Belief in the unseen is a universal characteristic of religion. All religious belief essentially involves commitment and obligation, and may appear mere ritual to the unenlightened. Mysticism, seen rightly, is not something opposed or alien to religion. It stands at the very root of religious experience. The mystic, not content with the bare externals of religion, seek a direct experience of God or the Ultimate Reality. He aims to bring himself into an intimate relationship with the Divine. This attitude—the insistence on direct experience—establishes his kinship with the founders of various faith “who owed their power and originality to the fact of their communion with the divine.”\(^1\) Hence there is no conflict between the mystical temper and the practice of religious belief. In fact, mysticism and religion are integrally linked, though there have been many mystics who steered clear of creeds and dogmas. The intricate nature of the relation between the two has been appropriately pointed out.

Though no deeply religious person can be without a touch of mysticism, and no mystic can be, in the deepest sense, other than religious, the dialogue between mystics and conventional religionists has been far from happy. Though it validates religion, mysticism also tends to escape the fetters of organized religion.\(^2\)
The “religious” and the “mystic” shade into each other in what is taken to be religious mysticism, practised by those in whom mystical temper and religious devotion reinforce each other. Otto Pfleiderer, a 19th century scholar, says aptly that mysticism is “the immediate feeling of unity of the self with God; it is nothing, therefore, but the fundamental feeling of religion, the religious life at its heart and centre.”

The mysticism that we come across in English poetry is largely Christian in inspiration. However, it bears definite marks of neo-Platonic thought. Christianity, with its highly catholic character, readily absorbed the mystical concepts based on neo-Platonism. This synthesis took place during the Renaissance when Christian thinkers, with an open mind, studied Greek literature and philosophy and freely assimilated Pagan wisdom into their theology. Although the Greeks had already given a humanistic bias to eastern mysticism by emphasizing the beauty of the human form, it was in the doctrine of Incarnation, the cardinal fact of Christianity, that humanism and mysticism found their proper synthesis. Besides, it is in the Incarnation that the contradictory modes of mystical thought, connected respectively with transcendence and immanence, are reconciled meaningfully.

A pertinent question that should arise in any discussion of the “religious” and the “mystic” in relation to poetry is: can what is mystical or deeply religious be communicated poetically, and, how far should the poetic medium be relied upon to achieve this communication? Religious devotion
and mystical contemplation, are not incompatible but often go together. To the extent experiences of this sort can be articulated, one can think of no better medium of communication than poetry itself. At this point, it is useful to ponder the views of Dr. Johnson, T.S. Eliot and T.E. Hulme, challenging the very status and value of devotional poetry. Dr. Johnson’s attack on poetical devotion is based on the incompatibility he sees between “religious activity, and poetry.” He is not critical of the devotional frame of mind as such but is of the view that the state of mind in the attitude of prayer is a higher one than poetry can confer. Though T.S. Eliot does not consider poetry and devotion incompatible, he is not prepared to accord the status of major poets to those who sing of the Divine. In his view, devotional poetry has a limited range inasmuch as it leaves out “major passions”. Such poetry, he adds, gives a limited kind of pleasure. T.E. Hulme points out that man engaged in the pursuit of the Divine, more specifically when he is absorbed in prayer, is not his normal, natural self. In terms of his argument, devotional poems do not project an image of the natural man. As Helen Gardener rightly points out, we notice variations “from age to age in the concept of religion and the concept of poetry and the interecations between them.” The views of the three critics mentioned are thus coloured by what each of them understood by the terms ‘religion’ and ‘poetry’. When Johnson talks of poetry, he is preoccupied with the requirements of the poetic art as an exercise in conscious craftsmanship. Eliot considers the value of poetry in
terms of the general “awareness” expected of the poet while Hulme is concerned about the image of the “natural-man”. No final judgement can be given about the status of religious or mystical verse. At any rate, such verse has its place in the scheme of poetry so long as it is not divorced from a human interest. Stressing sharp distinction between humanistic and religious verse, as Hulme does, is not quite valid, for we find that human and religious interests intermingle in scared verse as they do in life. The ultimate value of poetry, of whatever kind it be, depends on its abiding value to man, though shifts in taste may temporarily obscure its worth.

It is now appropriate to consider the special problem ‘the unutterable’ poses for a poet in terms of the medium. In other words, we have to see how far poetic language is a fit medium for conveying experiences and intuitions of the mystical kind. Mystics of all times have generally emphasized the imageless character of Reality. Among the Christian mystics of the Middle Ages, Dionysius the Areopagite (who wrote between 475 and 525 AD) deserves special mention in this regard. As a mystical thinker, he faithfully followed Plotinus and introduced the seemingly contradictory concept of “divine dark” into Christian mystical theology. The concept was a little perplexing to the Christians since it put unusual emphasis on the attributeless character of Reality. Ordinarily, those who conceive of Reality in transcendental terms find an inherent inadequacy in language as a medium of communication. At the same time, it is interesting to see how poetic
language performs the paradoxical function of suggesting experiences from which ordinary speech turns back in dismay. Ernst Cassirer speaks of the inherent power of language itself that is exploited by the articulate mystic:

Thus all mysticism is directed toward a world beyond language, a world of silence... The spiritual depth and power of language is strikingly evinced in the fact that it is speech itself which prepares the way for that last step whereby it is itself transcended.⁶

The language of “silence” met with in mystical poetry consists generally of negative terms, subtle suggestions and paradoxes. Eliot's famous lines from the *Four Quartets* provide a good illustration:

You must go through the way in which you are not,  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not.

It remains a paradox that the mystic-poet finds suitable words and symbols to present an approximate image of the very reality he affirms “hath no image”. Mystics have, in fact, given the poet “a large number of poetic similes and metaphors, such as the Desert of Godhead, the Marriage of the Soul, the Kiss of Christ, the Cloud of Unknowing, the Divine Dark and the Beatific Vision, to name only a few.”⁷ As a matter of fact the visionary imagination of the mystical type does not differ qualitatively from the poetic
imagination (making use of sensorial images), when both are viewed as involving an expansion of consciousness. This leads us to the conclusion that poetry and mysticism are closely related, and it is wrong to see a dichotomy between the two. Helen C. White makes an important observation in this behalf:

It is not a strange hybrid of poet and mystic who writes a mystical poem. It is not a man who writes first as a mystic and then as a poet. It is not even a mystic who turns over to the poet who happens to dwell within the same brain and body the materials of his insight to be made into a work of art by the competent craftsman. It is rather that the same human being is at once poet and mystic, at one and same time, from the beginning of the process to the end.  

The symbols and images that we come across in mystical verse are of varied kinds. In Christian mystical verse, they are often traditional, based on the language of the scriptures and other sacred writings. An important feature of mystical literature in general is that it celebrates divine love in terms of images drawn from earthly love. Thus the concept of "spiritual marriage" is central to Christian mystical theology. According to this concept, the fulfilment of spirituality is analogically realized in the wedlock of the soul with Christ as ‘her bride-groom.’ The nuptial analogy is a persistent motif in English mystical verse making use of the erotic images one often finds in secular verse. Besides the symbolism of marriage, we find
other types of symbolism too in mystical verse—notably the symbolism of ‘journey’ (with a ‘place’ or ‘state’ as the goal) and that of identification.’ All these types are represented in English mystical verse. There can be no denying the fact that the “religious” and the “mystic” are related.

Much of the literature of the Victorian era is involved with the characteristic problems of the period. These problems exercised the minds of the major writers, for they had a high sense of social responsibility. This is specially true of the ‘prophets’ and reformers such as Carlyle, Dickens and Ruskin. They protested against what they saw as the evils of the age and pleaded for the preservation of human values, which they felt were being undermined by the new forces of “progress.” Likewise, the major poets of the period, notably Tennyson, Browning and Arnold, wrote as masters responsible to their age, each committed in his own way to an individual view of life. Of the three poets, Tennyson, the acknowledged “bard” of his generation, sought a personal solution to the problem posed by the Christian faith, assailed as it was by doubts caused by the theory of evolution. His *In Memoriam*, though not a religious poem in the conventional sense, involves meditations on the theme of immortality. These meditations certainly have a significance close to the religious. A disposition for philosophizing and moralizing in verse is equally evident in Robert Browning though he adopts many disguises and gives the impression of being detached in his monologues. His studies of Renaissance artists and clerics enabled him,
indirectly, to express his views of human character—views which were not alien to his contemporaries. Mathew Arnold, in spite of a religious disposition, accepted the loss of faith, a general phenomenon in his time, as inevitable. Poetry, he asserted, could be an anodyne to the experience of a general cultural collapse. In ‘The Scholar Gipsy,’ ‘Thyrsis’ and ‘Dover Beach’, he voices the feelings of a saddened intellectual sensitive to the decline of religious values.

Although the general trend of the Victorian era was anti-Romantic, Romanticism survived in a specific form. The Middle Ages, which had cast a spell on the Romantics like Coleridge and Keats and been a source of literary inspiration to them, found favour with a class of intellectuals including men of religious convictions and literary tastes. An important manifestation of this revival of interest in the Middle Age was the Oxford Movement. Connected with the Anglican Church, it sought to preserve and enhance ecclesiastical prestige and authority. Its advocates pleaded for “a recovery of the tradition of piety, spirituality, and authority, as found in the English divines of the seventeenth century (Hooker, Andrewes, Vaughan, Ken) and in the great Church Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries.”9 Their protests against the growing liberalism of the time reflected an intense concern for religion as the only friend and saviour of man. The revival of interest in the Christian experience had implications for literature too. The Pre-Raphaelite poets, who were linked together by a community of interests,
were closely associated with the Oxford Movement. They pursued a cult of Beauty in utter disregard of the philosophical or moral issues with which the great poets and writers of the time were vitally concerned. Not satisfied with the kind of poetry that was popular, they went back to the Middle Ages in search of an aesthetic that reconciled the claims of the body and the spirit. Rossetti took “delight in concrete definition,” a quality that won him Pater’s admiration.\(^{10}\) This is reflected in his exploitation of sensory detail and his use of Christian symbolism. In the poet of the pre-Raphaelite school generally, the religious side of medievalism is seen only as an ancillary element assimilated to an aesthetic object. These poets were branded “fleshly,” the Victorians being shocked by their glorification of the senses.

Although the crisis of religious belief generated acute spiritual unrest among the Victorian intellectuals, the majority of the middle class continued in its allegiance to Evangelicalism. Genuine devotion was not lacking but a “spontaneous and imaginative religious experience was harder than ever to come by.”\(^{11}\) The position of belief was insecure in the face of the developing scientism of the age, which questioned the claims and basic assumptions of all forms of religion. In such an atmosphere, devotional or religious verse could not thrive, the poet’s task being made more difficult by the uncertain state of the English language itself. For the Divine poets of the seventeenth century, a theological term such as ‘soul’ had an accepted conceptual meaning. Unlike them, the Victorians generally understood by it
something equivalent to feeling: As the terminology of religion was fast losing its traditional meaning during the period, an appropriate response to religious verse, involving the use of such terms for a direct assertion of dogma or doctrine, could not be guaranteed. A revival of interest in the religious side of medievalism, marked by an indifference to the intellectual controversies of the day, was the chief inspiration of this poetry, and the Divine poets of the seventeenth century reinforced this inspiration. The pre Raphaelites, as stated earlier, evinced a parallel interest in the legends and rituals of the Middle Ages, but their aestheticism did not have a religious motivation nor were they drawn to the Divine poets of the seventeenth century. Coventry Patmore, G.M. Hopkins and Francis Thompson, linked by their Catholic faith, and Christina Rossetti, influenced more specifically by the Oxford Movement, could be singled out as the poets who made a significant contribution to the religious poetry of the Victorian age. In these poets we find little evidence of the unrest that is generally associated with the Victorian era.

Christina Rossetti shares some of the characteristics of her brother, D.G. Rossetti, as far as her poetic technique is concerned. However, she maintains an individual tone, marked by an intense spirituality: a religious acceptance gained through renunciation, often accompanied by a sense of pain and deprivation. The simplicity of her language and manner, and the lyrical intensity of her devotion are in sharp contrast to the general
Victorian diffuseness, and hence perhaps her appeal to the modern reader. The poem ‘Uphill’ among her *Goblin Market* pieces, establishes her affinity with George Herbert as a powerful writer of religious lyrics.

Before dealing with the two poets with whom we are mainly concerned, it should be appropriate to make a brief mention here about the distinctive qualities of Hopkins as a religious poet. He became a celebrity after the major part of his work was published in the present century. The circumstances of his belated discovery and also the special qualities of his verse, have given him a place among the modern poets. His distinction owes itself to the way he uses the resources of language, making it answer the pressure of his religious experience. This is what renders his poetry “un-Tennysonian.” Otherwise, considering the materials he handles, he is very much a Victorian. His pre-Raphaelite affinities are also apparent. In the manner of that school, he concentrates on the distinctive quality of a thing—what he terms the “inscape.” The term “inscape” (as also the other related term “instress”) has a religious and also a technical connotation. By it Hopkins means the unique form of a work of art. This, in his view, is comparable to the individual soul seen as distinct from every other soul. As a religious poet, Hopkins reminds us of the Metaphysicals in achieving a fusion of passion and intelligence that gives his verse a distinctive quality. His sensuous response to Nature, a quality linking him specially with Duns Scotus, who inspired him, made Eliot describe him as a “Nature Poet” rather
than a “religious poet.” Eliot even associated him with Meredith, who is Pagan rather than Christian in thinking. Hopkins, however, is unmistakably a religious poet. To him the beauty of Nature spoke of God and we find this feeling powerfully expressed in such poems as ‘God’s Grandeur’ and ‘Pied Beauty.’

Hopkins’ language and style have received adequate critical attention to the corresponding neglect of Coventry Patmore and Francis Thompson, his co-religionists and contemporaries. He has undoubtedly overshadowed them and his literary reputation has been steadily growing. His technical skill, strictly speaking, is inseparable from his religious vision as indeed the very terminology he uses in relation to poetry (the “inscape” and “instress” we have mentioned) would show. His resourcefulness in handling language distinguishes him as a writer of religious verse. It particularly accounts for the great originality that is so evident in his use of religious symbolism. In the poetry of Patmore and Thompson, the language of traditional symbolism is inevitably and conspicuously present. The two poets were friends linked together by the common sources of their religious and literary inspiration. Patmore was a friend of Hopkins too, their friendship based largely on their shared literary interests besides their religious affinity. Hopkins and Thompson did not know each other. Both were younger than Patmore (by 21 and 36 years respectively) and held him in great respect.
Thompson acknowledged Patmore as his master. As he came under his influence, he consciously tried to learn from his method and practice. For his own part, Patmore claimed special interest in Thompson whom he admired for his promise and attainment. A mystical strain of thought runs through the work of both the poets. The early Patmore leans markedly toward the pre-Raphaelites, who owned and admired him unreservedly. With his poetic maturity, the poet outgrew pre-Raphaelitism and he changed his models. His conversion to Roman Catholicism led to his close intimacy with mystical reading, which stimulated his interest further in the poets of the seventeenth century. The meagre correspondence between Hopkins and Patmore has brought interesting facts to light regarding their poetic theories and practice and shown beyond doubt that they valued each other’s views and suggestions. Thompson, being more specifically a poet of the nineties, is lumped by some critics with the Rhymers’ Club comprising the poets known to have displayed characteristics which contrasted with the typical moral and intellectual pre-occupations of the age. Thompson’s strong religious interests indicate unmistakably that he cannot be classed with them. Admired overenthusiastically in his own time and even believed to have outdone Patmore, his reputation has suffered a decline ever since. However, his poetry has evoked a special response in some countries of the continent, particularly France. Interestingly, Patmore’s continental reputation is greater than his reputation in his own country. Neither Thompson nor Patmore was
rooted in his period, although they did not entirely escape the influence of their contemporaries and immediate predecessors as far as their materials and manner are concerned. Significantly, their poetry bears marks of the seventeenth century manner associated with the Metaphysicals, who were generally neglected by the Victorians.

As a poet, however, Patmore has been neglected or not properly estimated.\(^{12}\) His wide scholarship and talent have, no doubt, attracted attention but even his admirers have not recognized his poetic excellence without reservations. He is “still potential\(^{13}\) and deserves a place beside the major poets of his age, if not as an illustrious equal but as one “surely at the top of the second class.”\(^{14}\) A gifted and versatile intellectual, he maintained views that often ran counter to the trend of his times. He did not share the political and economic optimism of the day and as far as his poetic practice is concerned, he chose to handle difficult forms (the “irregular” odes) in his later poetry, refusing to pursue an easy path to success and popularity. He claimed that “he was the only poet of his generation, except Barnes, who steadily maintained a literary conscience.”\(^{15}\)

Patmore’s earlier verse is not free from the didacticism and sentimentality characteristic of the Victorian verse. His initial exercises in poetry are imitative and derivative in character, revealing a “romantic idealism and melancholy” which link him with Tennyson and the older Romantics. His first poetic success, the long poem entitled *The Angel in the*
House, published in 1854, brought him immediately into the limelight. Here Patmore makes his mark as a singer of wedded love, a theme dear to the Victorians, and more specially so to the poet himself. The poem concerns the love-making of Felix Vaughan’, poet and farmer-gentleman, who, without struggle, wins and marries the beautiful Honoria, daughter of the Dean of Sarum. The simple narrative presents little complications. There are no exciting situations or surprising turns of events to grip the reader’s attention. The simple plot is matched by the smooth movement of the verse, written in the form of iambic octosyllabic quatrains. Patmore found this verse pattern easy to handle and appropriate to his purpose: the telling of a domestic tale of love. It is believed that his first wife, Emily, was the chief inspiration of The Angel, but it is easy to see that the poet’s lyrical interest in marriage springs largely from his mystical intuitions confirmed by his faith. However, the romance of marriage celebrated in the poem, viewed and recapitulated in the various phases and moods of pre-marital courtship leading to the happy union, looks somewhat tame in the conventional setting of the Victorian Deanery. Yet the poet succeeds in highlighting the abiding joy at the core of the nuptial relation, whose glamour and value are often lost to the mere sensulist. Images of light and splendour, suggesting a paradisal state, pervade the whole poem. A woman’s love for her husband, conceived in Christian terms, is shown to parallel and anticipate that of the soul for God:

This little germs of nuptial love,
Which springs so simply from the sod,
The root is, as my song shall prove,
Of all our love to man and God”

Thompson’s faith and his involvement with themes of religious interest provide a strong link between him and the elder Catholic poet whom he revered. Yet, in relation to the Victorian age, the positions of the two poets are not identical. Patmore thus did not share the intellectual interest of his contemporaries. His political odes reveal how he made use of rhetoric and satire to lash at what he did not like about his age. Though he is unlike his contemporaries, he is not a romantic alienated from his period and society. Thompson’s case is different. His suffering and sorrow, no less than his individual temperament, seem to have bred and encouraged in him an exclusive self-absorption which, when he could direct it to a purpose, religious or aesthetic, flowered into poetic achievement. Critics are quick to observe that his drug addiction also contributed to his alienation inasmuch as he sought refuge in dreams and fantasies that colour his poetic vision. Chesterton, commenting on Thompson’s estrangement from the main-stream of Victorian life, observes: “Perhaps the shortest definition of the Victorian Age is that he stood outside it.” The knowledge of Thompson’s addiction to opium seems to have led critics to emphasize those characteristics of his poetic vision which establish his kinship with other drug-addicts. M.H. Abrams thus links him with De Quincey, George Crabbe and Coleridge, in all
of whom he traces the effects of opium visions. Likewise, J.C. Reid, while not denying the religious element in Thompson’s verse, is of the view that he “shares his vision with that of the stricken band which includes Poe, Mangan, De Quincey, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, even James Thomson, as well as Francis Thompson’s own co-religionists, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson.”

Such observations are as superficial and onesided as those which, pursuing almost an identical line of logic, deny a positive vision to Thompson, stressing his fondness for words and their tonal qualities. He is thus associated, as mentioned earlier, with the poets of the nineties who wrote verse under Pater’s influence and sought little beyond a delight in sensation. It is inconceivable, however, that with his devotional fervour and a strong religious bent (not without an intellectual understanding of his creed), he could have subscribed to the Art for Art’s sake school. Quite a number of his poems express “a positive vision of a realm of spiritual realities rather than a rejection of the world of everyday.”

Thompson’s poems demand careful reading. This is particularly necessitated by his unusual vocabulary. His manner too is often idiosyncratic. Our failure to read him with care could mislead us into thinking that he has little originality and that his poetry is derivative or, at best, imitative. One cannot deny the fact of his literary borrowings. This is inevitable in the case of a highly impressionable and assimilative mind such as Thompson’s. In his early years, he became “an entranced reader of great literature.” With his
classical leanings and spiritual affinity with the Caroline poets, he was surely impressed by certain styles. But on the whole, his originality is impressed on what he borrows. Paul Van K. Thomson, in his critical work on Thompson, pleads persuasively in support of the relevance of his poetry to the techniques practised and popularised by modern poets. This view is endorsed in these terms in a review of Paul Thomson’s work:

It is in his bold exploration into symbolism, into the creation of new matres, a new poetic language, in the feeling for the metaphysical poets that Thompson anticipates the twentieth century.

Critics have compared Thompson to Shelley in respect of the latter’s fondness for imagery. To the extent the two visionary poets have a passion for the remote and the transcendental, the affinity is evident. In both, the imagery is suggestive of things unearthly. There is another quality which links the two the faculty for myth-making. In many of his poems Thompson weaves images into myths of his own (as, for example, in the ‘Ode to the setting Sun’). Further, he makes a more frequent use of the classical myths than Patmore in his poems devoted to Christian themes. These myths sometimes embody a knowledge of scientific facts—this is another characteristic Thompson shares with Shelley. Thompson, in fact expressed his deep admiration for Shelley in the celebrated essay he wrote on him. Here
is what he says of Shelley’s mythopoeic faculty which is no less applicable to his own:

Coming to Shelley’s poetry, we peep over the wild mask of revolutionary metaphysics, and we see the winsome face of the child. Perhaps none of his poems is more purely and typically Shelleian than *The Cloud*, and it is interesting to note how essentially it springs from the faculty of make-believe. The same thing is conspicuous, though less purely conspicuous, throughout his singing. It is the child’s faculty of make-believe raised to the nth power. He is still at play, save only that his play is such as manhood stops to watch and his playthings are those which the gods give their children. The universe is his box of toys.\(^{23}\)

Thompson quite often succeeds in conveying a mystical awareness of the spiritual realm with the help his imagery. However, as a singer of divine love, he does not lean as heavily on images of earthly love (for symbolic purpose) as Patmore. The sacred and the profane mix up less often in him than they do in his other co-religionist, Crawshaw. Thompson’s references to human love have often a Platonic or sacred significance. He celebrates it only to the extent it symbolizes the union of the soul with God. Thus the odes included under the title *Love of Dian’s Lap* express Thompson’s pure Platonic adoration of Mrs. Alice Meynell, the lady whom
he revered and whom Patmore admired. In manner and conception, these poems remind us of Shelley’s ‘Epipsychidion’ and Patmore’s odes. There are, besides, many of Thompson’s poems which dwell on the theme of poetic inspiration itself. Here he reveals his self-consciousness as a poet, a quality or habit peculiar to the poets of the present century. His reflections on the nature of poetry are, at the same time, concerned with the mystery and significance of life. He shapes his ideas and intuitions into a coherent symbolism suggesting a relationship between the poet and the seer who both read the mystery of life. ‘The Mistress of Vision’ is an excellent example of Thompson’s poetry of this sort. Concerned with a poetic exploration of the realm of esoteric wisdom, its symbolism equally lends itself to an interpretation in Christian terms.


3. Ibid., p. 787.


5. Ibid., p. 122.


12. Thus John Drinkwater observes about him: “Of all the great poets of his time he has hitherto been by far the least generally understood and appreciated.” See his Victorian Poetry (London : Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1923), p. 118. Batho and Dobree express in effect the same opinion when they refer to him as “that unduly neglected poet Coventry Patmore.” See Victorians and After, 1830-1914, p. 66.


16. All passages from Patmore’s published poems, quoted in this study, are from The Poems of Patmore, ed. Frederick Page (London : O.U.P., 1949). The relevant page numbers are indicated within parenthesis immediately after the quotations.


