identify with the divine:

The door was shut. I looked between
Its iron bars; and saw it lie,
My garden, mine, beneath the sky,

....
It had been mine, and it was lost.

....
“Let me have
Some buds to cheer my outcast state.

....
Since my delightful land is gone.68

Perplexed by the loss of the garden of Eden and yearning for her home, Eve felt a sense of devastation when she was confronted with a refusal for an emblematic token on the one hand, and received a punishment for her request which was inflicted on her in the form of a denial, on the other. ‘What happened to me’ constitutes the original title of the poem and reveals to us the significance of the poem to Rossetti herself. This also helps to explain the reason for Rossetti’s

68 Ibid., ‘Shut Out’, p. 50.
endeavour ‘to seek out images of womanhood which can re-establish the links between Eve and her garden’. 69

‘Shut Out’ by Rossetti reminds us of Emily Dickinson’s Poem 613, ‘They shut me up in Prose’. In this poem, like Eve in the former poem, ‘a little Girl’ is captivated in a ‘Closet’, because the world likes her to be ‘still’. Both the poems starkly convey the agony and worldly inhibitions of the woman poet, who remains incarcerated since it is felt that she should not be let to speak about female experience which threatens to deny the male canon of literature, thereby establishing a literary tradition of her own. Rossetti, almost in a true sense, describes her heart’s bitterness in her poem, ‘The heart knoweth its own bitterness’, constructing a fabric of a fatigued ‘female’ soul:

When all the over-work of life
   Is finished once, and fast asleep
   We swerve no more beneath the knife
   But taste that silence cool and deep;
   Forgetful of the highways rough,
   Forgetful of the thorny scourge,
   Forgetful of the tossing surge
   Then shall we find it is enough? 70

The tedious sojourn of the female artist gets expression through ‘the over-work of life’. When she realizes that ‘the highways rough’, ‘the thorny scourge’ and ‘the tossing surge’ have proved to be ‘enough’ for her, she suffers from an anxious pain which she realizes acutely:

69 Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. 19.
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.

Being pierced and probed and dug, the woman poet goes through a distressful ordeal in a world which almost tries to repress her voice and hence she senses her heart being scratched with a ‘pin’. The only strength and resilience that she gains is from herself being ‘full of Christ’. Her consummate internalization of ‘Christness’ fortifies her ‘scratched’ heart which, in its turn, corroborates her immense artistic anxiety. We find a thematic recurrence of the ‘vanity of vanities’ idea in the concluding stanza of the poem:

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.71

The struggle of the woman poet to ‘catch at hope’ in a ‘world of hope deferred’ and a ‘world of perishable stuff’ continues when she pronounces almost in vehement and impassioned desperation in ‘De Profundis’:

I never watch the scattered fire

Of stars, or sun’s far-trailing train,

But all my heart is one desire,

And all in vain:

For I am bound with fleshly bands,

Joy, beauty, lie beyond my scope;

I strain my heart, I stretch my hands,

And catch at hope.72

The poet seeks vitality from the all-invigorating Jesus to inspire her creativity which is almost ‘numbed too much for hopes or fears’. She despondently observes that she dwells alone in the midst of an orthodoxly defined male world of creation which threatens to resist her desire and craving for self-definition. She yearns for Jesus to provide her with the elixir of life to her drooping soul which is devoid of ‘wit’, ‘words’ and ‘tears’, and so ‘dimmed with grief’ that she can see ‘No everlasting hills’. A ‘falling leaf’ is what her life is despicably reduced to. This is what forms the idea of her poem, ‘A Better Resurrection’. The poet, though dejected and sorrowful, is filled with poetic force and energy and wistfully aspires to be resurrected and revitalized into a ‘better’ life, replenished with the spectacle of ‘everlasting hills’ and the ‘greenness’ of Spring:

My life is like a faded leaf,

My harvest dwindled to a husk;

Truly my life is void and brief

And tedious in the barren dusk;

My life is like a frozen thing,
No bud nor greenness can I see:
Yet rise it shall – the sap of Spring;
O Jesus, rise in me.\(^73\)

Rossetti derives her feminine strength from this magnanimous appeal to identify with the divine. It is this ultimate female spiritual power of being one with ‘Thou who gatherest lilies’ that the poet wishes to be resuscitated with, reviving her unique poetic capabilities with the help of the ‘free fragrance’ of ‘earth and air’:

Filling with fragrance earth and air:
Thou Whogatherest lilies, gather us and wear.\(^74\)

A brilliant instance of Rossetti’s feminist rage finds immaculate expression in a somewhat un-Rossetti-like manner of vengeance. The utter desperation of the female writer is vented with an inextinguishable ire concluding with a realization of God’s wrath which demolishes all:

Then in my wrath I broke the bough
That I had tended so with care,
Hoping its scent should fill the air;
I crushed the eggs, not heeding how
Their ancient promise had been fair:
I would have vengeance now.\(^75\)

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\(^74\) *Ibid.*, ‘Consider the Lilies of the field’, p. 533.
In ‘A Portrait’, the rejection of temporal beauty and the ‘love of Jesus Christ’ can be visualized and perceived as female tenacity and stoicism in choosing a path of the religious, where she finds artistic succour through literary self-expression. It remains open to the reader to conjecture the subject intended by the indicative ‘she’. She faces utter denial and disavowal of even the reality of her existence in the world and thus ‘hate[s] all for love of Jesus Christ’. She finally exalts over her earthly being and its mundane experiences to ‘raise’ her head ‘with the saints in Paradise’:

O maid replete with loving purities,
    Thou bowest down thy head with friends on earth
    To raise it with the saints in Paradise.\textsuperscript{76}

It is remarkable to notice that the poet takes the stance of both the speaker initially and thereafter God in the concluding stanza of the poem, ‘When my heart is vexed, I will complain’, which has an incantory refrain asking: ‘Yet, Lord, how canst Thou say Thou lovest me?’ It appears as a palpable shift from the commonly thought renunciatory position to a triumph of female sacrality, which helps the poet to express her doubt about God’s love since she is cast ‘in a barren land, / Hungry and thirsty where no waters be / Nor shadows of date-bearing tree’.\textsuperscript{77} God’s love forms the poet’s ‘strong foundation and my hill’ and it is this love that can, by its ‘Perfect Will’, infuse new life and restore an effervescent buoyancy in her life. A transcendental reality always enthuses the poet to purge the throes of her anxious presence:

    Lord, grant me grace to love Thee in my pain,
    Thro’ all my disappointment love Thee still,

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., ‘A Portrait’, p. 116.\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., ‘When my heart is vexed, I will complain’, p. 221.
Thy love my strong foundation and my hill.\textsuperscript{78}

In another poem, the speaker finds solace only in the ‘Heart’ of the Supreme Redeemer and his ‘Love’ and ‘Blood’ provide her with the necessary imaginative impulse to create. It seems that Rossetti invokes the divine existential ‘being’ as her Muse and her heart craves to be in union with God – a phenomenon which will lead her to the path of deliverance and salvation:

Because Thy Love hath sought me,

All mine is Thine and Thine is mine:

Because Thy Blood hath bought me,

I will not be mine own but Thine.\textsuperscript{79}

Rossetti’s poem, ‘The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children’, has been distinguished as a poem expressing revulsion against ‘social hypocrisy’. It is a conspicuous and undisguised outpouring of ‘disillusionment and anger’\textsuperscript{80} against a masculine theological texture and a Christianity which gets defined by such a monopolistic vision. This notion afflicts and ails an immaculate life and forces a disagreement and hostility between mother and daughter. The illegitimate daughter is given the position of the speaker of the poem and it is this besmirched condition of illegitimacy that the mother cannot accede to. From an indictment of ‘social hypocrisy’ and ‘the decent world’ murmuring and ‘pointing fingers’,\textsuperscript{81} the poem proceeds to accuse the typically male construct of the Church:

“All equal before God” –

Our Rector has it so,

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., ‘The gold of that land is good’, p. 395.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., ‘Peace I leave with you’, p. 416.
\textsuperscript{80} Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, p. 40.
\textsuperscript{81} Palazzo, Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology, pp. 40-1.
And sundry sleepers nod:
It may be so; I know
All are not equal here,
And when the sleepers wake
They make a difference.  

In the ‘The Lowest Room’, we find two sisters involved in an altercation about the excellence of the Homeric period. They reinforce two disparate and converse theological standpoints. The theme sufficiently corroborates the anxiety of female artistic achievement typical of Victorianism in that the elder sister, being enlightened by the ‘vanity of vanities’ theme of the preacher of Ecclesiastes, yearns for a life of passion, accomplishment and attainment in a male world with the urge to reaffirm her mental and spiritual vigour. She eschews the banal commonality of the world and disagrees to partake of the pursuits of her younger sister, who keeps herself employed in embroidery during their conversation, and at the same time feels tormented since the latter is now rendered incapable of re-dwelling in the chivalrous ‘golden days’ of Homer. Being impeded in fulfilling her desire of establishing her potentials within the staunch framework of masculine ideals, the elder sister accepts martyrdom, espouses renunciation and vindicates her position by citing the preacher of Ecclesiastes:

Vanity of vanities he preached

Of all he found, of all he sought:

Vanity of vanities, the gist

Of all the words he taught.  

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We find that the elder sister associates herself with the unproductive and infertile world which has traditionally repudiated the feminine. Through her martyrdom, she forfeits her existence in the spiritual order and as Palazzo wonderfully puts it: ‘... she has lost the special way in which femininity reflects the face of God, the way woman in her active ability to create and nurture is able to link nature and the infinity of God’. Her figure has often been understood as a model for Rossetti herself, with her ‘striking, passionate renunciation’\(^8^4\) and her stance of complaisant defiance which, in actuality, becomes her source of strength that enables her to challenge the conventions that bound women to the confines of stern social definitions. This position finds a telling expression in Rossetti’s poetry and the poem becomes more relevant to the theme of disquietude regarding the very ‘unfeminine’ act of writing, when the poet is seen to explore the scriptures for a figure who can better satiate her spiritual aspirations.

The fascinatingly beautiful younger sister flourishes, as the elder sister degenerates. She proves to be efficient and efficacious in performing the domestic chores like embroidering, which she does while conversing, and hence she fulfils the demands of nature perfectly well. Her assortment of flowers from the garden is ‘intuitively wise’ and as the scope of wisdom and perspicacity stretches across earth and heaven, both the natural world and that of the divine, so does she traverse to achieve ‘God’s blessed husbandry’:

> She thrives, God’s blessed husbandry;
> Most like a vine which full of fruit
> Doth cling and lean and climb towards heaven
> While earth still binds its root.\(^8^5\)

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\(^8^4\) Palazzo, *Christina Rossetti’s Feminist Theology*, p. 20.

Significantly enough, she can be perceived to be closely yoked with Christ. Her *raison d’être* in the poem is to reprehend her elder sister’s standpoint of martyrdom and her exercise of ‘vanity of vanities’ as a predominant precept. ‘One is here’, the younger sister murmurs, ‘Yea Greater than Soloman’.\(^8^6\) In the ‘The Lowest Room’, the key objective of the poet is to write a poem about domesticity, which is characteristically Victorian, or about domesticity in opposition to actively taking part and contributing in a male world of business and enterprise.

Emily Dickinson’s epistemological doubt and her resulting poetic indeterminacy do not happen to her retroactively as a result of current critical conformist practices. Her poetry rather, much in the manner of Rossetti, bears testimony to her personal doubts concerning religious faith and the gradually augmenting uncertainty, indefiniteness and restlessness of the age in which she wrote. Doubt and desire impelled, rather than inhibited and discouraged, Dickinson’s epistemological and poetic pursuit and she wished her song to continue to be heard. An early poem sets the theme of suffering and anguish she experiences on earth, which she visualizes from heaven. She delineates her experience of the Cross and her sense of its meaning in her 193\(^{rd}\) poetic rendition composed around 1860:

> I shall know why – when Time is over
> And I have ceased to wonder why –
> Christ will explain each separate anguish
> In the fair schoolroom of the sky –\(^8^7\)

She looks at the sufferings on earth from an exalted and elevated pedestal of heaven and her conception of Christ, in perhaps stark contrast to Rossetti, barely has eschatological dimensions. Hence, her image of Christ is strikingly, if not mundanely, human. She approved of and was interested in the sermon about the disappointment of Jesus in Judas, since it was ‘told like a mortal story of intimate young men’. In a late poem, ‘The Saviour must have been / A docile Gentleman –’,\(^88\) and in an elegy on Charles Wadsworth, a charismatic Presbyterian Reverend, whom Dickinson admired deeply, the poet wrote:

\[
\begin{align*}
&W\text{‘Twas Christ’s own personal Expanse} \\
&\quad \text{That bore him from the Tomb –}^89
\end{align*}
\]

Christ’s ‘personal Expanse’ signified for her his triumph over suffering and it is particularly in this way that Dickinson tries to identify her artistic consternation and dilemma and the pain it entails, as endured by the Saviour. On the other hand, the Risen Christ or Christ, the Consoler or Redeemer, does barely rouse her concern, since it is not the act of apotheosizing that she endorses, but it is Christ, the human sufferer, in whom she acquiesces comfortably. According to her greatest crucifixion poem, she narrates the experience in a strangely familiar tone:

\[
\begin{align*}
&W\text{One Crucifixion is recorded – only –} \\
&\quad \text{How many be} \\
&\quad \text{Is not affirmed of Mathematics} \\
&\quad \text{Or History –}^90
\end{align*}
\]


\(^{89}\) Ibid., Poem, 1543.

\(^{90}\) Ibid., Poem 553.
Dickinson’s faith of the religious becomes pronouncingly felt when she speaks of reading ‘with straight renunciation / By the Son of God –’.\(^91\) She identifies herself with the ‘faint Confederates’, renouncing the World ‘like a Bundle’ and ‘walk[ing] steady away’ the path wrought with artistic pain and agony. She followed the tormenting path of the woman author to its bitter end through ‘straight renunciation’ of the ‘Scarlet way’\(^92\) that prohibits woman’s creation thereby finding solace in the fullest commitment to the religious: ‘Even in Our Lord’s “that they be with me where I am”’, she wrote, ‘I taste interrogation.’\(^93\)

She underwent an acute sense of suffering which was caused by a disavowal of the male literary tradition and was compelled by ‘a loss of something’ to bemoan ‘a Dominion’ of lost, if not forgotten, childhood. But, more often than not, a stroke of ‘Suspicion’ causes interruption to her search for ‘delinquent Palaces’ that she feels gravitating towards the ‘site of the Kingdom of Heaven’. The poem,\(^94\) indicated here, can also be understood to possess a little different, in other words, supplementary referral. Her religious anxieties came early as reflected by the above poem and it affected her profoundly. Girded by some devout and pious friends, she felt herself to be ‘cast out’, being ‘the only Prince’ and a ‘Mourner’ ‘among the children’. She was perhaps afflicted by some strange spiritual lack which impelled her to conceive of Christ rather as a human figure than as a transcendent and divine being. Contrarily again, ‘Suspicion’ intervenes and she begins her search ‘for the site of the Kingdom of Heaven’. But, retrospection and the nostalgic memory of childhood are again fraught with danger, if offered as a solution to the anxieties and discomforts of the present.

\(^94\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 959.
This disavowal of the matrilineal heritage of tradition affects Aurora Leigh as well when we find her orphaned of her mother during her early infancy. This can perhaps be understood in terms of an acutely felt absence or a lack of the sense of ‘mother’ in Barrett Browning’s poetry. Similar was the state of affairs with the poet’s life as well. So powerful was the emphatic influence of her father on her poetic abilities that she almost, occasionally, felt shocked by his presence, an experience which also, at the same time, inspired and enthused her to try to make her voice heard through her passionate and fierce commitment to create.

Dickinson also enters into the conventional reality of Christian devotion, as suggested by Oberhaus: ‘The Bible pervades her mind of art, as it does the mind and art of all Christian devotional poets and writers. And the Bible was not, as many have supposed, merely a source of imagery for her. Rather, the Bible is essential to her structure and meaning, the very sum and substance of her art.’ The ‘singularly cryptic’ poems of Fascicle 40, says Oberhaus, require the reader to ‘enact the role of sleuth’. This done, she sees ‘F-40 as an architectural tour de force, a three-part meditation, a letter addressed to the reader, a garland of praise, and a conversion narrative, as well as the triumphant conclusion of the protagonist’s account of her poetic and spiritual pilgrimage from renunciation to illumination to union and finally, after many conflicts, to contentment with this union.’

This all the more amplifies the fact that the Christian metaphysical tradition unmistakably finds expression in her poetics, and operates interminably. Dickinson seldom completely dispossesses herself from the Christian, and particularly Calvinist, milieu in which she was brought up in Amherst, attaching to it often contentiously. The ceaseless metaphysical exigencies

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in her poetry are felt from the specific mode of juxtaposition of poems with a discernible religious dislocation or dissension and poems of a palpable religious fervour. This argument, of course, does not identify Dickinson as a ‘religious poet’ nor does her quintessential and all-encompassing poetic understanding, derived from her sense of dispossession, raise her to a state of transcendence. ‘She is, instead’, says Jane Donahue Eberwein, ‘a poet of religious engagement, whose very criticism of religion reflects her deep involvement in it.’

Dickinson revelled in formulating a human image of God which sometimes dissuades us from her religious inclinations, if not her religious affiliation. Poem 251, being apparently simplistic, has implicit metaphysical intonations:

Over the fence –
Strawberries – grow –

....

But – if I stained my Apron –
God would certainly scold!

Oh, dear, - I guess if He were a Boy –
He’d – climb – if He could!

What seems strikingly noticeable in Dickinson’s religious thought is the concept of God being either a male or a ‘female’ idea. The expressions, ‘if He were a Boy’ and ‘… if I stained my Apron – / God would certainly scold!’, portray respectively male and female images but, in both cases, they are very mundanely human. Similarly, in a later poem, the abode of such a ‘human’

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God is conceived of as having an anthropomorphic existence. The poet raises some fundamental ontological questions, but does not quite seem to navigate into them so far as to extricate any comprehensible or a so-called ‘human’ solution to them. She subscribes to a description which is distant from a glorified or a chivalric idealization of the concept of ‘Heaven’, since she has not experienced it hitherto. The poet, hence, asks:

We pray – to Heaven –
We prate – of Heaven –
Relate – when Neighbors die –
At what o’ clock to heaven – they fled –
Who saw them – Wherefore fly?
Is Heaven a Place – a Sky – a Tree?  

Perhaps the most revealing of her experiences of heaven, that received a mature enunciation, appears in one of her letters to Mrs. J. G. Holland during early August, 1856: ‘My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large, blue sky, bluer and larger than the biggest I have seen in June, and in it are my friends – all of them – every one of them – those who are with me now, and those who were “parted” as we walked, and “snatched up to Heaven”.’  

She goes on to describe ‘God’ as an ‘Old Neighbor’ with much convenience and ease:

How excellent the Heaven –
When Earth – cannot be had –
How hospitable – then – the face

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98 Emily Dickinson, Poem 489, p. 373.
Of our Old Neighbor – God –¹⁰⁰

All these human depictions can possibly be extrapolated as the poet’s desire to be in propinquity with God, a hominid presence, who is more able to provide her with the solace and reassurance that she is desperately in need of. The ‘Old Neighbor’ can share and participate with her in her times of woe, despair, dejection and anguish much more conveniently than a distant, transcendental Omnipresence.

Dickinson deploys variegated themes and conceptualizes God in multiple and myriad images. At one time, she is roused by a revelation:

God is a distant – stately Lover –
Woos, as He states us – by His Son –
Verily, a Vicarious Courtship –
“Miles”, and “Priscilla”, were such an One –¹⁰¹

At another place, God is ‘Revelation’s limit’ in the following manner:

Embarrassment of one another
And God
Is Revelation’s limit,
Aloud
Is nothing that is chief,
But still,
Divinity dwells under a seal.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Emily Dickinson, Poem 623.
¹⁰¹ Emily Dickinson, Poem 357, p. 284.
¹⁰² Emily Dickinson, Poem 662.
The above-quoted instances from Dickinson’s poems may leave us with the consciousness that she acknowledged the predominance of a male divine figure with the reverberative ‘He’ or ‘His’ to designate such an image. But this dichotomous and incompatible angst as a woman writer pulls Dickinson apart and she does not, in any sense, miscarry her expression and this is how she asserts with vehemence:

To be alive – is Power –
Existence – in itself –
Without a further function –
Omnipotence – Enough –

The woman poet endeavours and struggles for creative expression, an artistic enterprise that has, with equal vigour and constraint, agitated the minds of all female authors, be it Barrett Browning, Rossetti or Dickinson. With a stance of self-abnegation and self-capitulation Rossetti declares:

But, Lord, when Thou didst choose me, didst Thou know
    How marred I was and withered too,
    Nor rose for sweetness nor for virtue rue,
    Timid and rash, hasty and slow?
    – “Yea, I knew” –

Dickinson apprehensively expresses her disquietude by disclosing that:

My Worthiness is all my Doubt –
His Merit – all my fear –

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103 Emily Dickinson, Poem 677.
Contrasting which, my quality
Do lowlier – appear –

Equally reminiscent here is Barrett Browning’s earnest and passionate appeal to the ‘Maker and High Priest’ that perhaps anticipates Dickinson’s poetic unease:

I ask Thee not my joys to multiply,–
Only to make me worthier of the least.

Dickinson ventilates her ire firmly enough by loudly asserting that religiosity is presupposed to be inclusive of the idea of femininity which can scarcely be proscribed from the tyrannically defined ‘angelic’, or in other words, a male definition of religious participation. She debates with rancour and wrath:

Why – do they shut Me out of Heaven?
Did I sing – too loud?
But – I can say a little “Minor”
Timid as a Bird!

Wouldn’t the Angels try me –
Just – once – more –
Just – see – if I troubled them –
But don’t – shut the door!

‘Protomodernist, proto-verslibrist, protoprojectivist, protofeminist’ Dickinson solicits these taxonomical structures for her poetry, through which she barely postulates any dogmatic

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105 Emily Dickinson, Poem 751.
107 Emily Dickinson, Poem 248, p. 179.
propositions, bearing underlying convictions, philosophical ideas and pedagogical views. Such predilections on the part of the critics actually gainsay the quintessence of Dickinson’s nature. Some critics have expostulated that Dickinson’s early religious recalcitrance in reality paved the path for her subsequent contemplative and meditative certitude but in spite of such innate metamorphosis, she never preached a principle or a precept of any kind whatsoever. She reveals in a letter of February 13, 1859, to Mary Emerson Haven that ‘Mr. S. preached in our church last Sabbath upon “predestination”, but I do not respect “doctrines”, and did not listen to him, so I can neither praise, nor blame.’\(^\text{109}\) If we are to ascertain an unmistakable tinge of religious, aesthetic and ontological consideration in her poetry, she did opt liberally to ‘dwell in Possibility’,\(^\text{110}\) an expression that is poetically indicative of inexhaustible ‘possibilities’ of connotation, rhetoricity and ellipsis, which are, in their turn, likely to generate an interminable repository of significations and explanations. On the other hand, we unavoidably find in Rossetti the Christian association of women with the diabolical and the unrighteous. However, Rossetti’s concern to ‘adhere to a just weight, a just measure, even balances, a superhuman standard’\(^\text{111}\) implies that she will not endorse the patriarchal consciousness of women being more ‘vicious’ than men. She says: ‘Some have opined that a woman’s wickedness even exceeds that of a man …. But this point must stand over for decision to the Judgement of that Only Judge to whom each and all of us will one day stand or fall.’\(^\text{112}\) Thus Rossetti clearly repudiates the fact of moral superiority of man over woman, thereby indicating that the latter can hardly be disparaged by being considered as spiritually menial and subordinate, and this is how she shows a

\(^{110}\) Emily Dickinson, Poem 657.  
\(^{112}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 400.
disinclination to proceed with the argument in the socio-political context of temporal and material existence.

If we regard the theme of religion as a conscious dematerialization of existence, it is well echoed also in Barrett Browning to whom poetry was an irresistible vocation, needing no justification to make her follow it. In spite of the fact of her disbelief in priesthood, she elevated poets to the echelon of priests of the human race, who, in the manner of Shelley’s ‘unacknowledged legislators’, are yet to be recognized by the world they write for. The office of the poet is one of ‘solemn responsibilities’,\(^\text{113}\) of witnessing and perceiving the essence of God’s absolute and complete work. Since the poet stands as a spectator to the entire phenomenon of Creation, herself/himself not actually creating, Barrett Browning believes that it is not a (wo)man who produces a great poem, but it is really an insightful perception that (s)he endeavours to disseminate. The sense of divine solidarity produces a perception of sympathy with all men, with all life and with all creation, and this is what she has tried to say in ‘The Poet’s Vow’, an idea that must underlie all true poetry. A poet, then, is one who has the insight to discern the relationship between visual manifestations and the fundamental pattern at work behind them. She thus remarks in the Preface to the First Edition of *The Seraphim*, 1838, that ‘Poetry is essentially truthfulness; and the very incoherences of poetic dreaming are but the struggle and the strife to reach the True and the Unknown.’ In the same Preface, she establishes the divine task of the poet by saying: ‘Surely it should be the gladness and the gratitude of such as are poets among us, that in turning towards the beautiful, they may behold the true face of God.’\(^\text{114}\) So she wrote *The Seraphim* and *A Drama of Exile*, ‘The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus’ and ‘Cowper’s Grave’, and spoke in her poetry of God and Christ, of Incarnation and the Crucifixion, of Grace and


Atonement. According to her, the poet shoulders the immense responsibility of executing the task of connecting the temporal and the transcendental. God exists not only in Nature but is truly omnipresent. She firmly asserts the ontological veracity of poetry as ‘the noblest of the productions of man, that which inspires the enthusiasm of virtue, the energy of truth, … elevates the mind to heaven, kindles within it unwonted fires, and bids it throb with feelings exalting to its nature.’\textsuperscript{115} In contrast to Emily Dickinson, Barrett Browning maintained that the poet is, in one sense, a preacher and must have a doctrine, but her business is not to be professedly didactic. She considered the theme of religion to be the characteristic feature of every noble and poetic endeavour: ‘… in all nations, in all ages, religion must be the spur of every noble action, and the characteristic of every lofty soul.’\textsuperscript{116}
