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A Poetics of the Soul: Devotional Poetry in Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and Christina Rossetti

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A POETICS OF THE SOUL:
DEVOTIONAL POETRY IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING;
ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON; AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Heather Shippen Cianciola

August 2008

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Heather Shippen Cianciola
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ABSTRACT

A POETICS OF THE SOUL: DEVOTIONAL POETRY IN
ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING; ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON;
AND CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

By

Heather Shippen Cianciola

August 2008

Dissertation Supervised by Laura Callanan, Ph.D.

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This study explores devotional poetry of the nineteenth century as a poetic discourse in which tropes of the human soul connect spiritual reflection with lived experience in order to engage literary, religious, and social issues in Victorian England. Like G. B. Tennyson's *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (1989), this project situates individual poets in their cultural and religious contexts, and it encourages an understanding of devotional verse as an important feature of Victorian poetry. In addition to these aims, this dissertation surveys both popular and lesser-known devotional verse by poets not formally part of the Oxford Movement in order to demonstrate the far-reaching influence of devotional poetry. Defining devotional poetry in a broad sense, this analysis examines ways in which devotional verse employs tropes of the soul in order to reveal, evaluate, and challenge Victorian concerns with progress and modernity as well as social and gender relationships. Specifically, Elizabeth Barrett Browning challenges religious and literary authority as a woman writer whose vivid use of devotional language

displays the soul in its formative processes and contests readers' ideas of Christian unity. Quite by contrast, as a well-established male writer, Alfred, Lord Tennyson employs tropes of the soul in *In Memoriam* to provide a dialectic of faith and doubt and to emphasize the variegated and complex nature of a "modern," progressive faith. Lastly, Christina Rossetti's devotional verse, when read in relationship to her ideas of secrecy, reveals a powerful way in which disempowered "fallen" women might regain their spiritual and social equilibrium. One goal of this dissertation is to work against the assumption that devotional poetry is merely simplistic piety in verse, which becomes less relevant and interesting as poetry of skepticism and doubt emerges in the nineteenth century. This study suggests a different trajectory for religious literature: one that accounts for the vibrancy and complexity of devotional verse as it emerges in the works of a variety of Victorian poets.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Dr. Janice Brown, who inspired the project and convinced me that devotional verse is indeed good poetry.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Enlarging the Sphere” of Victorian Devotional Poetry

I trust I shall not be accused of presumption for the endeavor which I have here made to enlarge, in some degree, the sphere of religious poetry, by associating with this themes more of the emotions, the affections, and even the purer imaginative enjoyments of daily life, than may have been hitherto admitted within the hallowed circle.
—Felicia Hemans, *Scenes and Hymns of Life* (1834)

Only by not mistreating oneself – by accepting that you can have no final dominion over yourself, that you are a stranger to yourself – can your dealings with yourself be a model for your dealings with others.
—Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (2005)

1.1 Victorian Devotional Poetry: Engaging Tradition and “Enlarging the Sphere”

In addition to their obsession with progress and “modern” life, English Victorians sought new and various ways for articulating religious experience. As Michael Wheeler suggests, “[m]any of the most burning issues in Victorian Britain were religious controversies” (5); and from these controversies a passionate engagement between spiritual life and Victorian culture arose. A vital historical and literary link to such “burning issues” is found in Victorian devotional poetry, a mode of nineteenth-century religious verse that engages a poetic discourse of “spiritual formation” (Larson 50) whose tropes of the human soul connect spiritual reflection with lived experience in order to explore cultural issues of literary and religious authority in Victorian England. Moreover, while devotional poems are important forms of Victorian poetry specifically, such texts are worth considering in the historical and literary context of devotional poetics that has been a significant feature of English literary and religious life from the

Middle Ages to the Victorian Age. “It is,” as Louis Martz says of the meditative poem, “a kind of poem that occurs in various periods of the world’s history” (xvii).

Unfortunately, to date, no critical study of English devotional poetry across such a broad span of years exists; and G. B. Tennyson’s *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode* (1989) is the only extant monograph that addresses nineteenth-century devotional verse as a significant form of Victorian poetry.¹

To be sure, nineteenth-century poets like Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins—as Tennyson has shown—employ significant qualities of Tractarian aesthetics, which sought to reinvigorate a church whose lively spirituality, cultural relevance, and connection with traditional liturgical forms had waned throughout the eighteenth century.² However, from other poets—like Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning—who consciously worked outside Tractarianism, we hear a different, though equally devotional, voice. Tennyson explores, for example, the relationship between divine and human knowledge in *In Memoriam* (1850):

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they. (Introductory stanzas 17-20)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, on the other hand, tackles the problem of linguistic ambition and authority in poems that include supernatural beings in their cast of characters:

Forgive me, that mine earthly heart should dare
Shape images of incarnate spirits
And lay upon their burning lips a thought

¹ The closest we come to such a “study” are a number of anthologies of religious, sacred, or devotional poetry: see Appendix I for a brief list. Moreover, as Isobel Armstrong has observed, studies of Victorian poetry in general have been slow to emerge in twentieth-century criticism and theory. Cultural criticism, Feminism, and Deconstruction, for example, focus primarily on other genres (the novel) or literary periods (Romanticism) (*Victorian Poetry* 1-2).

² See G. B. Tennyson, pgs. 198-210.

Cold with the weeping which mine earth inherits.
("The Seraphim" IV.1035-38)

Addressing God or discriminating readers, Tennyson and Barrett Browning's poems employ a devotional aesthetic that works differently from Tractarian influence and from the simplistic "versified prayer" (Richards 182) denigrated by many nineteenth-century poetry critics. A study of Barrett Browning's and Tennyson's devotional verse is badly needed, especially because it would demonstrate the broad scope of devotional poetry in the nineteenth century and—by extension—highlight further the significance of devotional verse in English poetry.

In the early part of the nineteenth century—the starting point for my study—women poets sought to broaden the discussion of religious poetry or, more precisely, make room for religious poetry in the critical vocabulary of English poetics. In her 1834 volume of poems, *Scenes and Hymns of Life*, Felicia Hemans states the following, which is an epigraph for this chapter:

I trust I shall not be accused of presumption for the endeavor which I have here made to enlarge, in some degree, the sphere of religious poetry, by associating with this themes more of the emotions, the affections, and even the purer imaginative enjoyments of daily life, than may have been hitherto admitted within the hallowed circle. (548)

She continues by expressing her

wish to portray the religious spirit, not alone in its meditative joys and solitary aspirations (the poetic embodying of which seems to require from the reader a state of mind already separated and exalted), but likewise in those active influences upon human life, so often called into victorious energy by trial and conflict. (548)

Two facts are interesting here. First, Hemans acknowledges an already dominant form of religious poetry, whose "aspirations" are "meditative" and "solitary," and which expects a lofty state of mind from its reader who is to be already "separated and exalted" in

thought before even approaching the text. Second, Hemans suggests, in what may or may not be what Marjorie Stone calls a “modesty trope” (51), that any attempt to make religious poetry a more inclusive literary category will meet with contention by those who affirm the hallowed and exalted qualities of the appropriately authoritative texts. By seeking to include “emotions,” “affections,” and “the purer imaginative enjoyments of daily life,” Hemans plays on a theme familiar to women writers, especially insofar as they were expected to mark their religious poetry with the purity and weakness of feminine emotion.³ At the same time, she articulates the desire to use such “feminine” textual qualities—particularly affective discourse—to push the boundaries of religious poetry past its own elitism.

As we shall see in Chapter 2, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1838 and 1844 volumes—both their prefaces and poems—resonate with the sound of Hemans’s challenge. “Enlarging the sphere” of religious poetry to include women writers and different types of religious poems, and “enlarging the sphere of English poetry” to make room for devotional verse, is Barrett Browning’s two-sided purpose. Likewise, it is the purpose of this dissertation to “enlarge the sphere” of critical discussion when it comes to devotional verse in nineteenth-century literature. Yet, rather than engaging the specific spiritual traditions of Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, I seek in this study to explore Christian devotional poetry in a broad sense: not as exemplifying any one theological

³ Robert Kachur’s article about women’s devotional writings on the Apocalypse, demonstrates the sort of “mark” of femininity (that is, female processing of religious concepts) that women’s texts were supposed to display, and he connects this “mark” specifically with devotional writing. He notes that “[a]lthough women were officially prohibited from offering original biblical exegesis within the Anglican church and most Dissenting congregations during the nineteenth century, they published at least two kinds of prose intended to illuminate the Apocalypse: adaptation of Apocalyptic exegesis done by men, simplified for laypeople and children, and the ecclesiastically sanctioned form of ‘devotional meditations’ on the Apocalypse” (2). Moreover, “women’s texts of the Apocalypse were by definition supposed to be unremarkable echoes of men’s texts—translations of what the last book of the Bible means, or suggestions of how those already established meanings should affect one’s domestic affairs and private worship” (4).

concept or debate, but as a kind of religious poetry that addresses the variegated features of the soul for a variety of purposes. Thus I am less interested in the doctrinal commitments of specific poets (though they will be mentioned where appropriate), and less interested in revealing the particular uses of Scripture, theology, or doctrine any one poem may engage. In other words, I am not decoding devotional poetry in order to align it with particular religious traditions and beliefs. Instead, I seek to explore ways in which Victorian devotional poetry, in its particular historical moment, features important aspects of the human self and of God in order to address literary and cultural concerns. Considering nineteenth-century devotional verse in this broad sense, I believe, enables a connection between that poetry and English devotional poetry of the past: to find traces of an aesthetic, even as that “aesthetic” itself is not wholly stable.

In the tradition, so to speak, of English devotional poetry as I see it, a discernable trace of the human self in relation with a divine Other—and the idea of the self-in-relation as a defining feature of devotional aesthetics—may be identified via tropes of the soul, which I will define in the next section of this introduction.⁴ “The effort to renegotiate a content to every relationship between self and the world,” argues Isobel Armstrong, “is the Victorian poet’s project. It is now a simultaneously personal and cultural project and carries the poet into the new genres and a new exploration of language. It entails renegotiating the terms of self and world themselves” (*Victorian Poetry* 7). Devotional aesthetics in Victorian poetry addressed this renegotiation with the knowledge that “the terms of self and other in all these acts of relationship are unstable,”

⁴ As Armstrong explains, “The problems of agency and consciousness, labour, language and representation become crucial [in Victorian poetry]. Teleology is replaced with epistemology and politics because *relationships* and their representation become the contested area, between self and society, self and labour, self and nature, self and language and above all between self and the lover” (*Victorian Poetry* 7).

but for other reasons than Armstrong (who focuses on romantic love) suggests (7). A consideration of the role played by devotional poetry in these poetic “terms of self and other” enlivens our sense of the function of religious poetics and provides a more textured image of Victorian poetry than has been offered to this point.

However, unlike studies of medieval and early modern poetry, whose investigations of devotional poetry continue to proliferate, scholarship in Victorian devotional poetry is in short supply. The reason for such scarcity is a guiding question for my dissertation: why do we not read and study devotional poetry more frequently? Critical appraisals of religious poetry—and devotional poetry in particular—in the nineteenth century and our own day reveal two main assumptions: that no religious poetry can be “good” poetry, because its piety diminishes its aesthetic value; and that, due to Victorian religious controversies, devotional poetry may be defined by qualities of either “faith” or “doubt” but not both. In this unproductive binary, “faith” and “doubt” have become overdetermined terms to which we attach particular critical values. Specifically, the texts of “faith” are deemed conventional, dogmatic, and, unless they are read as subversive (such as “Goblin Market” by Christina Rossetti) or complex stylistically (e.g. the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins), are not worth reading. Conversely, the texts of “doubt” are valued for the ways they undermine the earnest, dogmatic moralism of Victorian Christianity.

Like any critical terms, “faith” and “doubt” may be useful categories. However, as Diane D’Amico, Linda Pallazzo, and Mary Arseneau have demonstrated in the case of Christina Rossetti; as G. B. Tennyson and Emma Mason have shown with the Tractarians; as Linda Lewis and Karen Dieleman explain with Elizabeth Barrett

Browning; and as Aiden Day and Alan Hill exhibit with Alfred, Lord Tennyson, recent studies of Victorian religious poetry esteem “faith” as a complex and dynamic term. Following the lead of these scholars and critics, I seek to move away from a binary construction of Victorian faith and doubt. At this point the category of “doubt” is largely favored over “faith” as a critical—and interesting—notation, and as a result the devotional poetry of the Victorian period has gone largely unexplored.

In particular, the binary of faith and doubt as a nexus for critical concerns has encouraged critics such as Bernard Richards to suggest that by and large “religious poetry”—i.e. poetry of faith—is merely “versified doctrine and versified prayer” (182). As a result, Richards declares, “the poetry that catches our interest is concerned with struggle and loss of faith” (182). His arguments against a poetics of faith call to mind Samuel Johnson’s contention that “[a]ll that pious verse can do is to help the memory, and delight the ear, and for these purposes it may be very useful; but it supplies nothing to the mind” (80). Moreover, “[c]ontemplative piety,” Johnson explains, “or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical,” because “[m]an, admitted to implore the mercy of his creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer” (80). Thus, such verse falls outside the definition of “good poetry”:

From poetry the reader justly expects, and from good poetry always obtains, the enlargement of his comprehension and elevation of his fancy; but this is rarely to be hoped by Christians from metrical devotion. Whatever is great, desirable, or tremendous, is comprised in the name of the Supreme Being. Omnipotence cannot be exalted; Infinity cannot be amplified; Perfection cannot be improved. (80)

Distracted in his “contemplative piety,” the devotional poet may never create “good poetry” because no human may augment the power, endlessness, and perfection of “the

Supreme Being.” A century later, some Victorian critics agree with Johnson: one writer discussing a narrative poem called *The Messiah* in an 1832 *Monthly Review* article commends it for celebrating “the life and death of The Redeemer—a subject than which none more exalted, or more worthy of the genius of the poet or orator, could possibly be selected” (“Article VII” 410). However, the reviewer concludes that “[t]he man who would now attempt to sing so great a theme, must either follow or excel the scriptures. To suppose that he could do the latter, without the assistance of supernatural gifts, would be silly, as well as impious” (410). In order to maintain their individual powers, piety and poetry must be kept separate.

Moreover, piety’s danger to poetry also involves the problem of originality and limitation of poetic scope: the suggestion made by *The Monthly Review* that in order to write “good poetry” the poet of *The Messiah* must “excel the Scriptures” (i.e. achieve the impossible) corresponds to Johnson’s argument that

[t]he essence of poetry is invention; such invention as, by producing something unexpected, surprises and delights. The topics of devotion are few, and being few are universally known; but few as they are, they can be made no more; they can receive no grace from novelty of sentiment, and very little from novelty of expression. (80)

Like Johnson, T. S. Eliot finds the focus of religious poetry limiting.⁵ “For the great majority of people who love poetry,” Eliot explains in “Religion and Literature” (1934), “‘religious poetry’ is a variety of *minor* poetry: the religious poet is not a poet who is treating the whole subject matter of poetry in a religious spirit, but a poet who is dealing with a confined part of this subject matter: who is leaving out what men consider their

⁵ Johnson’s comments on devotional verse in his *Lives of the Poets* series (1779-81) and Eliot’s essays on religion and literature collected in *Essays Ancient and Modern* (1936) provide useful historical book ends, so to speak, for my study of devotional poetics. Both writers denigrate devotional poetry; and twentieth- and twenty-first century views of religious poetry often resonate with their ideas.

major passions, and thereby confessing his ignorance of them” (96). His point echoes Hemans’s view from exactly one hundred years earlier, in which she emphasizes that “the emotions, the affections, and even the purer imaginative enjoyments of daily life” had been refused admittance to “the hallowed circle” of religious verse. Yet for Hemans this omission was a problem to be remedied, while for Eliot it defined devotional verse as a restricted genre. As Eliot asserts, the religious poet is “too limited in his range, too sensitively aware of his relation to God to be sensitively aware of his relation to his fellows, or to nature, or to the hundred and one other occupations of men when they are not on their knees” (qtd. in Gardner, 125). Thus according to two of English literature’s critical giants, religious poets commit the sin of overambition when they approach “the Supreme Being” via poetic themes—a charge, as we will see, that was frequently leveled against Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In doing so, such poets risk what William Blake calls in another context “the same dull round” (97): by writing primarily about faith, they constrict the imagination, repeat simple and uninteresting topics, and, quite simply, compose bad poetry.

Yet the poetry of doubt is another matter. In his famous assessment of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*, that “[i]t is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt” (“In Memoriam” 138), Eliot encourages a critical sensibility that avoids poems deemed “religious for the quality of [their] faith” and also claims that poets who are “on their knees” in a posture of devotion cannot simultaneously be “sensitively aware of [their] relation to [their] fellows.” Devotional poetry, I will argue, demonstrates quite the opposite. Engaging both faith and doubt—often simultaneously—devotional poems register an aesthetic and experiential interaction

between the human self and God via tropes of the soul. They do so in order to navigate and, at times, to “demarcate,” as Michael Schoenfeldt explains, referring to John Donne and Aemilia Lanyer in the English Renaissance, “the border territory dividing inwardness that devotion demands from the conduct that [...] Christianity enjoins” (209). For each of these poets such “conduct” (and Christianity, for that matter) looks different; and yet each writer investigates the material results of an “inward” devotional voice: Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Rossetti use devotional poetry to raise crucial ethical concerns they see as part of a fractured individual and social identity. While in her criticism Armstrong argues that for Victorians, “[a]rt occupied its own area, a self-sufficing aesthetic realm over and against practical concerns,” she points out that “it was at once apart and central, for it had a mediating function, representing and interpreting life” (*Victorian Poetry* 4). It is through this activity of “representing and interpreting life” that Barrett Browning’s, Tennyson’s, and Rossetti’s devotional poems offer spiritual responses that enliven rather than avoid the political, economic, social, and historical implications of unstable identity.

In particular, I will consider Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Christina Rossetti as writers of devotional poetry who depict what Janet Larson calls “encounters with God” as “experiences of pure immediacy” (Larson 50). These experiences display “the extended process of transformation” that engulfs the total human and “that is discursively mediated at many points” (50). Such “transformation” brings an “awareness” that “implies not only interpretive frameworks for what the ‘soul’ experiences but also its naming after the event, both of which entail the mediations of language” (50). To acknowledge such “mediations of language” as defining features of

devotional poetics is to recognize that devotional poems act discursively, “constitut[ing]” the spiritual encounters that they claim “to describe realistically and to analyze objectively” (White 2). As such, they encourage multiple levels of meaning in devotional experiences that are simultaneously immediate and “extended”: they are not merely simple, transparent specimens of “versified doctrine and versified prayer.” Instead, through tropes of the human soul, devotional poems enact the multivalent discourses of divine being and human spiritual subjectivity that comprise Victorian Christianity in all its forms.

1.2 Theorizing a Devotional “Self”

I am most interested in the idea of the soul as the key component of that human subjectivity in devotional poetry: and yet, the “soul” is a difficult thing to define. Is it the same as the “subject,” the “identity,” or the “self”? Moreover, the “soul” has different definitions in different spiritual traditions: the *Encyclopedia Judaica* explains that “[t]he personality was considered as a whole in the biblical period. Thus the soul was not sharply distinguished from the body. In biblical Hebrew the words *neshamah* and *ru’ah* both mean “breath” and *nefesh* refers to the person or even the body (cf. Num. 6:6)” (Ivry 33). The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* presents more detail in a definition that is ultimately inconclusive:

Intuitively and almost universally man acknowledges an essential difference between living and nonliving things. The intrinsic force, or principle of movement, by which certain things are living is commonly called the soul (see Aristotle, *Anim.* 413a 20–21). The human soul, essentially different from other souls, is that internal principle by which man lives, perceives, and thinks (*Anim.* 414a 12–13). All cultures and civilizations have been convinced that man is not a purely material being; rather, they recognize that man possesses within himself some element that is relatively independent of the body, giving life and power to the body. The nature of this principle was not always clearly understood.

Often it was compared or identified with air, wind, breath, or spirit. Some considered the soul to be a single simple principle; others distinguished between the soul, the principle of bodily life, and the intellectual powers by which man thinks [...]. The origin of the human soul has often been explained by myths, by superstitious belief, by natural causes, or by religion. Consideration of its survival and ultimate destiny have given rise to many beliefs. (Brady 336-337)

While I will do not seek to offer a comprehensive definition of the soul, and even as I realize how troublesome the term “soul” may be, I suggest one way in which the notion of the soul works poetically in these texts. In particular, each poet displays the capacity for the speaking “I” of devotional poetry to articulate a spiritual and a poetic “self”⁶ that develops into a soul through the “process of spiritual formation” whereby that “self” comes into contact with various aspects of itself, with others, and with God in the text as well as in material reality. This “self” is “not sharply distinguished from the body”—though the body and soul are often discussed as distinct entities by Victorian poets—and, as I see it, is an “internal principle” with external implications. Armstrong argues, with respect to the “Victorian dramatic poem,” that such a poem “is not the dialogue of the mind with itself so much as the dialogue of the poem with itself,” and such dialogue works as the “lyric entry into the phenomenological world” (*Victorian Poetry* 14).⁷ Using the text as an embodied “self” via tropes of the soul, devotional poets navigate nineteenth-century critical debates over the function of the poetic imagination and the poetic “self” (Scott 1). In particular, as Nathan A. Scott, Jr. observes, those debates either celebrate or denigrate “radical creativity and freedom” in the poet (1), ultimately engage our own, contemporary critical and theoretical arguments that dismiss “any kind

⁶ I put “self” in quotation marks to indicate its role as a critical concept.

⁷ Armstrong makes the valuable point that such dialogue in Victorian poems “is not a question of a simple dialogue or dialectic form in which the opposition between two terms is fixed and settled,” but rather is “highly complex” (14).

of privileged subjectivity” as well as “the notion of the self as an autonomous center of creativity” (4). With devotional poetry as a touch point for these concerns—Victorian and contemporary—it is difficult to envision a way around a wholesale dismissal of devotional writing insofar as it suggests a “radical creativity” in placing a seemingly “autonomous” human “self” in a vital interaction with God.

In this way the “self” is the creative center of the text; but because God functions as the interlocutor, comforter, and challenger to that “self” through grace, these poets demonstrate the instability of the faith-doubt binary by engaging, through tropes of the soul, the indeterminacy of being in both faith and doubt as valuable features of religious experience. The devotional poems of Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Rossetti, in moments of lively faith and rigorous doubt, shape the human soul as the central figuration of concerns about a “modern” and poetic “self” in relationship to/with a divine Other. Specifically, they relate self and other through tropes of the soul. In my use of the term “tropes,” I adhere to Hayden White’s idea that “troping” is “both a movement *from* one notion of the way things are related *to* another notion, and a connection between things so that they can be expressed in a language that takes account of the possibility of their being expressed otherwise” (2). At times this “self”—as soul—has little control over its own will, but rather is led by divine will: “Dost thou not will, pour soul?” (9), asks God in Christina Rossetti’s “A Bruised Reed Shall He Not Break” (*Goblin Market and Other Poems* 1862): “Yet I receive / The inner unseen longings of the soul, / I guide them turning towards Me [...] (9-11). And from *In Memoriam*: “Our wills are ours, we know not how; / Our wills are ours, to make them thine” (Intro. Stanzas 15-16). At other times, the soul is less well-established, either in a divine will or any other: “O Soul,”

says Tennyson in Stanza 65 of *In Memoriam*, “do with me as thou wilt; / I lull a fancy trouble-tost” (1-2). Yet what remains constant is an inconstancy: through an interaction between the “self” and God, devotional poems bring the “self” to spiritual and material “non-being” (Eagleton 213). The devotional “self” is willing to be undone and remade, it is always transitional; and its very instability suggests the poetic articulations of that “self” as a particularly fruitful area for investigative work on historical change: “Our little systems have their day; / They have their day and cease to be [...]” (Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, Intro. Stanzas 17-18).

As Terry Eagleton explains, “because we are historical animals we are always in the process of becoming, perpetually out ahead of ourselves. Because our life is a project rather than a series of present moments, we can never achieve the stable identity of a mosquito or a pitchfork” (Eagleton 208).⁸ In the moments of “pure immediacy” displayed in devotional texts, tropes of the soul demonstrate how “encounters with God” create a revaluation of language, selfhood, and society. Therefore, unlike Eliot’s contention that poets who are “on their knees” in a posture of devotion cannot simultaneously be “sensitively aware of [their] relation to [their] fellows,” I argue that devotional poetry encourages social and self awareness; and it also promotes a kind of selflessness or “non-being” through its variegated representations of human identity.

⁸ I am aware of the irony involved in my choice to feature Eagleton, a Marxist, as the contributor of a central theoretical concept to my dissertation about devotional poetry. However, it is precisely Eagleton’s arguments about historical contingency that provide a theoretical vocabulary for discussing the indeterminacy of being, or “non-being”: as Eagleton says, “history is quite as much our destiny as death” (209). Eagleton asserts that an awareness of historical contingency and death itself gives humans the capacity for (1) viewing “the world” in its “contingency” (210) and (2) “turn[ing] facts into values,” into “the kind of behaviour appropriate to a friend” (211). Eagleton’s arguments are crucial to my project because they emphasize that indeterminacy of being, when reflected upon and embraced, leads to ethical action. This is precisely what devotional poets communicate as well.

Eagleton's theory of "non-being" as "the ultimate purity" (213), in its "constructive rather than corrosive" (220) capacity to counter "political order...based upon the non-being of human deprivation" (221), provides a significant starting point for investigating a new direction in theories of devotional poetry and Victorian studies. For Eagleton, "non-being" involves viewing "the world aright...in the light of its own contingency" (210), recognizing that "absolute self-abandonment which death demands of us is only tolerable if we have rehearsed it somewhat in life," (211), and that both the apostle Paul of the Christian theological tradition and the "social order" of "the ancient world" help us to understand the "structure of mutual self-giving" (211) that non-being demands.⁹ For Eagleton, living in an awareness of death has the potential for raising our awareness about our own ignorance of human suffering around us; and it is in the correspondence Eagleton makes between an understanding of "self-giving" and ethical responsibilities to oppressed peoples that provides a bridge for me to discuss both the theological and ethical implications suggested by the poets in this dissertation. In a devotional poem, God and humans, as it were, come face to face; and it is in that interaction, devotional poets tell us, that the capacity for "non-being" and "self-giving" enlivens the spiritual exchange that occurs between the human and God as well as the human's sense for his or her ethical responsibility to others.¹⁰

⁹ This concept of "non-being" relates to Scott's idea of humans as "liminars" (5). He states that "the nature of temporality in which we dwell commits us to a 'threshold' existence," and so "the self is always confronting the not-self" (6). In my view, Victorian devotional poets applied the workings of embodied spiritual grace to the poetic imagination in such a way that always suggests the "not-self" to the "self" in its interaction with God.

¹⁰ This is not the same, however, as Kuchar's suggestion that "in the context of religious devotion the 'political' is primarily a matter of the relationship between being and Being, self and Other, and only secondarily a function of doing or acting in the sense of changing one's immediate socio-political circumstances" (7). According to him, "the seventeenth-century *politics of being*...is a matter of finding an

The notion of “non-being” has its theoretical roots in the decentering of being-as-presence, a tricky subject to address in relation to devotional poetry. Devotional English literature is, of course, informed in varying degrees by the very theology that Derrida deems metaphysical and logocentric. Victorian devotional poets like Christina Rossetti and Gerard Manley Hopkins—influenced strongly by the Oxford Movement, which particularly sought to reinvigorate notions of “being” and “presence” in the sacraments of the church but also in Christian theology in general—wrote ideas of sacramental “being” and the “presence” of God into their poems. However, as Luke Ferreter has shown, the “logocentric metaphysics” deconstructed by Derrida and others is itself a theoretical construct that has missed the point, in many ways, about God, selfhood, and presence in Christian theology (14). Specifically, he cites Brian Ingraffia’s argument that “the God of Biblical revelation ‘does not make possible but rather makes impossible, an absolutely pure and absolutely present self-knowledge’” (14), which suggests that Christian theology is best viewed not as a totalizing discourse incompatible with contemporary philosophical and theoretical concerns but as congruent in many ways with poststructuralist analyses of “self” and subjectivity.

Thus, I believe that although language is the only means by which we articulate spiritual experience as devotional poetry, we do well to consider what Derrida refers to as “the *problem of language*” (6). Part of this problem involves the fact

effective formal means of predicating the sacramental continuities between eternal and temporal orders, between the hypostasis of Being and the flux of time” (7). The claims of the Christian faith do indeed suggest such “sacramental continuities,” but I seek to highlight the ways that these claims are more complicated than Kuchar makes them out to be, namely because not all Christian thinkers reinforce “the hypostasis of Being,” even when they accept doctrines such as the omnipresence and omniscience of God; moreover, according to Christian theology, the “eternal and temporal orders” both diverge from and collapse into one another in the devotional text’s sacramental focus. The ways that this focus demands immediate ethical attention from its readers are, in my view, *primarily* “function[s] of doing or acting in the sense of changing one’s immediate socio-political circumstances.”

that a historico-metaphysical epoch *must* finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon. It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play but also because, for the same reason, language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift at the very threat of limitlessness, brought back to its own finitude at the very moment when its limits seem to disappear, when it ceases to be self-assured, contained, and *guaranteed* by the infinite signified which seemed to exceed it. (6)

Derrida makes this assertion in the context of a larger discussion of linguistics, speech, writing, “technics,” and truth; and while I do not presume to think as a philosopher or linguist, or to embrace with full certainty all of Derrida’s arguments, I believe that this view of “the play of language” in a “historico-metaphysical epoch”¹¹ is a useful point of entry into a discussion about the ways language works in devotional poetry. Specifically, the idea that the “play of language” resists limitations that “desire” imposes on it relates to devotional language in a significant way: for me, “desire” in this context gestures toward the codifying efforts of institutions or doctrines; and while (as we shall see) I do not think that doctrinal meaning or God—as “the infinite signified”—is erased altogether, I affirm that the play of language in a devotional text always “recaptures” limiting efforts of desire in the play itself. Ultimately, devotional texts may affirm divine presence and religious belief or doctrine, but insofar as any of these are expressed in language, their meaning is always, to some degree, unfixed and unstable.

Derrida’s questioning and undermining of language that is “self-assured, contained, and *guaranteed* by the infinite signified” have a particular importance in discussions about religious literature because they seem to erase any possibility of discussing divine presence meaningfully. As Morny Joy explains, “[I]t would seem that by unmasking the pretensions of the Enlightenment claims of reason to certainty,

¹¹ Though it is not useful to my argument at present, it is important to note that Derrida’s idea of the “historico-metaphysical epoch” is an assertion of definition he seeks to undermine.

deconstruction simultaneously corrodes any foundational basis for ideal types, such as God or personhood. Words and meaning are no longer linked irrevocably” (127). Thus what I see as the major tropes of devotional poetry—the human soul, as well as God—are mere illusions founded on an illusion, and my study and use of language complies with rather than clarifies the illusion. It shows my efforts to “guarantee” God as a metaphysical presence which exceeds the limits of language. However, following Joy’s leadership, I will suggest a view of devotional language that simultaneously affirms its “play” and resists what Joy calls “the dissolute abandonment of all standards of coherence and morality” (127). She asserts that if deconstruction does “[corrode] any foundational basis for ideal types, such as God or personhood,” then

[t]he resultant instability can be then be interpreted in two ways. The pessimistic reading portrays its effects as the dissolute abandonment of all standards of coherence and morality. A second and more buoyant reading understands this challenge to absolutist notions of truth as a necessary remedy to the human propensity to impose rigid structures on things which are essentially indefinable. The resultant infinite play of the word need not necessarily imply the end to all speculation about God or our own identity. (127)

Thinking of devotional poetry as texts which register both claims and “challenge[s] to absolutist notions of truth,” I argue that a “buoyant” rather than “pessimistic reading” of deconstruction offers the play of language as a way to open up rather than close down discourse about God and the human soul. As I see it, Christian theology suggests that divine being itself contests “the human propensity to impose rigid structures on things which are essentially indefinable.”

For Victorian devotional poets, the interaction between God and the human soul at work in their texts is a means of figuring a flexible “self” that may be continually reshaped; and the spiritual emphasis of devotional poetry does not split the “self” into

metaphysical binaries of “being and time,” or absence and presence, and does not work primarily—as Gary Kuchar suggests—to secure devotional readers in the proper “structures of authority” (2) that are manifested primarily in social institutions and the church. In this discussion it is important to distinguish between the “self” and the “self-as-subject” that Kuchar features in his argument about the devotional “subject” and its place in an increasingly secular, seventeenth-century context. For Kuchar a devotional “subject” is a construct whose “primary function” is “to teach readers how to experience themselves as properly desiring subjects” (2). His argument, which claims that devotional literature serves to “[produce]...ideal religious subjectivities” in order to “represent and symbolically mitigate some of the most pressing ontotheological crises of the age” (5), seeks to counter “the economy of divine subjection” that many seventeenth-century poets “reorganized in an effort to sustain” (246).

For Kuchar, the “subjects” speaking in devotional poems worked purposefully—as did the poets—to reinscribe the religious self back into the authoritative religious structures capable of endowing a modernizing world with stable meaning. Their effort, which is manifested in “sacramentalist modes,” is marked by the same “logocentric metaphysics” that complicates Althusser’s treatment of the interpolated subject (245-46), and, Kuchar states, may be “demystified” through “a move from an implicitly theological to an explicitly genealogical model of subject formation,” a model suggested by Judith Butler (246). By working to demystify the devotional subjection of seventeenth-century selves into “ideal religious subjectivities,” Kuchar suggests that religious literature always serves dogmatic ends. Although Kuchar’s study provides a rare and valuable resource for my work, namely a discussion of devotional poetry in the context of

contemporary theoretical perspectives, his argument frames the devotional “subject” in a way that ultimately restricts critical discourse: he concludes that the “self” in devotional texts does nothing more than imprison itself in religious strictures and institutional structures. It is too preoccupied by its business on its knees to be concerned about the world around it, or even the version of itself that has been spiritually restructured. If Kuchar—and Richards, and Eliot, and Johnson—are correct, then devotional poets will return to their previous state of critical oblivion, and rightly so.

I argue that they are wrong. My method in this dissertation will be to focus on the “self” in Victorian poetry only insofar as that “self” is critically underwritten by questions about its capacity to interact with God in devotional activity. As a theoretical notion, the “self”—like the “soul”—is a fraught concept. This is fitting, for the point of devotional poetry, in my view, is to display, via tropes of the soul, the fraught “self” as it undergoes spiritual change.¹² In particular, this change occurs in conjunction with historical change, as theological and cultural notions of the “self” part ways in the Victorian age. In Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* for example, this parting caused a split between the speaking and the believing self: “Take wings of foresight; lighten thro’ / The secular abyss to come, / And lo, thy deepest lays are dumb” (76.5-7). The “self,” as it is constructed in devotional poetics, responds to this change, in order to demonstrate the capacity for human selfhood to consciously engage individual and social inequalities and fragmentation.

¹² I do not recognize this “spiritual change” as the “specific confessional, theological, or, more broadly, metaphysical crisis” that Kuchar identifies in the early modern devotional subject (2). For him, devotional literature is a means for “sacramental writers” to “reconstitute within the self a sense of order that often appeared absent from both national and cosmological spheres” (6): hence the “crisis.” For me, devotional literature encourages the sense of “crisis” in order to display the problems with “order” in the self.

Moreover, I will argue that devotional poems, in their capacity to address social realities and in their specific Victorian manifestations, may be theorized in a more textured way than G. B. Tennyson's landmark study suggests: "By devotional poetry," he argues, "I mean...poetry that grows out of and is tied to acts of religious worship" (Tennyson 6). Beyond a focus on particular "established liturgical forms" (6), I will explore various exchanges between the "self" and God in the devotional text that convey new forms of "self" to the devotional speaker and audience. In addition, rather than positing being-as-presence as a theoretical touchstone for my understanding of how the "self" is moved to ethical action, I seek to investigate the ways that "non-being," in its theological, philosophical, theoretical, and ethical sense, is the primary focus of the devotional "self" in Victorian poetry. This "self," shaped into "non-being" via tropes of the soul in relationship with the divine Other, does not attend only to its business on its knees: this "self" assesses the quality of social and political realities, and then engages with those realities in ethical ways.¹³

1.3 Victorian and Devotional Poetics: A Brief Survey

In her 1842 *Essays on the Greek Christian Poets*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes a careful distinction between two types of writers:

[O]f religious poets, strictly so-called, the earth is very bare. Religious "parcel-poets" we have, indeed, more than enough; writers of hymns, translators of Scripture into prose, or of prose generally into rhymes, of

¹³ The ethical component of devotional poetry finds, in the Victorian context, its most prominent support in the atmosphere of "religious revival" in the nineteenth century, which, Josef Altholz argues, "shaped that code of moral behavior, or rather that infusion of all behavior with moralism, which we still call, rightly or wrongly, 'Victorianism'" (58). In addition, the relationship between the Christian religion and ethical behavior in the Victorian period was, at times, an uneasy one: David J. DeLaura suggests that "the dominant factor" for "the loss of religious faith in...early Victorian agnostics" was not the usual suspects of biblical higher criticism or theories of evolution but rather "a growing repugnance toward the ethical implications of what each [Victorian agnostic] had been taught to believe as essential Christianity" (e.g. original sin and eternal damnation) (13).

whose heart-devotion a higher faculty were worthy [...] But the right “genius of Christianity” has done little up to this moment [...]. (22)

While she asserts that her contemporaries should develop an appreciation for the “hidden beauties” of “these neglected Greeks” (22), Barrett Browning makes the “full and frank admission, that they are not accomplished poets” (14). Of all the writers she explores, “not one,” she concludes, “can be crowned with a steady hand as a true complete poet’s name” (16). Not only are the Greek poets second-rate, she suggests, but their few ranks illustrate an important concept for Barrett Browning’s Victorian readers: poetry that involves Christianity and “genius” largely remains to be seen.

As a critic and a poet, Barrett Browning had been thinking about this scarcity of religious poetry since 1826. In the preface to her volume from that year, published just before John Keble’s *The Christian Year* (1827) and seven years before the first *Tracts for the Times* pamphlet appears, Barrett states, “I am...aware of how often it has been asserted that poetry is not a proper vehicle for abstract ideas—how far the assertion may be correct, is with me a matter of doubt” (“Preface” to *An Essay* 56). Moreover, in an extended statement on her own poetic subject Barrett explains the following:

I wish that the sublime circuit of intellect, embraced by the plan of my Poem [*An Essay on Mind*], had fallen to the lot of a spirit more powerful than mine. I wish it had fallen to the lot of one familiar with the dwelling-place of Mind...who could try the golden links of that chain which hangs from Heaven to earth, and shew that it is not placed there for man to covet for lucre’s sake, or for him to weigh his puny strength at one end against Omnipotence at the other; but that it is placed there to join, in mysterious union, the natural and the spiritual, the mortal and the eternal, the creature and the Creator. (59)

She develops this theme in her 1838 Preface to *The Seraphim and Other Poems* where, as we shall see, Barrett Browning makes a detailed case for religious poetry. Taken together, Barrett Browning’s various statements on poetry, religion, and the devotional

suggest a distinct critical concern on her part about the function of religious devotion in poetry. This concern does not, of course, make her unique: by 1838 Keble's *The Christian Year* had been in print for over a decade, and the Tractarians' initial statements about poetry and religion had become a defining feature of Victorian critical debates.

Understanding these specific debates requires a broader exploration of Victorian perspectives on poetics in general. As Isobel Armstrong has shown in *Victorian Scrutinies: Reviews of Poetry 1830-1870* (1972) and *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993), theories and debates about the functions of poetry are a central feature of Victorian literary discourse. Moreover, these theories and debates shift in their focus and emphasis throughout the nineteenth century, from Wordsworth's 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to John Keble's 1825 essay on "Sacred Poetry," Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 1838 Preface to *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, Matthew Arnold's Preface to *Poems* (1853), and James Russell Lowell's assessment of Wordsworth in 1875, among many others. A survey of some general trends in Victorian assessments of poetry will, I hope, demonstrate that devotional poetry worked within rather than apart from general discussions about poetics. Thus devotional verse played a more significant role in Victorian literary discourse than has been previously recognized; moreover, it was not segregated from secular poetry, nor was it a type of coterie verse—a poetry of sects or distinct movements only. While devotional poetry, by virtue of its religious subject-matter, does not "transcend" all types of poetry and historical moments, I believe that it is integral to Victorian poetry in general.

Armstrong demonstrates that early- to mid-nineteenth century reviewers in particular imbued their “periodical criticism”¹⁴ of poetry with a remarkable kind of urgency:

Romantic and post-Romantic writers had dissolved the old categories and vocabulary of criticism and it was necessary to find new ones: Victorian critics contemplated a new poetry which seemed strange and, difficult though it is to see how this could be now, almost revolutionary; they were also confronted with a social or cultural environment which seemed to be particularly hostile to the writing of poetry. (*Victorian Scrutinies* 4)

Specifically, Victorians address progress, modernization, and industrialization—an urgency of the “new” that differs from Romantic preoccupations with new “poetry as poetic diction” (as Wordsworth calls it)¹⁵ and an emphasis on the natural (i.e. not urban) world. William Johnson Fox, reviewing Tennyson’s debut volume of poetry—*Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830)—explains what he sees as a clear relationship between mechanization and poetics:

It would be a pity that poetry should be an exception to the great law of progression that obtains in human affairs; and it is not. The machinery of a poem is not less susceptible of improvement than the machinery of a cotton-mill; nor is there any better reason why the one should retrograde from the days of Milton, than the other from those of Arkwright. (qtd. in Armstrong, *Victorian Scrutinies* 71)¹⁶

¹⁴ Armstrong notes the difference between “abstract treatises on poetry” vs. “periodical criticism”: “J. H. Newman’s *Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle’s Poetics* (1829), E. S. Dallas’s *Poetics: an Essay on Poetry* (1852), G. H. Lewes’s *The Principles of Success in Literature* (1865), and the theories of Carlyle or Ruskin are written with a hypothetical or ideal poet and poetry in mind,” while essays about poetry in periodicals are “concern[ed] with the actual” and, as such, demonstrate “the immense variety of emphasis with which an idea can be interpreted” (*Victorian Scrutinies* 3). Moreover, she suggests that periodical reviews were “closer to cultural pressures than the abstract treatises” were (3); and while I will not explore the distinctions between periodical reviews and “abstract treatises” in this study, I do assume that there is in Victorian England an notable association between poetics and “cultural pressures.”

¹⁵ Cf. pgs. 1-39 of *English Critical Essays: Nineteenth Century* (Ed. Edmund D. Jones. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1935).

¹⁶ John Arkwright (1732-1792), a Lancashire barber who patented a cotton-spinning machine in 1769 (Scherer 66-67).

And although Arthur Hallam, in a review of the same volume, takes issue with Fox's mechanical metaphor, the metaphor itself is an important one: Victorian culture lived and moved in the effects of a growth of science and industrialization that altered social and poetic consciousness, especially with regard to progress, modernization, and the human self. "Shall Science," asks Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor Resartus*, "proceed in the small chink-lighted, or even oil-lighted, underground workshop of Logic alone; and man's mind become an Arithmetical Mill, whereof Memory is the Hopper, and mere tables of Sines and Tangents, Codification, and Treatises of what you call Political Economy, are the Meal?" (32). In speaking of "[t]hat progress Science, which is to destroy Wonder," Carlyle addresses the concern raised by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times* (1854) over what sort of dismal society might emerge from the thinking that "Facts alone," not wonder, "are wanted in life. Plant nothing else and root out everything else" (13).

Moreover, set alongside new economic, political, and social realities were religious controversies—debates over the place of the church in Victorian minds and souls. As G.B. Tennyson has shown in *Victorian Devotional Poetry: The Tractarian Mode*, and as a recent volume of *Victorian Poetry* (44: 2006) demonstrates, poetry of the Oxford Movement—or Tractarianism—is a main feature of Victorian ideas about the role of what John Keble calls "Sacred Poetry" in Victorian literature. In addition, this poetry contributes to a reshaping of the English church: Keble's 1827 bestseller *The Christian Year* and the 1833-41 publication of the *Tracts for the Times* in an effort to reinvigorate Anglican spiritual life and practice points to a general complacency as well as a

stagnation of devotional life evidenced by the Established church throughout the eighteenth century.¹⁷

For Keble, sacred verse demands a poet's "instinctive attachment to his subject," an impatience with "languor or constraint" ("Sacred Poetry" 201)—i.e. inauthentic emotion or apathy—and should serve as evidence of what Wordsworth calls a "serious faith" (qtd. in Keble 202) rather than "mere flashes of goodness" (202). Reacting to a previous generation of complacency, Keble and his fellow Tractarians prized sincerity and dedication to a poetic subject in devotional poets. In this way, Keble is similar to the Wesleys—particularly John and Charles—who worked against eighteenth-century stagnation in the Church of England by advocating for a subjectivism and sublimity in the realm of religious faith that is similar to Romanticism's emphasis on subjectivity and the sublime. In literary style Wesley purportedly admired St. John's epistle most: "Here is sublimity and simplicity together, the strongest sense and the plainest language" (qtd. in Wakeley 189), he explains, using terms that resonate with Wordsworth's esteem for "the very language of men," and his effort "to look steadily at my subject" in order to avoid "falsehood of description" (Wesley 8-9). Yet for Wesley, such sublimity was communicated through hymn lyrics:

O Thou our Husband, Brother, Friend,
Behold a cloud of incense rise!
The prayers of saints of heaven ascend,
Grateful, accepted sacrifice! (487)

¹⁷ Joseph Altholz explains: "In the genteel eighteenth century issues were rarely pushed to extreme conclusions. The churches remained securely established, well endowed, externally prosperous and powerful; the clergy were respected and privileged members of society, to which they made an all-too-easy adjustment, rarely offering a determined resistance to the decrees of the monarchs" (20). He asserts, further, that "the net effect of all these tendencies, following upon a reaction from the religious tensions of the preceding era, was a decline in the vigor of the churches and a decay in the religious life of Europe" (20).

These are no *Lucy Poems*. But Wesley's goal in a forty-year career as a hymnodist was primarily expository and didactic.¹⁸ As he explains in the preface to his 1820 volume *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of People Called Methodists*, he sought "to contain" in his texts "all the important truths of our most holy Religion, whether speculative or practical; yea to illustrate them all, and to prove them, both by Scripture and Reason" (iv). Moreover, Wesley emphasizes that "this [containing, or including, of hymns in the volume] is done in a regular order. The Hymns are not carelessly jumbled together, but carefully arranged under proper heads, according to the experience of real Christians. So that this book is, in effect, a little body of experimental and practical divinity" (iv). Like *The Christian Year*, Wesley's hymns seek to establish an order by which "real Christians" may develop their spiritual "experience": they prize—as Keble describes it—a "practical tendency" rather than only "the exercise of intellectual subtlety" ("Sacred Poetry" 191). Such practicality and authenticity is a significant feature of nineteenth century poetry, as Wordsworth and later, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, demonstrate. For Barrett Browning, such authenticity connects poetics with humanity: "one truth is self-evident—*wherever there is room for HUMAN FEELING to act, there is room for POETICAL FEELING to act*. We cant [*sic*] separate our humanity from our poetry" (*BC* 4.181-82, emphasis original). As Wesley and Keble show, this feature of practical humanity is all the more vital to devotional poetics.

Wesley's proposal that his book itself is "a little body of experimental and practical divinity" highlights the material implications of religious bookmaking that arise whenever a writer seeks publication on a spiritual subject. For Wesley, the hymns would

¹⁸ He writes the kind of lyrics (poems/hymns) that Keble identifies as "the form of sacred poetry which has succeeded best in attracting public attention" from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth: "the didactic" (221).

not just encourage Christians to approach divinity with appropriate devotion: they would embody that divinity in “experimental and practical” ways. For such a “carefully arranged” text, Wesley’s book suggests that a “real Christian” might experience divinity through any number of features in a text. Therefore, this text embraces the instability (rather than the order and sameness) of Christian experience with divinity—it deconstructs the stabilizing features in Wesley’s volume and challenges any interpretation of his hymns that focuses on the goals of religious proof and teaching. Even as it asserts the truth of its approach, Wesley’s preface gestures away from order and towards “experimental” and “real” (i.e. contingent) textuality.

As we have seen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning prized “human feeling as a key aspect of poetics; and for her, the role of feeling explains the trouble that unsuccessful religious poets face: “against every experience of non-success or mal-success on the part of so many ‘religious poets’,” she explains, “the fault is more likely to lie in their not being poets than in their being religious [...] I am afraid that the matter with some of us, may be resolved into our not considering religion a subject of *feeling*, of real warm emotion & feeling” (BC 4.181-82). By looking at her Prefaces to *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) and *Poems* (1844), as well as a selection of poems published in 1838 and 1850, I will explore ways in which Barrett Browning employs “human feeling” in devotional texts to create “experiences of pure immediacy” in the soul’s “encounters with God.” In her tropes of the soul, Barrett Browning demonstrates the problems of authority inherent in women’s religious poetry and criticism; she shows the problems of inequality that plague society; and she reveals corruption in the church as a prime example of spiritual fragmentation facing Victorian Christians. Moreover,

Barrett Browning proposes a way to counter problems of authority and inequality, and to resist corruption and hatred in the church, by means of a devotional self.

In particular, Chapter 2 focuses on one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's early volumes of poetry in order to clarify her devotional poetics. *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) is one of Barrett Browning's earliest coherent statements of devotional verse, and in her preface she responds specifically to eighteenth-century biases against religious verse by arguing for the "greatness" of a poetics that investigate "a soul within us & [...] a God above us" (BC 7:214). Moreover, she defends her choice as a woman poet to address sacred themes, a decision that is not popular with many of her critics.

Chapter 3 considers *In Memoriam* as a devotional text that depicts the "modern" soul as part of Victorian culture and poetics as well as part of a Victorian devotional aesthetic. Looking into Tennyson's poetry and his biography, we see a considerable interest on his part in the struggle of faith and doubt; and yet, I do not see these terms working as binaries in his texts. Specifically, *In Memoriam* establishes a dialectic of faith and doubt that enables the reader to understand Tennyson's notion of the soul's progress embodied in tropes of the soul. Through a consideration of the non-linear form of Tennyson's texts, we see these tropes create "processes of spiritual formation" that bring the "self" into contact with others, God, and its own difficult qualities in order to craft a "modern" soul that embraces progress. I avoid reading Tennyson from any particular theological or doctrinal perspective because, like Barrett Browning, he eschews most sectarian interests throughout his life even as he maintains a general interest in and commitment to the basic tenets of Christianity. As a popular poet, Tennyson provides an important link between devotional aesthetics and Victorian poetics, and he reveals

potential for a further renegotiation of the boundaries between “religious” and “secular” poetry in the Victorian age.

Christina Rossetti also takes on the distinctions between “religious” and “secular,” but in a very different way. In Chapter 4 I discuss how Rossetti’s poetics of secrecy—working with and apart from the Tractarian notion of Reserve—develop a response to the “fallen” women of Victorian England. Eschewing conventional definitions of fallenness via tropes of the soul, Rossetti’s poems encourage the renovation of fallen women’s social equilibrium by demonstrating all humans to be “fallen.” Moreover, she challenges social conventions in a personal way through her work at the Highgate Penitentiary for “fallen women.”

In all their works these poets bring to life the poetics of devotion: they explore what it means for a text to be both spiritual and Victorian, and they demonstrate the wide variety of devotional verse. Reading Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Rossetti through the lens of contemporary theory, I seek not to reshape them in a twenty-first century image (though that is inevitable) but rather to set their poems in conversation with current ideas in order to see what happens next. As we will see, “what happens” is different for each writer: and in Chapter 2, we will investigate ways in which Barrett Browning calls for a reshaping of language as well as a greater appreciation for the mystery of the devotional “self.” For her, this reshaping was no tame effort at “versified prayer,” but rather a daring act.

Chapter 2

“Mine Earthly Heart Should Dare”: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Devotional Poetry”

2.1 Introduction

“And I — ah! what am I
To counterfeit, with faculty earth-darkened,
Seraphic brows of light
And seraph language never used nor hearkened?
-Elizabeth Barrett, “Epilogue” to “The Seraphim”¹⁹

We give many classifying names to Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poems, but “devotional” is not typically among them. Yet this form of religious verse takes up a substantial portion of her 1838 volume *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, conveying the devotional mode of poetry primarily in lyric form. As Linda M. Lewis observes, “Barrett Browning was in her lifetime widely known as a devout, deeply religious poet” (2). Moreover, as Lewis, Alexandra Wörn, and Karen Dieleman demonstrate, the texture of Barrett Browning’s poems and poetics is most fully appreciated when approached with attention to its religious as well as its auto/biographical, political and cultural

¹⁹ From *The Seraphim and Other Poems* by Elizabeth Barrett. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1838). In *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett*. Cambridge Edition. Ed. Ruth M. Adams. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

dimensions.²⁰ Indeed, in her preface to *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, Barrett Browning²¹ engages what she sees as a significant debate about the role of devotional poetics in nineteenth-century poetry and culture. As a reviewer from *The Metropolitan Magazine* (August 1838) suggests, Barrett Browning maintained an “all-absorbing enthusiasm with which she advocates the cause of devotional poetry” (*BC* 4.383).²² In particular, she demonstrates a keen interest in contradicting the notion set forth by Samuel Johnson, as well as many of her own critics, that religion and poetry should not mix. In support of her own claims, she mounts her rebellion against Johnson and other naysayers by writing a variety of poems that display the methods and influence of devotional verse.

Barrett Browning’s focus on devotional poetry in her early- and mid-Victorian publications coincides with a sharp rise in the popularity of devotional poems in the literary marketplace,²³ and with debates about the role of women in literary and religious spheres. Barrett Browning’s time in English history is one in which “[q]uestions of religious, racial, and national identity were already under heightened scrutiny...due to a number of other historical phenomena,” including England’s imperialism, various movements and controversies in the Church of England, and a sharpening focus on

²⁰ Cf. Alexandra B. Wörn, “‘Poetry Is Where God Is’: The Importance of Christian Faith and Theology in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Life and Work” (In *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*. Ed. Jude V. Nixon. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Eng.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 235-52); and Karen Dieleman, “Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Religious Poetics: Congregationalist Models of Hymnist and Preacher” (In *Victorian Poetry* 45.2 (2007): 135-57).

²¹ Although she did not marry Robert Browning until 1846, after the publication of *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, I will refer to her as “Barrett Browning” throughout this chapter for the sake of consistency and to avoid confusion.

²² “*BC*” is an abbreviation for *The Browning Correspondence*.

²³ John Keble’s *The Christian Year* (1827) is the most outstanding example of this popularity, but another popular devotional poet is Adelaide Proctor: Dorothy Mermin reports that “in 1877, thirteen years after her death,” Proctor “outsold every living writer except for Tennyson” (qtd. in Scheinberg 19).

“sexual difference” (Scheinberg 24).²⁴ In particular, I will focus on gender issues in order to explore ways in which Barrett Browning engages ideas of difference through devotional poetics. In her prefatory remarks on poetry and in her devotional verse, Barrett Browning critiques ideas of authority and social power implied in notions of difference.

Rather than featuring religious difference as defined by distinctions between Christian and Jewish (as Scheinberg does), or Anglican and Roman Catholic (an important issue in Tractarian poetry), I argue that in Barrett Browning’s works, the discursive qualities of devotional poetics are emphasized most clearly by her poems’ investment in what Janet Larson calls the “processes of spiritual formation” (50) in a broad sense. Barrett Browning ascribed to Christian beliefs but resisted the dogma of any particular Christian sect throughout her life. As a result, her devotional discourse emerges in poems that feature social and gender difference in order to focus primarily on human experience rather than theological inquiry or debate.²⁵ Resisting definition as “abstract” or “spiritual” at the expense of their investment in the realities of human life, her devotional poems work as a means of intervention in what Barrett Browning sees as unjust social practices, particularly with respect to women. Thus we may read them as socially activist texts that broaden our definition of Victorian devotional poetry: in

²⁴ As Cynthia Scheinberg suggests, with regard to religious identity in particular, these converging historical factors place devotional poetry in a unique relationship with notions of religious difference, especially insofar as “the figures of Christian otherness—Jewish and ‘Hebraic’ figures from contemporary life and Biblical history—necessarily exist in tension with the figures of Christian self” (22).

²⁵ Barrett Browning eschewed strict sectarian loyalties and ideologies throughout her life; and thus she fits more with what Gordon Mursell identifies as nineteenth-century “Liberal” Christianity than with Oxford Movement or Evangelical spirituality (Cf. pgs. 186-222 in *English Spirituality From 1700 to the Present Day* [London: SPCK, 2001]). Her beliefs featured ideas of a broad church focused on Christ as God and human (Lewis 13). She attended the Congregationalist church as a girl and married Robert Browning in the Anglican Church. She was also interested in Swedenborg’s ideas and Spiritualism later in her life. For more information on Barrett’s religious perspectives and leanings, see Lewis’s *Elizabeth Barrett’s Spiritual Progress* and Avery and Stott’s *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Pearson Longman, 2003).

addition to G. B. Tennyson's assertion that devotional verse²⁶ is "poetry that grows out of and is tied to acts of religious worship" (6), I contend that Barrett Browning's devotional poems feature tropes of the soul in the "processes [or process] of spiritual formation" as a means of vibrant social critique.

2.2 Barrett Browning and the Critics—Her 1838 Poetics of Daring (Devotional)

Speech

Acting as part of early nineteenth-century discussions about religion and poetics, Barrett Browning's verses illustrate gender and social difference through tropes of the soul that relate ideas of what the soul has been—and is—to what it could be. The soul's potential, as it were, is an integral component of Barrett Browning's poetic theories: In an 1843 letter, she contends that "any work of Art, however vivid and consummate, which excludes the sense of a soul within us & of a God above us & takes life in its conventionality denuded of its inner mystery,—*will* be felt in the end to be one-sided and unsufficing,—& deficient in the elements of greatness" (*BC* 7:214). Thus "great" poetry must address both God and the soul in ways that focus on the "inner mystery" of life rather than the shallow aspects of existence.

Barrett Browning's idea that a consideration of the soul's most "vital" features moves the poet toward "greatness" and away from life's shallow surfaces echoes Romantic views of poetic genius as well as nineteenth century notions of literary culture. As Patrick Parrinder contends, "the early Victorian critics inherited the romantic beliefs

²⁶ Tennyson makes a useful distinction between "devotional poetry" and "religious poetry," which he explains "is the term I shall use for all poetry of faith, poetry designed to advance a particular religious position, poetry animated by the legends and figures of religious history, and poetry that grows out of worship" (4). This term "comprehends devotional poetry and sacred poetry as well as the verse of hymns" (4).

about genius,” and as those “beliefs...solidified” into “a body of doctrine,” critics focused on “locating” poetry “within a cultural framework” (117). Specifically, that “framework” includes “institutions of society” (118) as well as the “mechanised, corporate world of letters” that literary work had become (122). Thus, in an industrial age and in an era when literary production had become more streamlined, Barrett Browning offers a view of the “vital” poetic soul as a Romantic one: a soul that preserves the mystery and power of life. Her ideas here seem commensurate with Carlyle’s declaration, in an 1829 essay, that all accomplishments which fall beyond the power of literature will be lacking:

Could ambition always choose its own path, and were will in human undertakings synonymous with faculty, all truly ambitious men would be men of letters...all other areas of ambition, compared with this rich and boundless one of Literature, meaning thereby whatever respects the promulgation of Thought, are poor, limited, and ineffectual. (“Voltaire” 396)²⁷

Perhaps more importantly, Barrett Browning’s perspective on art coincides with what Parrinder calls Carlyle’s “evaluative definition” of poetry (123): in an 1828 essay on Goethe, Carlyle distinguishes between the “practical sense” of “[Samuel] Johnson’s prose” and “that finer portion of our nature, that portion of it which belongs essentially to Literature strictly so called, where our highest feelings, our best joys and keenest sorrows, our Doubt, our Love, our Religion reside” (Carlyle 214). It is for this “finer portion of our nature,” concludes Carlyle, that Johnson “has no word to utter” (214). As we shall see, in her 1838 Preface to *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, Barrett Browning makes a similar claim about Johnson’s view of literature; and like Coleridge, who in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) declares that “[t]he Poet, described in *ideal* perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity” (12), she supports the notion that poetry as

²⁷ I am indebted to Patrick Parrinder for direction to the Carlyle quotations: cf. *Authors and Authority*, pg. 123.

literature engages a sense of “greatness” that eschews ambitious life “in all its conventionality” and embraces its “inner mystery” through its “sense of a soul within us.”²⁸

However, as more of an advocate for religious poetry than Coleridge, Barrett Browning develops the sense that poetic “greatness” involves not only a spiritual sensibility but also a dedicated investment in sacred topics:

‘An irreligious poet,’ said Burns, meaning an undevotional one, ‘is a monster.’ An irreligious poet, he might have said, is no poet at all. The gravitation of poetry is upwards. “The poet wing, if it move, ascends... 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.” (“Preface” to *The Seraphim* 169-70)

Barrett Browning’s concept of “behold[ing] the true face of God” in poetry that “ascends”—that enacts the “vivid and consummate” qualities of “true Art”—is similar to John Keble’s assertion, in 1829, that sacred poetry is “the truest expression of the best state of the affections” (“Sacred Poetry” 91).²⁹ For him, such poetry is a lofty expression of the soul that is “true in substance and in manner marked by a noble simplicity and confidence in that truth, by a sincere attachment to it and an entire familiarity with it” (91). And as such, sacred poetry deserves its own defense against the charge—

²⁸ Barrett Browning’s view of the soul in art is worth exploring further in comparison with Romantic ideas of the soul, including Coleridge’s and Keats’s. (Cf. pgs. 369-70 in Keats’s 1819 letter to George and Georgiana Keats, in which he defines the “Soul” verses the “Intelligence” [*The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1899.]

²⁹ By mentioning John Keble here, I do not mean to draw a connection between Barrett Browning and the Oxford Movement. Barrett Browning did not own a copy of Keble’s *The Christian Year*—which is not to say she did not read it (Cf. the library of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning catalogued in *The Browning Collections: A Reconstruction, With Other Memorabilia*. Compiled by Philip Kelley and Betty A. Coley. Winfield, KS: The Wedgestone Press, 1984.) Moreover, she does not begin her discussion of religious poetry with an overt adherence to Tractarian aesthetics, though she refers to them in the preface to her *Poems* of 1844 and addresses Tractarianism specifically in *Aurora Leigh*. As Lewis notes, “Barrett Browning claimed that she was not a controversialist, that she would not debate the intricacies of doctrine and liturgy (issues that she believed mainly concerned the Anglo-Catholic, or Tractarian, movement)” (11). Additionally, “[a]lthough she classified herself as an Independent or Dissenter, by early adulthood she had taken to avoiding the religious services of her father’s church” (11-12).

articulated in Johnson's *Life of Waller* (1779)—that devotional verse works against the true “nature of poetry” as well as nature of “devotion” itself through its narrow range of topics, its necessary simplicity, and its treatment of divinity, which in itself may not be improved upon by poetic language (Keble 92-94). For Barrett Browning, the upward “gravitation of poetry” (i.e. its “greatness”) coincides with rather than works against its interest in “the sense of a soul within us & of a God above us.” By offering her own defense of religious poetry, Barrett Browning illuminates the relationship between poetry and religion as a significant point of interest in the criticism of her day.

Specifically, Barrett Browning's poems emphasize two stages in the “process of spiritual formation” by which the soul realizes its potential: in the first stage, a need for new language and a new perspective (of God, oneself, and others) arises as the soul encounters the divine. In the volume's preface, Barrett Browning claims that she seeks to recast via the title poem, “The Seraphim,” Jesus's crucifixion in a

less usual aspect, — to glance at it, as dilated in seraphic eyes, and darkened and deepened by the near association with blessedness and Heaven. Are we not too apt to measure the depth of the Saviour's humiliation from the common estate of man, instead of from His own peculiar and primæval one? (“Preface” to *The Seraphim* 167)

By reflecting on the suffering of Jesus from the perspective of seraphim instead of humans, Barrett Browning aims at dual purpose. She provides an unconventional (i.e. uncommon, non-human) approach to a familiar topic, a kind of “repetition with difference” (Pagano 339) that emphasizes the implications of the seraphim's observations for human devotional speech and spiritual experience.³⁰ Moreover, and as a result of this

³⁰ This idea of “repetition with difference,” which emerges from Giles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition* (Trans. P. Patton. New York: Columbia UP, 1994), as well as Derrida, Lacan, and Judith Butler, among others, is multifaceted; but in Barrett Browning's case, I am thinking of “[c]omplex repetition,” which “is not the return or representation of some prior or fundamental sameness in superficially different

unconventional approach, she calls for a new kind of devotional language—language capable of conveying the “pure immediacy” of that experience. Using the seraphim and an unnamed speaker in the poem’s Epilogue as guides, Barrett Browning establishes a new form of speech for the soul.

Attempting to move beyond the “common estate of man,” the typical view of “the Saviour’s humiliation” afforded by human senses, Barrett Browning introduces as the poem’s speakers seraphim who were previously familiar with only heavenly utterance and praise.³¹ Yet Zerah—a seraph, and one of the main speakers in the text—expresses the need for new type of speech once he has witnessed Jesus’s death, wherein “the vexed, accursed humanity, / As worn by Him [Christ], begin to be / A blessed, yea, a sacred thing” (*The Seraphim* 312-14). The activity of watching moves the speaker to language: “By what new utterance,” Zerah asks

shall I now recall
Unteaching the heaven-echoes? Dare I say,
‘Creator, thou art feebler than thy work!
Creator, thou are sadder than thy creature!
A worm and not a man,
Yea, no worm, but a curse?’ (640-45)

guises and masks; rather, it is the continual presentation of singularities that are always radically new and that cannot be subsumed under any general concept” (Pagano 339). While we might see the crucifixion itself as the “fundamental sameness” undergirding the various reactions to it in Barrett Browning’s poems, that crucifixion is—as a spiritual experience unique to each angel or human watching it—singular and “radically new” in its potential effects on devotional speech.

³¹ Seraphim are, in Biblical usage, “living creatures with six wings, hands and feet, and a (presumably) human voice, seen in Isaiah’s vision [cf. Isaiah 6:2] as hovering above the throne of God” (*OED*). More particularly, “by Christian interpreters the seraphim were from an early period supposed to be a class of angels [...] The presumed derivation of the word from a Heb. root meaning ‘to burn’ [...] led to the view that the seraphim are specially distinguished by fervour of love [...], and to the symbolic use of red as the colour appropriate to the seraphim in artistic representations” (*OED*). This definition clarifies Barrett’s choice of the seraphim as angels of praise, love for, and devotion to the suffering Christ.

Struggling to recount the scene in which the “Creator” becomes a “feeble,” suffering human, Zerah echoes the attempts of the speaker in the poem’s Epilogue to grapple with the same crucifixion scene.

Much like the seraphim, who have had a language-altering experience, the poem’s speaker in the Epilogue articulates in five lyric stanzas her own experience of viewing the crucifixion and its consequent effects on her language. “My song is done,” she begins, referring to the end of the narrative: “I see no more thy cross,” but rather hear “that sabbeth bell” which “records how CHRIST IS RISEN” (I.1007, II.1018-19). She thus provides a stopping-point for the seraphim’s story and the start of her own, even as she emphasizes that she has seen the same crucifixion witnessed by the seraphim. Yet at this moment the speaker immediately features her humanity in contrast to their “blessedness” by demonstrating—in the passage I chose for this chapter’s epigraph—self-conscious anxiety at her “counterfeit[ing] of “seraphic language,” her speaking from a mortal body (“[f]rom mouth so used to sighs, so soon to lie / Sighless...in the tomb”) (III.1021, 1023, 1025-26). Linking the speaker’s *apologia* for seraphic language with Zerah’s “dar[ing]” speech as well as her own prefatory remarks about the need for poetry to provide an unconventional view of sacred things, Barrett Browning seems to address potential critics of her devotional verse:

Forgive me, that mine earthly heart should dare
Shape images of incarnate spirits
And lay upon their burning lips a thought
Cold with the weeping which mine earth inherits. (IV.1035-38)

In the guise of being too mortal, earthly, or low to be worthy of articulating holy mysteries, the speaker in these lines sets a precedent for devotional language to follow. As Zerah “dare[s]” to speak about the humiliation of Christ on the cross, and as the

speaker of the Epilogue “dare[s]” to both create and give speech to “incarnate spirits,” Barrett Browning demonstrates that humanity—once “accursed”—has become “a blessed, yea, a sacred thing” in the crucifixion. No longer is the soul, then, only “earthly,” as it has been (and as it sees itself); and the Epilogue speaker’s statement becomes more of an assertion than a disclaimer. Using the seraphim’s experiences as a precedent, Barrett Browning reveals in the Epilogue the soul’s capacity to reflect on its own “process of spiritual formation” as an act of articulation—of turning sacred experience into speech. What is at stake for Barrett Browning is language itself: her 1838 volume negotiates the question of who, exactly, is authorized to “shape” such “images,” to “dare” such speech, to verbalize the “process of spiritual formation” that occurs when the soul encounters Christ at the moment of his atoning sacrifice for that soul’s sake.

This encounter between the human speaker (of the Epilogue, whom I tend to read as Barrett Browning herself), the seraph, and the suffering Christ in the opening texts of the volume encourages a transformation of language that enables the second stage of “the process of spiritual formation” in Barrett Browning’s devotional poetics: the critique of social inequalities that hinder women’s speech as well as Christian unity. As a woman writer, Barrett Browning consciously worked with and against literary traditions: as Dorothy Mermin observes, Barrett Browning “was always looking for a new subject, a generic innovation, a new way to touch the world” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 2-3), and

her place at the wellhead of a new female tradition remains the single most important fact about her in terms of literary history, whether that history is conceived as simple chronology or as a complex chain of echoes and influence. It was also central to her self-consciousness as a poet. Her anomalousness was constantly present to her imagination, and questions of gender shaped and colored almost everything she wrote. (3)

Moreover, as a writer of religious verse, Barrett Browning engaged a longstanding and variegated tradition in English poetry that includes the verse of Middle English lyricists, Edmund Spenser, John Donne, John Milton, William Cowper, and Barrett Browning's own contemporaries, John Keble and John Henry Newman, among many others. Any representative list of well-known religious poets would include very few women; and thus, speaking both within and apart from the tradition of English religious poetry, Barrett Browning faced censure from many directions. In particular, her critics expressed concern that she treated her sacred subject too indirectly or that she overreached her bounds as a woman by addressing sacred topics so directly and boldly in her poetry.

We find an example of the former concern in a review of *The Seraphim and Other Poems* from *The Atlas*, which offers the praise that her "treatment of the theme is in keeping with the humility which she expresses in approaching it; she merely give us a distant glimpse of the crucifixion, and throws a poetical obscurity over it which may probably impress her readers more solemnly than if she had ventured to delineate it with a bolder hand" (BC 4.372). Like the Tractarian notion of reserve, this critic's idea of poetic success depends on what is kept hidden, rather than what is exposed, in the religious poem.³² By contrast, a reviewer from *The Examiner*, considering the same volume of poetry, censures Barrett Browning for her bold choice of subject-matter:

Miss Barrett is indeed a genuine poetess, of no common order; yet is she in danger of being spoiled by overambition, and of realising no greater or more final reputation than a hectical³³ one, like Crashaw's. She has fancy,

³² As G. B. Tennyson explains, "[t]he concept of Reserve is of ancient provenance and was a standard practice in early Church...Briefly, the idea of Reserve is that since God is ultimately incomprehensible, we can know Him only indirectly...Moreover, it is both unnecessary and undesirable that god and religious truth generally should be disclosed in their fullness at once tall regardless of the differing capacities of individuals to apprehend such things" (44-45).

feeling, imagination, expression; but for want of some just equipoise or other between the material and spiritual, she aims at flights which have done no good to the strongest, and therefore falls infinitely short... In a word, the subject of her present poem has been chosen with an unhappy want of judgment. (*BC* 4.375)

Indeed, for some critics of Barrett Browning, no professed humility can cover the sin of “overambition,” especially in that hallowed space “between the material and spiritual.” With these critics’ views in mind, we see that theological issues are firmly connected with issues of audience reception in Barrett Browning’s work. Specifically, the view of her poems’ “want of some just equipoise or other between the material and spiritual” reveals her capacity to hit a critical nerve. Her texts push the boundaries of the “appropriate,” in terms of religious as well as poetic efforts.

Acknowledging her tenuous role as a woman poet who speaks publicly about such weighty matters as religion and poetry, Barrett Browning explains her approach in an 1839 letter to Mary Russell Mitford:

I have been taught to ‘walk softly’ upon all subjects connected with theologisms [sic] by the repeated intimations of my obstinate proclivity towards them. Let it *be* an obstinate proclivity!— I do hold, & do not slacken in holding, that all high thoughts look towards God, & that the deepest mysteries, not of fanaticism but of Christianity, yet, *doctrinal* mysteries, are,—as approachable by lofty human thoughts & melted human affections,—poetical in their nature. (*BC* 4.181)

As Julie Melnyk has shown, nineteenth-century women who wrote about theology were often taught to “walk softly,” if at all.³⁴ Ruskin’s famous 1864 lecture, “Of Queens’ Gardens,” delineates theology as the “one dangerous science for women—one which they

³³ In this context, “hectical” most likely means “stirring,” or “characterized by a state of feverish excitement or activity” (*OED*).

³⁴ Cf. Julie Melnyk, ed. *Women’s Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of their Fathers* (New York: Garland, 1998); and Julie Melnyk, *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2008).

must indeed beware how they profanely touch” (89). However, for Barrett Browning, “theologisms,” dangerous or not, were fit for women’s writing. As we will see in the Epilogue to this chapter, in the preface to her 1844 volume *Poems*, Barrett Browning states that “[t]here is a feeling abroad which appears to me (I say it with deference) nearer to superstition than to religion, that there should be no touching of holy vessels except by consecrated fingers” (146). Referring to both the Tractarian movement and to restrictions on women’s capacity to “touch” the “dangerous” area of theology, Barrett Browning makes the case that “theologisms” in verse—by which she seems to mean the poetic treatment of theological topics rather than the “science” of theology—are most “approachable” by poets because they tend toward “high thoughts” and “*doctrinal* mysteries.” They are precisely the topics poets—even women poets—should address, if such poets seek “greatness” in art.

Yet “greatness” was not a quality prized by Victorian critics in religious writing by women. Specifically, such writing was acceptable and encouraged as long as it was not too ambitious in its themes or technicalities: men of letters wanted to see from women the kind of religious expression that made the world gentler and purer, not more complex. For example, one reviewer of *The Seraphim* states that Barrett Browning is set apart from other women poets “for her extraordinary acquaintance with ancient classic literature, as for the boldness of her poetic attempts”; even so, “her success has not been in proportion to her daring” (*BC* 4:413). This daring involves, the critic explains, “something too dogmatic in her criticism, and a world too positive in her philosophy” (4:413). Moreover, “[t]he awful name of God is used throughout her volumes with such reckless repetition, that we really cannot describe the pain it gave us in perusal, although

of course we notice it on the score of ill taste alone” (4:413). A woman poet may be “bold” in her attempts, but she has farther to fall from critics’ grace when she tactlessly speaks God’s name too often.

In addition, while the reviewer has every right to disagree with Barrett Browning’s criticism and philosophy, to charge her with “daring” in poetry by speaking God’s name too regularly corresponds closely to the charge of “dogmatism” in criticism—criticism, in Barrett Browning’s case, that speaks God’s name repetitively as well. As Mermin explains, the “potentially debilitating praise” offered by critics to female poets, which emphasized their feminine qualities, “incited [Barrett Browning] to set herself harder tasks, to try to shock her readers into new notions about Victorian womanhood, and to use her fame for overtly political ends” (8). To this statement I would add “overtly religious ends,” for her goals involved an engagement with devotional poetics that includes a daring and rigorous vitality which—like political aims—challenged static notions of female piety and “womanly” religious verse.

Moreover, Barrett Browning’s treatment of the soul in devotional poetry appears at a time when English critics were wary of religious verse, either because it was not poetic or because it displayed arrogance and irreverence. One example of this wariness appears in an 1832 review of Robert Montgomery’s poem *The Messiah*. The critic, speaking for *The Monthly Review*, asserts that the subject of the text is commendable, for “to celebrate the life and death of The Redeemer—a subject than which none more exalted, or more worthy of the genius of the poet or orator, could possibly be selected” (“Article VII” 410). However, the critic also suggests that “[t]he man who would now attempt to sing so great a theme, must either follow or excel the scriptures. To suppose

that he could do the latter, without the assistance of supernatural gifts, would be silly, as well as impious” (410). Therefore, says the critic, although a poet like Montgomery is likely to gain an audience, his poems themselves will always fall short of the (literary and spiritual) mark:

in the present religious state of this country, where there are millions of persons in our community who are absolutely at sea in pursuit of ideas which shall afford consolation to their minds, and encouragement to their aspirations, almost any thing in the shape of a religious poem is pretty sure to meet with a numerous class of readers. They are not very nice judges of poetical merit; they chiefly look for intensity of thought and vehemence of expression. (409-10).

This simultaneous uplifting and denigration of religious poetics is a trend in early- to mid-nineteenth century literary criticism, one to which Barrett Browning herself adds her own views. Even so, her treatment of the soul in devotional verse ran afoul of many of her contemporaries’ ideas about what women’s religious poetry should be.

At the same time, religious poetry was a significant feature of literary efforts in the first half of the nineteenth century: John Keble’s runaway bestseller, *The Christian Year*, published in 1827, is a volume of devotional poems that “parallels the Book of Common Prayer throughout,” and ran to 158 editions and sold 370,000 copies by the time its copyright expired in 1873 (Tennyson 226-27). As we have seen in the Introduction, Barrett Browning herself, in her *Essay on the Greek Christian Poets* notes in 1843 that Christian verse abounds—though it does not often meet the standards of good poetry:

[O]f religious poets, strictly so-called, the earth is very bare. Religious “parcel-poets” we have, indeed, more than enough; writers of hymns, translators of Scripture into prose, or of prose generally into rhymes, of whose heart-devotion a higher faculty were worthy [...] But the right “genius of Christianity” has done little up to this moment [...]. (22)

Barrett Browning's suggestion about the ubiquity of religious poetry suggests both its importance for Victorian readers as well as its problematic relationship to Victorian poetics: she and her critics seem cautious about how much "genius" religious poems reveal; and this cautious approach to what makes good religious poetry is an important issue to consider while reading Barrett Browning's early work.

Rather than maintaining the kind of reverent silence about scriptural topics that *The Monthly Review* critic deems appropriate, and rather than affirming that nineteenth century religious verse (while widely circulated) lacks all "poetical merit," Barrett Browning asserts that devotional poetry is one of the best ways to articulate the mysteries, the "elements of greatness," that constitute the soul's "spiritual formation." By arguing for a woman's place in the tradition of religious poetry, Barrett Browning challenges her contemporaries about the roles of gender difference and inequality in literary culture. Moreover, by offering devotional language as a new type of speech that is capable of addressing the soul's "process of spiritual formation," her poetry and poetics work as a form of activism, making space for a woman to address "theologisms" in verse. In the discussion that follows, we will see poems in which Barrett Browning questions the ways injustice disrupts the potential of the soul and the healthy functioning of society. In these poems, Barrett Browning envisions a "process of spiritual formation" as transformative: one in which devotional poetics speak to the realities (rather than shallow conventions) of life through the discourse of the soul; and thus, she develops an assertive and complicated engagement with dominant ideologies of power, religious and literary.

2.3 “Sneer[ing]” at Samuel Johnson in *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838): The Preface

As Elizabeth Gray suggests, many devotional women poets “strove to signal their identification with and closeness to certain predecessors” (63) not merely as slavish imitators but in order to respond to a Tractarian adherence to “appropriate language with which to discuss religious matters,” which “was the same as that authorized and exemplified by the Fathers, in the orthodox, patristic formulations passed down through the Church” (62). “[P]oetically,” Gray continues, “orthodoxy and correctness was to be ensured by following approved models” (62). In the case of Keble’s *The Christian Year*, for example, women poets “cop[ied] Keble’s stylistic and formal model in order to rewrite the model and the position of women within it” (63). Yet in her 1838 preface to *The Seraphim and Other Poems*,³⁵ Barrett Browning likens Christ more to Aeschylus’s Prometheus than the God of patristic theology; moreover, as we have seen, she argues that her main purpose for “The Seraphim” is to display Christ’s crucifixion as a “supreme spectacle under a less usual aspect,” that of angelic perception voiced by a human poet (“Preface” to *The Seraphim* 167). She then develops an extended reflection on notions of love and humility that culminates in her lively refutation of Samuel Johnson’s argument against religious poetry:

I need not defend them [her poems] for being religious in their general character. The generation of such has held the doctrine of that critic who was *not* Longinus, and believed in the inadmissibility of religious [sic] into poetry, may have seen the end of vanity. That ‘contemplative piety, or the intercourse between God and the human soul, cannot be poetical,’ is

³⁵ Barrett Browning demonstrates a particular self-consciousness about the preface to this volume, especially in terms of its influence on the reception of the volume’s main poem (i.e. its longest, and the one both she and her critics mention the most), “The Seraphim.” In a letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd in May of 1838, just before the volume was published, she writes, “I want to tell you about the Seraphim. I do not know whether the sheets are completed. I rather believe that they are not. But at any rate, I have a fancy in my head that you should see the whole book instead of a part of it—*that you should read the preface before the poem,—in which I mean to teach you exactly how much to admire it!!*” (4.31, italics mine).

true *if* it be true that the human soul having such intercourse is parted from its humanity, or *if* it be true that poetry is not expressive of that humanity's most exalted state. ("Preface" to *The Seraphim* 169)

By deeming Johnson "that critic who was *not* Longinus," Barrett Browning offers a formidable critique of Johnson's *ethos*, especially because her statement showcases her own familiarity with the classical and critical traditions as well as Johnson's revered place in critical discourse. Moreover, in this quotation Barrett Browning contends not merely with Johnson but with a whole "generation," thus establishing her own critical voice in contention with a discourse rather than one critical giant.

At the same time, the second portion of her statement emphasizes one of Barrett Browning's crucial spiritual ideas: the necessity that "the human soul" must be united with—not "parted" from—"its humanity," which underscores the sensual and corporeal nature of her Christian perspective. This view provides a clear means by which we may connect her conviction that "Poetry is where God is" (*Essays on the Greek Christian Poets* 206) to her idea that "greatness" in "Art" arises from "the sense of a soul within us & of a God above us" (*BC* 7:214). The human soul in its "most exalted state" is poetical, and it communes with God. Most importantly, though, such communion occurs at the same time that the soul is fully part of human, material existence. For women poets, this material existence involves considerable obstacles in which gender difference complicates any text that addresses literary and religious topics. The first publication to carry Barrett Browning's name is one that, in her view, is distinguished by a "less usual aspect" through which she may embody a refutation of Johnson's views and adopt a

poetics of “spiritual formation” through her own critical discourse and, later in the volume, through devotional verse.³⁶

In *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, a volume Barrett Browning viewed as her first substantial literary effort,³⁷ we may see what Mermin calls “the struggle that began in her early childhood to find woman’s place in the central tradition of poetry.

Throughout her career this struggle is her main subject, the version of the radical self-reflexiveness and subjectivity of the Romantic tradition, and the model on which she conceived almost all of her poetry on almost every theme” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 8). As I see it, devotional subjectivity is for Barrett Browning a formative issue in this “struggle,” especially insofar as the subjectivity that her devotional poems negotiate is informed by her literary views as well as the authority with which she asserts them.

Through her focus on spiritual subjectivity and the ways it intersects with cultural issues, Barrett Browning engages the Romantic tradition of “radical self-reflexiveness” through which poets, like Blake in particular, offered unconventional representations of the human soul in its material contexts. Yet Barrett Browning also forges her own purpose, moving away from some of Romanticism’s preoccupations. Specifically, she features in her critical discourse—and embodies in her poetry—a stance of opposition toward literary criticism that dismisses the potential for religion and literature to create a fruitful union in a woman poet’s texts.

³⁶ In fact, Barrett Browning’s quarrel with Johnson’s premise—and, by extension, her interest in crafting a devotional discourse—dates back further than 1838. What Barrett states in 1826 becomes a key assumption for *The Seraphim and Other Poems* in 1838, as well as the other volumes which follow.

³⁷ In an 1844 letter to Cornelius Mathews, Barrett Browning declares, “I, for my own part, desire to acknowledge nothing *before* my volume of Seraphim poems, which however unworthy, have my life & heart in them in some audible degree” (9.52).

In an 1839 letter to Mary Russell Mitford, Barrett Browning delineates (in light of critical reactions to *The Seraphim and Other Poems*) her position on religion and poetry in more detail and articulates the authority by which she makes such claims:

It wd. be a great mistake if I were to defend my own poetry from any imputation of intruding religious subjects, & of calling ‘vasty spirits’ whether they will come or not.³⁸ I do not defend it. I only maintain that all such appearances of intrusion, arise from my own incompatibility, from some want of skill in *me*, & NOT from any unfitness of the subject—the subject meaning religion generally, & not such questionable selections as the subject of the *Seraphim*. –... I am sure they [her readers] will agree with mine, against every experience of non-success or mal-success on the part of so many ‘religious poets’, that the fault is more likely to lie in their not being poets than in their being religious—& that one truth is self-evident—*wherever there is room for HUMAN FEELING to act, there is room for POETICAL FEELING to act*. We cant [sic] separate our humanity from our poetry—nor, when they are together, can we say or at least prove, that humanity looking downward has a fairer aspect than humanity looking towards God. I am afraid that the matter with some of us, may be resolved into our not considering religion a subject of *feeling*, of real warm emotion & feeling—but of this, only in religion!— Because you are kind to me, I must love you—& nobody will call me wrong for doing that. It is only grateful & natural that I shd. love you—& there is no want of decorum & picturesqueness in loving you. Because Christ died for me, I must love HIM—but it is very wrong of me to say it,—& very improper—& above all things very unpoetical! Oh! the pitiful inconsistencies of this mortal world! And the inconsistency would be nothing, if it were not for the cold—if it were not for the cold & the baseness!— (BC 4.181-82, emphasis original)

In this complicated statement, Barrett Browning lays out the implications of her literary perspectives with regard to the larger critical discourse she seeks to challenge. In particular, she emphasizes what she perceives as a cultural resistance to the existence of “real warm emotion & feeling” in religion. Though she does not identify them specifically here, Barrett Browning may be referring to a number of cultural and literary issues, many of which intersect: the growing secularism and religious skepticism in

³⁸ Barrett Browning’s idea of “Calling ‘vasty spirits’” is most likely a reference to Shakespeare’s *I Henry IV*, III. i. 52, “I can call Spirits from the vastie Deepe” (*OED*).

English culture; and the identification of binaries created by gender difference in English society, with intellect/authority/theology ascribed to males and “warm emotion”/subordination/uncritical devotion to females. Moreover, she highlights the censures of “religious poets” in order to reveal what is, in her view, a mistaken perspective of religious poetry: namely, that because all religious ideas transcend material humanity (“real warm emotion & feeling”), such ideas encourage inferior artistic sensibilities (i.e. religion is always the context for bad poetry).

Although Romantic ideas of the human subject tended to classify “feeling” as something different from religious piety, and though skepticism and secularism were emerging more strongly as prominent discourses during Barrett Browning’s time, she contends that “true feeling” (and not only a simple sentimentalism) may indeed arise in religious experience; and therefore, if a poem lacks true feeling, it is more likely that the poem is inadequate as a literary text than that it has become distracted by its religious sensibilities. Moreover, with her own role as a poet in mind, Barrett Browning demonstrates that religious poetry might be valued (and evaluated) as strongly for its poetics as it is for its piety. This view is significant for a woman writer, whose gender placed her in a tradition of literary production that celebrated religious conventions more than intellectual, theological, or poetic aptitude. Barrett Browning’s verse anchors Christian views firmly in material reality; and she inquires into the ways poetry portrays human feeling, especially as that feeling develops as part of—and not separate from—a Christian understanding of Christ’s sacrifice (“Because Christ died for me, I must love HIM”). As a result, she refocuses the debate from polarities (pro- vs. anti-religious, in the poetic sense) to continuity between theology and feeling. Thus she challenges the

authority of literary critics who call verses about Christ's love "unpoetical," who emphasize the unfitness of Christianity to engage human feeling in authentic ways, or who censure women's religious poems for lacking "human feeling."³⁹ Although she says she "will not defend" her "own poetry" (which means, of course, that she feels she must), Barrett Browning's preface is both an apology for religious poetry and a demonstration of her capacity to assert her own critical authority in the literary debate at hand.

Corresponding to the debate over her (in)appropriate choice of a religious theme and angelic characters for her poems, is a debate by reviewers over whether Barrett Browning is sufficiently reverent or merely a religious enthusiast in her devotional verse. For example *The Athenæum* (7 July 1838), using an anti-Catholic association to condemn the passionate qualities of her poetry, declares that Barrett Browning "addresses herself to sacred song with a devotional ecstasy suiting rather the Sister Celestines and Angelicas of Port-Royal, than the religious poets of our sober protestant communities" (*BC* 4.375).⁴⁰ Moreover, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (August 1838) suggests that "[i]n 'The Seraphim' there is poetry and piety—genius and devotion; but the awful Idea of the Poem—the Crucifixion—is not sustained—and we almost wish it unwritten" (*BC* 4.379). If Barrett Browning succeeds in articulating the power of the crucifixion by way of her seraphim, then she is over-bold or, in her devotion, too ecstatic (and thus not

³⁹ It is worth noting that this passage from Barrett's letter exposes, in an implicit way, the double-bind of female religious poets in the nineteenth century: an important niche in the literary marketplace for women writers was religious verse; but because they were praised for simple piety as well as poetry, their poems could not mobilize the kind of religious views or "human feeling" that was valued in "true" (i.e. men's) poetry. To assert authority in either category would draw a charge of hubris and "unfeminine" self-display for a woman poet.

⁴⁰ Port-Royal, a French Cistercian abbey extant from the 12th to the 18th century, is known for its theological (Jansenist) controversies in the 17th century, in which nuns took a central role. The reviewer's reference to "Angelicas" could refer to Abbess Angélique Arnaud, who restored the rigor of Cistercian practice to the monastery in the early seventeenth century after a period of leniency (*New Catholic Encyclopedia* XI.597-98). In this context, the reference to Port-Royal is most likely meant to imply extreme emotional excess.

appropriately Protestant); yet if she falls short, she proves herself guilty of a literary sin: she approaches her topic without the proper sense for its gravity, and therefore seems cavalier or misguided, “aim[ing] at flights which have done no good to the strongest.”

These “flights” are, as Barrett Browning demonstrates, more dangerous because she is a woman poet seeking a place in a well-established literary tradition. The same critic in *The Examiner* who censured Barrett Browning for her “unhappy want of judgment” in “The Seraphim,” takes her to task for not merely for her critical views on religion and poetry but, more specifically, for her audacity with respect to Samuel Johnson:

[N]otwithstanding the sneer (a thing that never sits well on a woman’s face) in Miss Barrett’s admirable preface, at the unlucky critic who was ‘*not Longinus*’ (Doctor Johnson, we presume), we venture to be of opinion that religion, or what is exclusively understood by ‘sacred subjects,’ is not fit for poetry, except on very rare and brief occasions; and that such of the greatest poets as have thought otherwise, have proved themselves mistaken in the very midst of their greatness. (*BC* 4.375)

In her appeal to Longinus, Barrett Browning invokes a critical voice that claims legitimacy through the classical tradition and demonstrates her own scholarly authority; additionally, she measures Johnson against that tradition and finds his assertions wanting. Therefore, she suggests, she understands far better than the eighteenth-century critical giant “the intercourse between God and the human soul” as it appears in poetic form. In particular, true poetry maintains the “humanity” of that soul, and relation to God renders “poetry...expressive of that humanity’s most exalted state.” Barrett Browning’s reviewer, in response, turns her specific argument into an unintellectual and unwomanly “sneer.” This move is aimed at restricting Barrett Browning’s entry into the critical discourse altogether by demonstrating her appropriate critical relationship with

established traditions. Moreover, the reviewer reinforces the principle of silence when it comes to religious verse: even good poets fail at it, and so such poetry is better left unwritten.

2.4 “Sneer[ing]” at Samuel Johnson in *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838): The Poems

Yet Barrett Browning refused to be silent, and was convinced that her 1838 collection of poems—religious poetry and all—was more formidable than any work she had yet done. In a letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd in March of 1838, she says (of the collection), “I feel very nervous about it—far more than I did, when my Prometheus crept out [of] the Greek, or myself out of the shell, in the first Essay on Mind. Perhaps this is owing to Dr. Chambers’s medicines!⁴¹ or perhaps to a consciousness that my present attempt *is* actually, & will be considered by others, more a trial of strength than either of my preceding ones” (*BC* 4.21). A good deal of this “trial of strength,” as she saw it, emerged in the daring ways by which she addressed Jesus’s crucifixion, especially because, as her preface shows, she sought to recast it in a “less usual aspect.” While in her approach Barrett Browning sought to employ the perspective of seraphic “blessedness” rather than the “common[ness]” of humanity, she proved that the language of “the common estate of man” was appropriate for articulating divine mysteries, for embodying the negotiation of the human soul, God, and lived experience through the “process of spiritual formation.” In fact, the whole 1838 volume serves as her proof for the aesthetic qualities of devotional language. In her use of the “process[es] of spiritual formation” throughout the collection, Barrett Browning draws together the “real” feeling of love as divine presence and lived experience in devotional language in order to

⁴¹ Dr. Chambers was Barrett Browning’s physician, and was treating her for a chronic cough in March of 1838, when this letter was written (See *BC* 4, letters 616-620).

challenge particular forms of literary and cultural authority. As I see it, the volume begins with activist aims in terms of language, seeking to intervene in speech in order to craft a space for devotional utterance by a woman writer; and the volume concludes by turning the focus on social inequalities and suggesting the potential for social transformation.

Several poems in the 1838 volume display Barrett Browning's uses of a devotional aesthetic. For instance, in "Night and the Merry Man" a personified Night observes the "out-trembl[ing]" soul of "Man" (1.9). "Man," then, reports that he is "digging [his] warm heart / Till [he] find[s] its coldest part" (19-20) and concludes that he will "tell [his] beaded tears" like a "moist rosary" (1.98, 101). These lines suggest that the poem—which is focused primarily on life's "treasures" and sorrows (96)—employs the devotional tropes of a seeking, suffering soul; a self-reflective speaker; and the activity of prayer. "The Earth and Her Praisers" employs Christian praise (220)—another devotional form—but directs it at the natural world. "A Song Against Singing" features a speaker who resists the request to sing to a young child, suggesting instead "prayer in place of singing; prayer that would commend thee to the new-creating God" (V.26-27). Thus the poem displays a tension between prayer and poetry (i.e. "song"). Lastly, "Cowper's Grave" celebrates and laments an important English devotional poet and hymnodist, complicating the relationship between language and reason ([W]rought within his shattered brain such quick poetic senses" VI.1), and reinforcing Barrett Browning's view of religious poetry ("He shall be strong to sanctify the poet's high vocation" IV.1).

In addition to these references to devotional practice and expression, Barrett Browning includes in her volume devotional poetry in the more traditional sense. One

small but significant example set in a longer poem, “The Soul’s Travelling,” is a reflection on the human soul’s relationship to its cultural context more than to a divine Other. Barrett Browning inserts devotional speech into a text that reworks the binary of Nature (i.e. the organic world) versus urban life which features prominently in Romantic poetry, taking to task those who are apathetic in the face of urban suffering.⁴² The text begins,

I dwell amid the city ever.
The great humanity which beats
Its life along the stony streets,
Like a strong and unsunned river
In a self-made course... (I.1-5)

Here the speaker depicts a journey from an urban scene, where “the rich man’s carriage...goes too fast for charity,” and where weddings and funerals abound; where “the young queen goes to her Parliament” (II.63), and where the speaker hears the voices of the “cabman,” “dustman,” “young maid,” “boys,” “lawyers,” of a “blind man,” and “the brothel shriek” (II.31-39). “I dwell amid the city,” the speaker repeats in Stanza III,

And hear the flow of souls in act and speech,
For pomp or trade, for merrymake or folly:
I hear the confluence and sum of each,
 And that is melancholy!
Thy voice is a complaint, O crownèd city,
The blue sky covering thee like God’s great pity. (77-82)

While in this state of “melancholy” the speaker moves—in a Wordsworthian vision—from the city into nature, where she finds a seat on a “seaside hill” (128) that proves to be an ineffective escape from “the city’s moan,” which the “Rapid Soul from city gone” still

⁴² Jerome Mazzaro’s suggestions about the connections between Romantic notions of sublimity and an “authentic” portrayal of emotion, which connect to Barrett Browning’s lyricism and her strategies to link religion and poetry, are useful here. See “Mapping Sublimity: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese*” on pgs. 291-305 in *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Sandra Donaldson, ed., New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1999).

“carr[ies] inwardly” (178-80). In response, at the beginning of Stanza XI, the speaker calls out

God, God!
With a child’s voice I cry,
Weak, sad, confidingly —
God, God! (XII.1-4)

and concludes the poem with the reminder that

Yea, very vain
The greatest speed of all these souls of men
Unless they travel upward to the throne
Where sittest THOU the satisfying ONE,
With help for sins and holy perfectings
For all requirements...(XII.219-24)

At first glance this conclusion may appear as a conventional Christian affirmation of God’s dominance over human activities, and a woman poet’s submission—in “a child’s voice”—to the rule of God, who can help her with her “sins” and enable her to fulfill “all requirements.”⁴³ As Mermin suggests, “in religious verse, representation of the soul as female or childlike fits unparadoxically and all too well” (*Elizabeth Barrett Browning* 6). With this view in mind, a reader may find “A Soul’s Travelling” a poem in which political pressures lead a female voice to disengage reality rather than face it: unable to intervene on behalf of the city’s “complaint,” the speaker (i.e. soul) seeks God in a helpless child-like state. However, in Barrett Browning’s 1838 volume, to be a “child” seems to indicate the soul’s receptivity to nature and to God: in a later poem, “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus,” Mary reports that she “often wandered forth, more child than

⁴³ Mermin, noting Barrett Browning’s interest in and indebtedness to the Romantics, asserts that “when nature appears in her poems as anything but inert matter, its meaning is always deeply ambiguous. She continues to conceive of nature as she had in her earliest imaginative constructions, like the Romantic poets, as female and maternal...As such, nature embodies both remembered childhood and a mythic paradise and represents a double loss: of sensuous and aesthetic delight, and the child’s freedom of action and vision in a future limitless in scope. The poems usually assert at the end that this doesn’t really matter, because heaven is best, but the assertions contradict the poetry instead of arising from it and carry little poetic conviction” (63).

maiden / Among the midnight hills of Galilee...Listening to silence as it seemed to be / God's voice, so soft yet strong..." (VI.94-98). In Mary's case, child-likeness enabled her to hear "God's voice"; and so Barrett Browning suggests that immaturity of the soul is not, as Mermin suggests, a simplicity prized as "feminine" in unequal gender relations.

Rather, the soul's experience while "travelling" through the "crownèd city" includes an articulation of the political realities of disempowered humans who suffer on the margins of culture as part of the "lower" classes or the poor. Therefore, the trope of the soul functions in "The Soul's Travelling" to reveal, in a devotional passage, the vanity of the "souls of men" who do not look to God and, as a result, are not made "weak" and "sad" by the social inequality borne by the citizens of the city. The queen, after all, is "bless[ed]" by the crowds who follow her, shouting, "May the queen rejoice / In the people's liberties!" (II.72, 74-75). Yet these "liberties" are clearly undermined: the "poor man's broom" creates a "trail" for "the lady who walks to her palace home," so that "her silken skirt may catch no dust" (19-21).

For "The Soul's Travelling," then, devotional speech becomes a means for the speaker to navigate the political realities before her eyes; and unlike the Wordsworthian turn to nature as an alternate lived experience, separate from the political conflicts and intensity of urban existence, the speaker in this poem articulates a trope of the human soul in such a way that offers a means to reflect on a lived experience cognizant of the assumptions of Romanticism and of the material realities of suffering in the urban world around her. Similarly, "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus" portrays the influence of a woman's reflection on embodied experience, yet in a wholly different way. Focusing on the singular experience of Mary, mother of Jesus, Barrett Browning's poem demonstrates

a particular kind of audacity that challenges her readers' perceptions of Mary as a devotional figure and, by extension, devotional language itself.

As Scheinberg suggests in her careful and provocative reading of this text, Barrett Browning's "self-consciousness of the 'daringness' of the poem itself [which she articulates in her preface] and her desire to justify her own motives in attempting such a poem suggest the high stakes involved for women when they challenge hegemonic representations of scriptural figures" (77). Much like Barrett Browning's efforts in "The Seraphim" to portray a "supreme spectacle under a less usual aspect" ("Preface" to *The Seraphim* 167), this portrayal of Mary is "less usual" in the sense that Barrett Browning envisions her as a significant devotional figure, a unique mediator between humanity and divinity. While Scheinberg places Mary's power in her role "as a linguistic, creative prophet in her own right" (83), Scheinberg concludes that this role for Mary is a "problem" that "Barrett Browning acknowledges" by the poem's last stanza, "because in Christian epistemology Jesus must be eventually claimed as the primary agent of salvation, not to mention the supreme poet/speaker" (83). As a devotional figure, however, Mary retains her agency and is distinct in her power and identity insofar as she provides the means for "the primary agent of salvation" to become human. Not only capable of speaking for herself and merging the linguistic and the sensual, Mary sets a potential precedent for others.

The poem presents Mary in two significant roles: a prophet—which features her association with Moses (Stanza IV) and to her own role in redemptive history as she looks into Jesus's future—and as the mother who must nurture and protect "a Creator, rent asunder from his first glory and cast away / On his own world, for me alone / To

hold in hands created, crying—SON!” (171-72). Although Mary is not, as Scheinberg suggests, “the primary agent of salvation” in Christian theology, it is important to note that Mary has a powerful role in the Christian scheme not only as a “linguistic, creative prophet” but also as a woman who, as a devotional figure in history, is “treasured as the means through which Christ understands humanity” because she has given him his human “flesh” (Sempe 8). In this position as a unique mediator between humans and God she is, this poem suggests, the first human to recognize the significance of Jesus, divine and human, as the redemptive mediator between the divine and the human. More generally, the role of Christ as mediator (especially the mediator of love between God and humans) seems to be the privileged role of Jesus in Barrett Browning’s theological views; and it is important to note that Mary informs and is informed by Jesus’s role of mediator in “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus.” The concept of Christ as a mediator is a particularly intriguing when Barrett Browning relates it to human suffering and God’s will, because she sees God as an agent in human suffering (including Jesus’s and Mary’s, which is significant here). In an 1840 letter to Richard Hengist Horne Barrett Browning says, “God’s will—so high above humanity, that its goodness & perfectness cannot be scanned at a glance,—wd. be very terrible if it were not for His manifested love—manifested in Jesus Christ. Only *that* holds our hearts together when He shatters the world” (4.272). The character of Mary in “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus” represents the unique human who understood “love...manifested” in her own son, and as a result is the unique devotional model for all humans to follow in the “process of spiritual formation,” wherein love mediates divine presence and inhabits lived experience.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Barrett Browning’s ideas—and Christianity theology’s notions—of suffering are more complicated than

Like “The Seraphim,” “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus” features a contrast between “blessedness” (i.e. divinity) and “the common estate of man” (i.e. Mary) in order to suggest the importance of material existence to spiritual realities. As Mary reflects on the roles of Jesus in the text—“worshipped One,” “kingly One,” “crownless One,” “A God,” “A child,”—she also ponders her own motherhood and her humanity: echoing the scriptural text, she knows she is “blessedest of women!” yet she also notes her “corruption” (i.e. she is no greater than any other human) in contrast to “The Incorruptible now born of me / This fair new Innocence” (107-08). As Karen Sempe observes, from the Middle Ages onward, Mary’s sensual existence, her humanity, is as important as her role as the mother of God: first, because from at least the fourteenth century, Mary is seen as a mediator who is more “approachable” than Christ (because she does not judge the human soul); second, because (as Margery Kempe suggests) “identification with the physical, sensory details of Mary’s life enriches her appreciation of Christ’s life and God’s love” (9-10).

Although Mary is a complicated (and at times, controversial) figure in Christian history, and although I am not trying to conflate medieval and Victorian concepts in a simplistic way, it is significant that Barrett Browning draws together Mary’s motherhood, her sense of “corrupt[ed]” humanity, and her emotions in this text. As a devotional figure, Mary is powerful both linguistically and sensually: she is not disempowered when her “prophesy” is interrupted, as it is at the conclusion of the poem, by her tears. Stirred by her emotion after she states that God, the Creator, is also her own son (“Awful is this watching place,” she says: “Awful what I see from hence” [164-65]), she sheds tears that

the brief sketch I provide here. A fruitful area of further research would be the specific concept of theodicy (which seeks to reconcile human suffering and God’s will) as it applies to Barrett Browning’s Christian and poetic convictions.

wake her infant. According to Scheinberg, “it is not, it seems, words that reawaken Jesus, but rather the hearing of a tear drop. With this image of Jesus responding to her body rather than her words, Barrett Browning’s Mary re-emphasizes her more conventional physical self over her linguistic self; indeed, these lines seem to negate the power of her own previous words” (82). Yet two points are worth considering here: first, Mary’s role in the redemptive scheme is to prophesy and weep, as the sacrifice of Jesus as an adult is part of the innocence and humanity displayed in this text by his infancy. Second, the presence of Mary’s emotion at the end of the text, while it appears to reinforce conventional ideas of gender difference (women’s tears are more significant and authentic than their speech), signals her significance as a devotional figure by creating an intersection between her material, bodily experience; her linguistic utterance; and her spiritual reflection.⁴⁵

Moreover, the affective response Mary displays in the poem’s conclusion emphasizes a passage that provides a gloss for rest of the poem. In Stanza IV, when “heavenly Presences” (who are there to worship Jesus) surround Mary, she tells these beings, “I fall not on my sad clay face before ye, — / I look on his” (IV.51-2). Conveying her own devotion, yet demonstrating that her devotional gaze is re-focused from any “heavenly Presences” to the human God in her arms, Mary demonstrates what for Barrett Browning was the vital idea in Christian redemption: that divine love and human love are intertwined. Moreover, by giving birth to Jesus, her own son and the divine Other, Mary makes congruent the physical, spiritual, and linguistic aspects of humanity. As a result, the “glad sounds out of number” to which Mary refers at the poem’s conclusion, which Scheinberg sees as Mary’s denigration of her own words (84),

⁴⁵ It is worth noting here that tears are historically an important aspect of Christian devotion.

are not bad poetry but rather (in the manner of devotional speech) spiritual utterances that are numberless, infinite, capable of endless repetition and thus abiding power and significance. Viewed solely as a prophet-figure, Mary may appear to lose her power in light of her interrupted speech; however, as a devotional figure, Mary demonstrates her role as an empowered woman who—linguistically and emotionally—contradicts the imperatives of gender difference that render women powerless in cultural and theological spheres.

While “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus” displays one of Barrett Browning’s most important uses of a devotional aesthetic in *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, four poems near the end of the volume—which Barrett Browning subtitles “Hymns”—show her most overt example of devotional poetry. Indeed, while “The Virgin Mary” could also be read as a traditional devotional poem—after all, Mary addresses Jesus throughout the text—“A Supplication for Love: Hymn I,” “The Mediator: Hymn II,” “The Weeping Savior: Hymn III,” and “The Measure: Hymn IV” convey Barrett Browning’s devotional themes and display her use of a devotional lyric speaker most explicitly. Of the four poems, the last three focus on one major image each (as delineated in their titles), while the first poem conveys a request, or “supplication.” By reading the poems in reverse order, we may see that the requests articulated in the final three poems lead a discursive investigation of the “Church” in the first poem, which Barrett Browning explores as a singular body/institution that is also corrupt (i.e. filled with hatred). Moreover, the “spiritual formation” conveyed by the texts relies on tropes of the soul that focus on humanity through embodied emotion, relating the divine capacity for material experience in the Incarnation with human material experience and corruption (i.e. mortality and

sinfulness). “The Measure,” “The Weeping Saviour,” and “The Mediator” flesh out the dilemma posed by the Church in “A Supplication for Love”; and the final poem of the sequence, in turn, creates the cultural context to which the other poems respond. Taken together, the verses provide a means for the lyric speaker to mobilize devotional tropes in order to advocate for institutional and spiritual reform.

As Scheinberg points out, “The Measure” is a poem in which Barrett Browning demonstrates her scholarly authority through the use of Hebrew text in the epigraph (71); and the poem itself—like “The Weeping Saviour” before it—emphasizes the humanity of Christ, “who assumed our dust and turn / On Thee [i.e. God] pathetic eyes / Still moistened with our tears” (III.13-15). As this passage demonstrates, the tears of Christ reveal his human emotion as well as his role as mediator—one who “turns” his “eyes” to God on behalf of humans. In particular, this poem sets out to expound on the notion of “measure” ascribed to “God the Creator”—or, as the speaker notes, “So saith his holy book” (I.1, 5). The text is thus a hermeneutical (i.e. interpretive, rather than expository or exegetical) discourse on two scriptural texts that interprets those texts for readers, reshaping them into a scholarly and aesthetic form through use of the original Hebrew. As a result the poem displays an audacious effort on Barrett Browning’s part to challenge Victorian conventions of gender difference with regard to religious authority. Women could write reflective, emotional texts about the Scriptures—but they were not authorized interpreters of the sacred text.⁴⁶

“The Measure” seems conventional in its Christian views. The speaker, working with the concept of “measure” in the mode of theodicy, asks God if there is indeed an

⁴⁶ “While Victorian religious discourse was gendered neutral or even slightly feminized, theology, ‘the study of or science which treats of God, His nature and attributes, and his relations with Man and the universe’ (*OED*), remained a clearly masculine discourse” (Melnyk, *Women’s Theology* xi).

ending-point to suffering: “Shall we...who have issued from the dust / Say ‘No more tears, Lord God! / The measure runneth o’er?” (II.6, 9-10). The role of this question, while potentially radical (insofar as it displays scriptural text in order to interrogate it and to address “the Creator”), is to portray by the end of the poem a response that teaches “patience”: the speaker contends that in the midst of weeping, “we” should also be “Waiting, in that meek gesture [of patience], till at last / These tearful eyes be filled / With the dry dust of death” (IV.17-20). The complete subordination of human agency and will in the poem, which seems to counterbalance the “daring speech” of scholarly authority that informs the text, is balanced by the stanza about Christ’s tears. The “saviour’s weeping”—as we shall see in the next poem as well—is for the speaker the active means whereby humans may approach God and endure suffering with more than blind faith.

Read in context of “The Weeping Saviour,” the poem that immediately precedes it, “The Measure” becomes part of a larger picture of Christ’s intimate connection with human suffering as Barrett Browning seeks to portray it. While “The Weeping Saviour” offers no explicit response to holy writ in the ways “The Measure” does, the epigraph to “The Weeping Savior” is comprised of two lines from one of Donne’s Holy Sonnets⁴⁷ which suggest that Christ’s tears (i.e. his human features) possibly mitigate his fear-inspiring role as eternal judge. “The Weeping Saviour,” drawing on the story of Jesus’s mourning for his friend Lazarus, demonstrates Christ’s human grief, and displays the

⁴⁷ The lines, “—tell / Whether His countenance can thee affright / Tears in His eyes quench the amazing light” are from Donne’s Holy Sonnet “What if this present were the worlds last night?” The sonnet focuses on Christ’s suffering body and contrasts the judgment of the soul by God with the ways humans, in their judgments, confuse physical and spiritual beauty (when, Donne argues, precisely the opposite is true in Jesus’s crucifixion) (Shawcross 343-44).

speaker's attempt to redirect Jesus's attention from his friend's tomb to "[t]he shroud of death our bosoms own" as sinful and "sorrow[ing]" humans (7-8).

Through Jesus's "shepherd care," human sorrow over sin might be converted into "the strength of sorrow" as Jesus wore it: instead of continuing to sin, humans may "weep to know, / So dark and deep our spirits' stain" (17-18). Here, the trope of the soul as expressed by the lyric speaker relates the human capacity to move from corrupt sinfulness (i.e. one who causes Jesus's tears) to holy sorrow over sin itself. By depicting Jesus's human qualities—his tears—as well as his redemptive role as divine Other, the speaker creates a poetic discourse of "spiritual formation," voiced by a first-person plural ("we") that carries the potential for such formation into a broad rather than individualized audience. In "A Supplication for Love" we will understand that this audience is the "crownless Church," but first the poem sequence must explain further the redemptive significance of Jesus's embodiment in the Incarnation.

By using a passage taken from Hugh Stuart Boyd's *Essay on the Atonement* as the epigraph to "The Mediator," Barrett Browning employs the theological language of sufficiency and sacrifice to focus on Jesus's crucifixion as the poem's topic: "As the greatest of sacrifices was required," Boyd states, "we may be assured that no other would have sufficed" (qtd. in Barrett Browning, *The Seraphim* 57). Whereas "The Measure" responds to a scriptural text and "The Weeping Saviour" to a poetic one, "The Mediator" engages a theological proposition, and the poem considers precisely when and how the crucifixion acted "[a]s the greatest of all sacrifices." Also, because "The Measure" and "The Weeping Savior" together provide a nexus of ideas relating to humanity, divinity, sin, and responses to sin—sorrow and weeping—we may read "The Mediator" as a

reflection on what is “required” as a divine response. Like “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus,” “The Mediator” features the face of Christ as the locus of redemptive power. The speaker asks God to “[b]ehold” human “darkness *only*” in the face of Christ, which is also full of divine “brightness” (19-20, emphasis mine). Moreover, “The Mediator” exposes the linguistic disconnect between the divine and the human—“How high Thou art! our songs can own / No music Thou couldst stoop to hear!” (1-2)—in order to emphasize the physical and spiritual link between human flesh/spirit and divine being that Jesus provides: “But still the Son’s expiring groan / Is vocal in the Father’s ear” (3-4). For Barrett Browning, the limits of language are met and unsettled in the poetics of “spiritual formation”: the theological concept she introduces in the epigraph connects with material reality in groans of the suffering Christ and in the “hands” of Jesus, which are “stretched...to hide / The sins that pierced them” (7-8).

Therefore, in “The Mediator,” Barrett Browning emphasizes the theological doctrine of mediation by which Christian ideology envisions Jesus’s sacrifice as sufficient to atone for human “hands...died / With curses, red with murder’s hue” (5-6). Like “The Measure” and “The Weeping Savior,” “The Mediator” is a “hymn” of embodied love, wherein a trope of God relates the human “face” of the divine to the “darkness” of humanity in order to mediate (i.e. transform) it in the redemptive scheme. It is left, then, to “A Supplication for Love” to display the particular cultural dilemma that Barrett Browning seeks to address in this hymn sequence: the discrepancy between the activity of institutional church—which is “crownless” as it “stands” before God “With too much hating in her heart, / And too much striving in her hands” (2-4)—and the initial purpose of that church, as communicated by Jesus: “‘Love as I loved you,’ was the

sound / That on thy lips expiring sate!” (9-10). The poem explores the myriad ways in which the church has fallen short of its purpose to “Love as I loved you,” and recalls Christianity’s Hebrew roots in order to suggest that even a corrupted church maintains its historic and theological origins. Yet the text vehemently implores God to intervene in the present, to mediate the “shame” (8) the church has incurred through its hate and striving: The “sweet words”—“Love as I loved you”—have been “in bitter strivings drowned! / We hated as the worldly hate” (11-12), thus disregarding or negating what Boyd calls “the greatest of all sacrifices.”

Each of the four “hymns” in this sequence requests, in the first-person plural voice, that God “do” something in particular: “The Measure” requests for God to “teach us, O our Father” (IV.16); “The Weeping Savior” asks, “Come! Lord... Turn those weeping eyes of thine / Upon these sinning souls of ours!” (11-12); and “The Mediator,” more boldly, asks God to “spare” humans and “[b]ehold” human “darkness” only through the mediation of Christ’s face. These desires are worth noting because “A Supplication for Love” is the first to ask for something tangible in the material realm: “Oh, *move* us,” it implores; “[t]each us the heights and depths of love / Give THINE — that we may love like THEE!” (35-36, emphasis mine). Such love, a response to the “hating” and “striving” evidenced by the church thus far, is an active change—one that portrays a context in which the material reality of the present moment might be altered, thus connecting in the trope of the soul presented in this text the discourses of institutional critique, complicity with injustice, and the potential for renovation. Moreover, in this poem a trope of God relates a “loving Lord” and a physical one—one whose body has the potential for intervening in historical moments insofar as the church “love[s] like THEE.”

In *Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the Poetry of Love*, Glennis Stephenson argues that in Barrett Browning's "early devotional poetry,"

God is seen to provide His weary child, His beloved, with a longed-for release from troubling human passion...He offers a peaceful refuge from the world in sleep-like death. The desire to withdraw from the world, to sink in to this perfect and placid form of ultimate passivity, is soon rejected in the romance ballads and succeeded by an even stronger desire for the satisfactions that human love can provide. (50-1)

I agree with Stephenson's view of Barrett Browning's texts as portrayals God's loving intervention on behalf of the soul, his "weary child." However, I argue that we should look to other methods by which Barrett Browning uses religious themes and figures of Jesus and/or God—in addition to examples of a "peaceful refuge" or a "placid form of ultimate passivity"—in order to appreciate the ways in which Barrett Browning sought to actively challenge literary and cultural authority with her 1838 volume. The first authoritative stance, as we have seen, is represented by Johnson's suggestion that both devotional poems and all religious poetry are incapable of engaging the material realities of the world properly—their piety is too "contemplative," their notions too abstract—and so they do not belong among "true" literature. Second, as conventions of Victorian religious and literary authority often claimed, women writers could not "dare" to write religious poems that did anything but retreat from the world without risking a reputation for ambition, for "sneer[ing]" at appropriate Christian and literary forms, and for corrupting themselves with "new utterance" in the public sphere.

Yet, as Dolores Rosenblum argues with reference to *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning "[works] out an aesthetic which, first of all, identifies women as originators of meaning" (157). In an 1843 letter to Richard Hengist Horne, Barrett Browning explains a

vital issue of “meaning” for her with respect to Christianity (especially in its institutional forms):

And may I say of myself that I hope there is nobody in the world with a stronger will & aspiration to escape from *sectarianism* in any sort or sense, when I have eyes to discern it—& that the sectarianism of the national churches, to which I do not belong, and of the dissenting bodies to which I do, . . . stand together before me on a pretty just level of detestation— Truth (as far as each thinker can apprehend it) apprehended,—& Love, comprehending—make my idea . . . my hope of a church. But the christianity of the world is apt to wander from Christ & the hope of Him—” (8.76)

In her devotional poems Barrett Browning “originates” a “less usual aspect” of “spiritual formation” in literary discourse by investing tropes of the human soul in devotional poetics with a powerful analysis of theological, scriptural, and literary precedents as well as religious, gender, literary, and social conventions. Moreover, with her reviewers’ commentary in mind, we may see that, taken together, Barrett Browning’s preface and her devotional poetics in *The Seraphim and Other Poems* have the potential to create a kind of “new utterance” aimed at social justice. We see this utterance in one of its most radical forms in a later poem, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1848), which deserves more critical attention as one of Barrett Browning’s devotional texts.

Devotional language in “The Runaway Slave” reveals the effects of brutal disenfranchisement on the identity and psychological integrity of a slave mother—a woman who displays slippage of linguistic and religious meaning in her tropes of God and her characterizations of humans who appeal to God. It is precisely this sort of devotional utterance that challenges our definitions of devotional verse and our appreciation for its value in Victorian poetics. Through her devotional poetry of “spiritual formation,” Barrett Browning claims authority to supercede Johnson’s injunctions against the

convergence of religion and poetry, and to proceed as a woman poet who, having spoken the language of angels, dares to speak in the language of institutional critique.

2.5 “I am black, I am black / And yet God made me”: Race, Gender, and Devotional Poetics in *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point*

One of Barrett Browning’s most powerful critiques of institutional injustices and social inequalities—one of her best examples of activist devotional poetry—appears in “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” a text she included in her 1850 volume *Poems* but which she published separately in 1848 in order to support the abolitionist movement in the United States. In doing so, Barrett Browning demonstrates her interest in political realities, merging her devotional poetics with issues of cultural authority and racial difference. As Cora Kaplan observes, Barrett Browning was interested in “mak[ing] the link between women’s intervention into political debate and her role as an imaginative writer quite clear” (76). One example of this link with reference to slavery, as Kaplan demonstrates, appears in Barrett Browning’s views of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In response to a “timid female correspondent,” Barrett Browning “rejoices in Stowe’s success as ‘a woman and a human being’”:

Oh, and is it possible that you think a woman has no business with questions like the question of slavery? Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery and concubinage herself I think as in the times of old, shut herself up with the Penelopes in the ‘women’s apartment,’ and take no rank among thinkers and speakers. (76)

While providing some valuable insight into her interest in abolitionism, Barrett Browning’s idea of identifying a woman writer’s “business” with political “questions” can be, as Kaplan points out, a complicated one in practice. “Inevitably,” Kaplan asserts, “a theory which identifies the radical practice of art with the achievement of radical social change...will emerge with a theory of art and politics unconnected with material

reality and deeply elitist” (78).⁴⁸ “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” published in 1848 for “The Liberty Bell,” an American abolitionist magazine that was also sold at a large “anti-slavery bazaar in Boston” the same year (Stone 191) is one of the most radical of Barrett Browning’s social justice poems published to that point (“The Cry of the Children” and “The Cry of the Human” were published in the 1844 *Poems*). In fact, “The Runaway Slave” is a text she describes herself as “ferocious” (*Poetical Works* 191).⁴⁹ For this reason, the poem is particularly important to evaluate in terms of its potential or desired impact on material reality, especially because—as I will argue—it employs a devotional purpose as well as a political one.

At first glance, the poem seems to conform to what Kaplan calls “deeply internalised...rules of sexual conduct” (91), by turning toward religious ideals as an escape from the horrors of lived experience and failing to offer a satisfactory response to the problems raised by racial and gender difference. While Kaplan finds Barrett Browning’s “business with...the questions of slavery” in this particular poem more elitist than political, especially insofar as a “heroicised slave mother” (91) is the poem’s central figure, I argue that Barrett Browning’s text offers a startling view—an “unusual aspect”—of God and the human soul from a devotional perspective. Set in the context of political debate and the material conditions of the slave system, “The Runaway Slave” suggests a “new utterance” whereby the material realm of language may influence

⁴⁸ Kaplan suggests that one of the only times Barrett Browning avoids such elitism is in *Aurora Leigh*, when Aurora successfully lives on her own as a writer in London. In Kaplan’s view, such independent living addresses the material reality of women’s existence, “for it affected the real possibilities and conditions of the lives of middle-class women” rather than offering some idealized or romantic notion of a woman writer’s life (101).

⁴⁹ In a (now often-quoted) letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd in 1846, Barrett Browning reports, “I am just sending off an anti-slavery poem for America, too ferocious perhaps, for the Americans to publish: but they asked for a poem, and shall have it” (*Poetical Works* 191).

spiritual and political action. Moreover, such utterance registers points of rupture in the identity and psychological integrity of the slave that are caused by the pressure of brutal disempowerment. In particular, these points may be identified with relation to the devotional spaces in the text, spaces in which the slave woman displays slippage of linguistic and religious meaning in her tropes of God and her characterizations of humans who appeal to God.

Although not a devotional poem, “The Runaway Slave” is a dramatic monologue that nonetheless makes use of devotional postures and speech as it explores two tropes of God in the context of gender and racial difference: one that relates God to white pilgrims and social injustice, and another that links the redemptive body of Jesus with the suffering bodies of American slaves. The first three stanzas critique a devotional context created, in the slave woman’s view, specifically by the Puritans who came to America seeking religious freedom. She arrives at Pilgrim’s Point to kneel where the “first white pilgrim’s bended knee” (2) had been; but instead of “thank[ing] God for liberty” (4) as the white pilgrims had, she kneels in fatigue, having “run / All night long from the whips” of slave owners who are tracking her (12-13). Addressing the pilgrims, whose cause of religio-political “liberty” (as the slave woman recognizes in line 4) brought them to this geographical mark, the slave arrives to “curse this land / Ye blessed in freedom’s, evermore” (20-21). For Ann Parry, the pilgrims are only meaningful “in terms of their symbolic function” (120); she argues that “[w]hy they were exiled from England or what might be the influence of the old country on the new” are “questions...of no importance” in Barrett Browning’s text (120-21). By contrast, I argue that Barrett Browning’s choice to feature the place where pilgrims landed—and performed their first devotional act in

America—emphasizes the slave woman’s different use of that location. Recognizing Pilgrim’s Point as a significant theo-political place, the slave woman replicates the Puritans’ devotional posture for a radically different purpose: to pronounce a curse over a nation whose sense of “liberty” is bound by racial difference and brutal injustice. Much like the city in “The Soul’s Travelling” and the Church in the “Hymns” of the 1838 volume *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, the United States in this poem represents a context of hypocrisy, injustice, and inequality in which devotional utterance may encourage reform by critiquing structures of authority. As a result, devotional utterance becomes daring speech.

The shape of injustice, as it emerges in the slave’s lived experience, is made explicit in her first characterization of God. One problem with the blessing of freedom the pilgrims offered to America, she argues, is the corresponding blanket of whiteness such “blessing” spread over the nation. The Puritan devotional community from which the pilgrims came, and by which they offered blessings, was committed to the notion of God’s creation of all things; but this notion of creation breaks down, the slave woman explains, when she explores ways that *she* fits into the creational scheme. Skin color, one significant marker of racial difference in the text, is figured by the slave woman in the binary of light/dark that inhabits God’s creation:

I am black, I am black,
And yet God made me, they say:
But if He did so, smiling back
He must have cast his work away
Under the feet of his white creatures,
With a look of scorn, that the dusky features
Might be trodden again to clay. (IV.22-28)

Apparently rejecting the conventional Christian idea of God as creator (which implies some kind of equality, if all are indeed God's creatures), the slave woman questions "if" she has been made in order to be "trodden" in the racial hierarchy God instilled in his own work. In the next stanza, she affirms that "He has made dark things / To be glad and merry as light," suggesting the kind of equality among all of God's creations—nature and humanity—idealized in the Christian scheme, and then turns to God directly in Stanza VI, saying that "*we* who are dark... / Ah God, we have no stars!" (36-37).⁵⁰ Rather than establishing a binary, in these opening stanzas, between the acceptance of a white God of the puritans and the "whips" (i.e. slave owners) who creates "dusky features" to be "trodden" and a thorough rejection of any God whatsoever, the slave woman establishes a continuum of God's characteristics that loosens the hold, in this text, of racist religiosity on devotional expression.

Indeed, the slave woman's turn to God ("Ah God, we have no stars") marks one of the several places in the text where she changes her interlocutor(s): at first, she speaks to the pilgrims; later, (from stanzas XXX-XXXVI) she addresses the slave owners who have caught her; and in two places (Stanza VI and Stanza XIII) she speaks to God. Scheinberg's comments on "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus" apply well to these shifts: "the boundaries between dramatic speech, apostrophized lyric, and devotional poetry become blurred as Barrett Browning's poem poses a number of generic questions about what it means to 'speak' poetically to God" (82). This indeterminacy of genre/audience reinforces, in my view, the sense for the discursive continuum on which

⁵⁰ The "stars" here refer to lines 34-35, when she says that "the sweetest stars are made to pass / O'er the face of the darkest night" in God's creation. Barrett Browning seems to suggest that, unlike the dark night with its stars, "dark" *people* have nothing sweet or "merry" as part of them, but only suffering. She thus delineates nature from humanity, emphasizing racial difference among humans (that does not exist in nature).

the slave woman places tropes of God: like the language she uses to signify her audience(s), the ways she addresses God displays a complicated scheme of religious meaning that shifts throughout the text. There is a God who “has made dark things / To be glad and merry as light,” who mercifully interposes the natural world (“the sky”) between his “face” (i.e. ‘grand eternity’) and his children’s so that they suffer no “dread and doubt” (VII.43-49) and who—as the figure of Christ—sees the “countless wounds” of American slaves (XXXIV.240).

Additionally, this God figures prominently in the religion of the pilgrims, whose devotion to God in the cause of liberty failed to produce anything but brutal offspring (the slave owners are the pilgrim’s ‘hunter sons’ [XXX.216] who flog her); this God also remains silent at a crucial moment in the slave woman’s life (XIII) and has a “secret power” that only the “fine white angels” approach (XXIII.159-60). By carefully considering the ways the slave woman portrays God in the scheme of racial difference, we may see that conventional piety and religious beliefs that admit racist ideology are one of the slave woman’s key targets. In Parry’s view, “Christianity is shown throughout [the poem] as the historical foundation of the American nation,” and is, of all the “transcendent possibilities” in Northern “contemporary discourse” that ignored the “increasing meaninglessness and cruelty” in the Northern states during that historical moment, the “first to be dismissed” by the slave woman (122). By contrast, I argue that Christianity is firmly maintained in order to be interrogated for its role in the racial politics of her historical moment.

Three main points of racial trauma highlight the slave woman’s interrogation of Christian ideology and—in particular—the use of devotional forms. First, the slave

woman describes her love for another slave, a relationship in which they were “two to love and two to pray” (XIII.88). Yet their prayers are not answered: “Coldly,” she tells God, “Thou sat’st behind the sun: / And now I cry who am but one, / Thou wilt not speak today” (XIII.91-31). In these lines, “cry” may mean “weep” or it may mean “shout,” and conveys a tone of enraged sadness aimed at God—a tone the slave woman proves is appropriate in the next stanza, when the slave owners separate the lovers and leave only her beloved’s “blood mark in the dust” (XIV.99). In this intense intersection between the slave woman’s lived experience of trauma and her appeal to God, we may see her charge that God “wilt not speak today” as her means of negotiating her soul’s relation to a God who appears silent in the face of her suffering, past and present.

The purpose for God’s silence in the text, argues Lewis, is the fact that

human agency is required to effect freedom and justice, however, no god answers the woman’s cries. God is similarly deaf in ‘The Cry of the Children’: although the exploited children cry to God, ‘He is speechless as a stone’ (*CWEBB* 3:139, 144-45), his image reflected in the master exploiter is that of the indifferent ‘white God’ in ‘Runaway Slave.’ BB’s God never swoops down to alleviate the suffering induced by humankind, but rather allows humans to take responsibility for social justice or injustice. (191)

Yet, in the stanzas following the slave woman’s description of her lover’s death, the text demonstrates the failures of human agency more than its possibilities for success.

Contrary to what Lewis suggests, God does not remain silent—not entirely, for in the final stanzas of the poem the slave woman revises her characterization of God in order to suggest God’s response to the suffering at hand. However, first she accounts for the trauma surrounding her own child’s birth and death. She calls her baby, born after she was raped as punishment for her grief over the murder of her lover (stanza XV), “My own, own child” even as she detests the sight of him (XVIII.222-23) and radicalizes him

as wholly other, an entity more of the “master” than of herself. The poem graphically recounts her violence against her child, devoting five stanzas (XVIII-XXII) to her infanticide. She details how the baby “moaned and struggled” as she smothers him (226), and what compels her is “a look that made [her] mad... / The *master’s* look” in her child’s face (XXI.145-46). This look by her child creates the same effect that the master’s whip (“lash”) had on “her soul”: the material trauma altered the spiritual understanding into “mad[ness].” Thinking of her “cry” to God, we may see this as the slave woman’s declaration of rage; we may also see it as the place in the text where her identity—body, soul, and mind—are fragmented by violence.

With this violence in mind, Parry suggests that while the slave woman is first “traumatized” when she discovers her pregnancy (124), she is “joyously transformed” once she kills her child: “It is from this moment with the world made black and the power structure inverted that the slave throws off the racist interpellations...calling her fellow slaves to rebellion, in her last moment achieving in her defiance the freedom that can be theirs, as she dies ‘of Liberty’s exquisite pain’ (125). While I agree with Parry that, following the death of her child, the slave woman finds “Liberty” from “racist interpellations” only in her child’s—and ultimately her own—destruction, this transformation is by no means “joyous,” and the inversion of power structures is only effected through the slave woman’s psychological and physical brokenness.

A basis for understanding this complicated issue of racist power structures and individual identity in the poem is in stanza XXIII, when the slave woman states that—in the past and presently—she laughs to think on her child (whose moment of death she describes in the previous stanza) as *hers*:

But *my* fruit . . . ha, ha!—there, had been
 (I laugh to think on't at this hour!)
Your fine white angels (who have seen
 Nearest the secret of God's power)
 And plucked my fruit to make them wine,
And sucked the soul of that child of mine
 As the humming-bird sucks the soul of the flower. (157-63)

Grotesque in her enjoyment of the child's physical struggle as she kills him, and in her depiction of the child's "afterlife," the slave woman demonstrates that any rational approach to the systemic brutality and injustice that the institution of slavery had created ultimately shatter. Yet while this scene makes complete the fissure between the woman and her child, somehow the angels (and God) who receive the child's soul do not seem like the God whom the slave woman described earlier in the text. The "white angels" who collect the baby's soul look vastly different from the "heavenly Presences" in Barrett Browning's other texts—namely "The Seraphim," "A Drama of Exile" and "The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus"—and more like angels in paintings, "fine" and "white" (159) but not merciful, just, or holy. Her placement of these angels "[n]earest the secret of God's power" reminds us of stanza VII, when the slave woman tells us that God hides his "face" from humans and also recalls her rage when, in response to her and her lover's prayers, God is silent (stanza XIII). At this point in the text, as she recollects her child's death, her devotional response is marked by doubt and anger—she does not wholly erase the presence of God and her attention to him from the text, and yet she also implicates "God's power" in her trauma. This "secret," though, is revealed to a strong degree in the final stanzas of the poem, when the third point of racial trauma—the "flogging-place" (XXXII.236)—becomes a point of association between the suffering slave and the second characterization of God that emerges in a new devotional utterance.

In stanza XXX, the slave owner “hunters” have tracked the slave woman to Pilgrim’s Point and are set to recapture her. Violence is an imminent threat in this moment, as is her death, a time when the slave woman defiantly proclaims that her “curses” will “answer” their “whips” (XXXIV.234). These curses include her suggestion that the men will “shrink” from her as she fights them off physically (“Keep off! I brave you all at once!” [XXX.218]), the insistence that it is not her madness but her sense of racial difference that inspires her passion (“I am not mad, I am black. / I see you staring in my face— / I know you staring, shrinking back” [XXXII.230-32]), and her understanding of the ways the “Washington-race” has created a “UNION” founded in disunity: “For in this UNION you have set / Two kinds of men in adverse rows, / Each loathing each” (XXIV.235-37). Recalling “The Supplication for Love: Hymn I” in *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, this revelation of the curse America brought upon itself looks like “[t]he crownless Church” that has “too much hating in her heart” (2, 4). Like that church, which has turned away from God’s love, “all” in America “forget / The seven wounds in Christ’s body fair, / While HE sees gaping everywhere / Our countless wounds that pay no debt” (237-40). Invoking an important devotional image—the wounds of Christ⁵¹—the slave woman insists that “Our [the slaves’] wounds are different” (XXXV. 241) because the wounds inflicted on black slaves by America’s “white men” are not the wounds of “gods”—not redemptive (they “pay no debt”) and not powerful enough to “make Christs” [i.e. martyrs] of the slaves and effect their distorted notion of “good” through the slaves’ “bleeding” (242-44). A careful investigation is

⁵¹ Christ’s wounds have been a special focus of Christian devotional activity since the Middle Ages. Devotion to “the five wounds of Our Lord” was “powerfully promoted” by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), following a “new impetus to devotion to the Passion of Christ” in the Crusades (“Wounds,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*).

necessary here: when the slave woman suggests the “white men” attempt to “make Christs,” she means that black slaves—perhaps all non-whites—will resist the racist perversion whereby the suffering of the slaves is deemed “good” because (as racist religiosity might say) Christ suffered and bled. This concept has nothing to do with the complicated concept of redemption in Christian theology, but rather with the justification of racial violence through the manipulation of religious images. “*We*,” she asserts “are too heavy for your cross, / And fall and crush you and your seed” (246-27).

This image of Christ, invoked in its manifestations as an important devotional figure and as the object of racist manipulation, is the final trope of God that the slave woman offers in the poem. Anticipating her death, the slave woman proclaims, “White men, I leave you all curse-free / In my broken heart’s disdain,” seemingly revoking the curse she sought to pronounce. Marjorie Stone suggests that this revocation is a curse in itself: “However one might wish to see the slave as adopting a doctrine of Christian forgiveness here, her last words are surely a case of reiterating her curse and absolving herself of it too” (192). Stone points out that the last line is “extra,” and it break[s] the pattern of seven lines maintained throughout the poem’s thirty-seven stanzas” (192), emphasizing the “disdain” with which the slave woman closes her monologue. For Stone, this disdain is empowering:

There is none of Eve’s meek self-abnegation in this fierce woman who compares herself to the ‘black eagle’ [XXX.220], and who rises in the moral loftiness of her heart’s disdain as she falls into the welcoming blackness of death...Like the white man’s God and His prophets, she is the one who curses and who, serene in the authority of her righteousness, revokes her curse at her will. (192)⁵²

⁵² She also contends that, “[i]n the course of her monologue, the slave questions and finally discards her faith in the benevolence of the white man’s God with his ‘fine white angels.’ She is as little able to believe in such a divinity as are Blake’s little black boy and Elizabeth Barrett’s crying children (157)” (Stone 191). Indeed, she is “[m]ore outspoken than they are,” and argues that “Blacks who bleed and who hang ‘too

Yet it is, as the slave woman suggests in stanza XXXIV, the hatred embodied in racial difference that creates the context for “whips” and “curses”; and while I affirm that the slave woman’s posture and language at the conclusion of the text is empowered, she recoils from her original purpose to curse—which, she declares at the outset of the text, she will perform in the place where pilgrims offered their prayers—after recounting the history of her brutalized experience in slavery. Like the effort to explain the injustices done to American slaves with rational discourse—which is shown, in this text, to break down—no simple notion of “Christian forgiveness” can explain the slave woman’s decision to curse (or not) or to disdain. The important intersection with the text and Christian ideology comes in the devotional image of the suffering Christ, whereby the God who has remained silent to the slave woman until this point “speaks” to her through the physical manifestation of divine suffering, thus empowering the slave woman to resist the racist domination of “White men”—who indeed may manipulate God and his “white angels” for their own purposes.

Barrett Browning employs through the slave woman tropes of God and the human soul that relate the soul, the (divine and human) material body, and suffering in lived experience in ways that implicate spiritual formation in the contested spheres of political action. Like the Mary in “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus,” who looks into Jesus’s face instead of falling down before the “heavenly Presences” around her, the slave woman appeals to the one human whose material existence in redemptive history intersects with her material existence in the cultural-historical moment. In both cases,

heavy’ for their cross are suffering martyrs, but their martyrdom brings destruction not redemption (244)” (191).

powerful civil and religious powers shed the blood of the innocent.⁵³ The sacrifice of Jesus completes the redemptive scheme of Christian theology, yet in his role as a political agitator he is censored and resisted in his historical moment. While the sacrifice of the woman slave, as she envisions herself in the text, has no corresponding “completion” in the scheme of cultural history, she remains—like Jesus—rebellious against the powerful cultural forces that desire her to be erased, physically and racially, from the American theo-political landscape. In “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” then, Barrett Browning suggests that abolitionist action must involve an evaluation of religious as well as political activity and authority, and a significant critique of the ways Christianity is complicit in the brutal oppression of human beings. Moreover, she demonstrates a “ferocious” challenge to literary authority through a woman’s voice that is “hurried to speech” (“Preface” to *Poems* 146) in a “new utterance” through devotional poetics.

2.6 Conclusion: Finding “Use” for Devotional Poetry in Barrett Browning’s Art

In her study of Barrett Browning’s “cursing,” Marjorie Stone asserts that “most of the curses portrayed or pronounced in Barrett Browning’s works have political dimensions, whether the politics at stake be those of nations or the politics of gender—or both” (186). Moreover, she observes,

Paradoxically, as her curses move out of the private realm conventionally associated with women and become more explicitly political, they also become more personal, and are more often uttered in her own voice. This paradox is in part explained by her realization that, as contemporary feminists like Adrienne Rich and Marge Piercy stress, the personal *is* the political. For Barrett Browning such a realization was a part of the ‘deepest truth’ in her own heart and head that she felt compelled to utter as

⁵³ For a thoughtful look into the intersections of contemporary political issues and the ideology of Christian redemption, see Terry Eagleton’s review of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, in which Eagleton calls the Christian perspective of Jesus’s crucifixion the “dreadful image of a mutilated innocent as the truth of history” (*London Review of Books* 28.20 [19 Oct. 2006]; http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/print/eagl01_.html).

an artist, in the spirit of her credo that art is ‘essential truth that makes its way through beauty into use’ (Kenyon 2:383). (186)

Through devotional poetry, Barrett Browning puts her texts to use in such a way that challenges conventions of politics, gender, and religion—especially because, as part of a discourse of spiritual formation, devotional poems are meant to engage historical moments through lived experience, thus providing a way to connect reflections on the soul and God with lived realities. While Kaplan warns us of the potential problems surrounding a purely “abstract” notion of political activism, which does little to change the effects of oppression and injustice in daily life, Barrett Browning shows us in devotional poetics that language works materially, responding and encouraging response to lived experience in a variety of contexts and with a variety of issues.

Moreover, devotional poetics provoke an exploration of political realities in complicated ways, rather than seeking an escape from them. With respect to “The Runaway Slave,” Ann Parry suggests that because Barrett Browning’s target audience was comprised of Northerners, she sought to stir up “guilt...about their own history so that they would bind themselves unequivocally to the movement for abolition in the Union as a whole” (119). Such a potential historical guilt may be, for Barrett Browning, a vital attempt to promote action and not just ideas: as Stone reminds us, members of Barrett Browning’s family were slaveholders in the West Indies and Barrett Browning herself “rebelled” in 1846 “against the patriarchal master of her own house” (192). Systemic inequalities were familiar to the poet; and while I seek to draw no substantial comparison between her and American slaves, who suffered infinitely more, it is important to recognize that as far as Barrett Browning was concerned, her “ferocious”

art—made bold through her specific comparisons between American slaves and the crucified Christ—was of “use” in this vital issue.

In her discussion of “*Aurora Leigh* and Authority,” Alice Falk suggests that “[w]e might begin by glancing at the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, poems crucial to Barrett Browning’s development of her voice as a female subject” (85). To this I would add that we should cast our glance back further, to Barrett Browning’s devotional poems, which enrich our understanding for the ways the “female subject” negotiates authority—religious and literary—and asserts a formidable “new utterance” that situates the human soul, God, and lived experience in relation to Victorian culture in ways that challenge and seek to renovate that culture. As Lewis explains,

Barrett Browning was not always consistent in her political thought, but she was consistently an advocate of liberty in all forms, and she believed that the poet of God should—as a divine duty—speak out against oppression. She also admitted her heterodoxy in politics and religion, sometimes even delighted in it, but she believed that the true poet, like the true Christian and true patriot, must commit herself to holy liberty and to mercy, fellowship, classlessness, and justice. (91)

One way she enacts her desire to be such a “true poet,” the devotional poetic mode, is a means for Barrett Browning to establish a discursive continuum in place of cultural binaries, unsettling conventional ideas of literary and religious authority as well as power and disempowerment. In addition, devotional poetry is a means for Barrett Browning to create an intersection between the human soul, God, and the “mystery” of lived experience in embodiments of “true warm emotion & feeling” (*BC* 4.181-82), especially love, as well as active resistance to literary and theo-political conventions. Eschewing neither abstract nor intensely personal poetics, Barrett Browning directs our gaze through devotional poetics to multiple points of entry into Victorian literature and culture,

invoking powerful cultural, literary, and religious issues in her aesthetics and demonstrating that, for a woman poet, the devotional voice may indeed be more “ferocious” than diminutive. Insofar as she succeeds in this “new utterance”—and a true test would involve tracing potential avenues of devotional poetics in her most revered works, *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, perhaps *Casa Guidi Windows*, and most of all *Aurora Leigh*—the “dare” of her “earthly heart” in devotional verse has proved a most fruitful and compelling one.

2.7 Epilogue: Barrett Browning’s Poems of 1844

As we saw above, a primary focus for Barrett Browning in the 1838 volume *The Seraphim and Other Poems* is the issue of literary authority, which she addresses in her preface by challenging the notion that religious topics are not suitable for poetry and which she confronts in her poems by using devotional modes and figures. In addition to Mary, the central devotional figure in the 1838 volume is Jesus, and especially Christ-as-mediator between the divine and human. Barrett Browning takes up this devotional theme again in her 1844 volume, *Poems*, in her preface and in her poetry itself; yet as a volume that gave Barrett Browning much anxiety, *Poems* reflects her continued investment in “daring” speech. After “a good deal of serious reflection,” Barrett Browning writes to John Kenyon in March of 1844 about the inclusion of *A Drama of Exile* in the collection. “I WILL NOT,” she says in thrice-underscored print, “either alter or print it...I shall have quite enough to print & to be responsible for, without it; and I am quite satisfied to let it be silent for a few years, until either I or you (as may be the case even with me!!!) shall have revised our judgements in relation to it” (BC 8.261).

The pressing issue, as Barrett Browning saw it, was that “that no mortal priest (of St Peters or otherwise) is referred to in a particular stanza; but the Saviour himself” (261) and, as she explains in the preface, her revision of the Eden story was audacious for three reasons: first she attempts a theme and form similar to *Paradise Lost*; second, she refocuses the drama around “Eve’s allotted grief” after the Fall, thus challenging the primacy of Adam and Milton’s focus on Eve’s temptation and sin (*Paradise Lost*, Book IX); and third—the “graver point,” in her view—in the text “[t]he divine Saviour is represented in vision towards the close, speaking and transfigured; and it has been hinted to me that the introduction may give offense in quarters where I should be most reluctant to give any” (“Preface to *Poems*” 145). In the end, John Kenyon—who unlike many of Barrett Browning’s critics approves of “sacred verse”—praises *A Drama of Exile* so much that Barrett Browning gives in: she includes the text in her volume, and (as we can see) communicates the anxiety about her infringement on religious conventions that the figure of Christ represents.

Yet we know from her previous volume that Jesus is a significant devotional figure for her: a trope of God wherein physical and spiritual qualities of divine being are related to human experience and institutional critique. Moreover, the figure of Christ in devotional form is a significant means through which Barrett Browning engages political realities of Victorian England, especially the notions of gender difference in literary and religious authority and cultural disempowerment among the lower classes, the poor, and American slaves. A fruitful area for further research with regard to these issues is her 1844 volume, in which she challenges gender difference through her characters of Eve and of Christ in *A Drama of Exile*; moreover, through a lyric speaker who addresses the

“insufficiency” of speech, she brings issues of cultural disempowerment into sharper focus through two poems of social protest, “The Cry of the Children,” and “The Cry of the Human.” By exploring the convergence of her interest in social injustice and in devotional poetics in this volume, we may better understand the significance of devotional poetry for Barrett Browning that, in turn, better equips us to investigate the religious and political controversies she ignites in later texts—namely, “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” and *Aurora Leigh*. In the 1844 volume, Barrett Browning’s attention becomes more particular: building on her interest, displayed in *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, to contradict Samuel Johnson’s views, Barrett Browning focuses on what she sees as a particular religious dilemma that impacts Victorian literary culture—and the culture at large—in vital ways.

This dilemma is the debate over the proper sphere for devotional utterance, the places in Victorian culture which prohibit, inhibit, encourage, and critique it. Connected to larger historical issues of sectarian debates, women’s roles in Christian institutions and theology, literary debates over “appropriate” religious speech, and social injustice, Barrett Browning envisions “devout” speech as a means by which—as we saw in her 1838 volume—devotional tropes relate divine being and the human soul in multivalent discourses of spiritual formation, discourses which in turn push material concerns into the foreground. It is here, in her approach to this dilemma, that Barrett Browning makes explicit her criticism of the Tractarian movement in a way unique to her prefatory—and poetic—texts. Only in her letters is she openly contradictory to the religious and cultural phenomenon that was at its height during the time in which she published the 1844 volume.

In her preface, she seems at first to agree with the motivation of the Tractarians—who sought to reinvigorate the Church of England as well as English spiritual life—when she says, “the tendency of the present day is to sunder the daily life from the spiritual creed, — to separate the worshipping from the acting man, — and by no means to ‘live by faith’” (“Preface” to *Poems* 146). Yet in the next sentence, she demonstrates that she will not endorse indiscriminately all challenges to secularism: “There is a feeling abroad which appears to me (I say it with deference) nearer to superstition than to religion, that there should be no touching of holy vessels except by consecrated fingers, nor any naming of holy names except in consecrated places” (146). For a woman writer, this statement has two layers of significance: it responds to a particular religious phenomenon (the Oxford Movement, which advocated high church rituals criticized by many as too close to Roman Catholicism, as “superstitious”), and it emphasizes that—because women were excluded from priestly ordination—no women could have “consecrated fingers.”

Moreover, she argues, such a view of “holy names” and “consecrated places” divests daily life from its intimate connection with spiritual realities: “As if life were not a continual sacrament to man, since Christ brake the daily bread of it in his hands! As if the name of God did not build a church, by the very naming of it!” (146). What seems here like a direct critique of institutional forms, set in conjunction with a critique of gender difference, is a statement that is also connected to Barrett Browning’s rejection—which we saw at the start of this chapter—of any kind of “Art” that “excludes the sense of a soul within us & of a God above us & takes life in its conventionality denuded of its inner mystery” (*BC* 7:214). Her emphases on “inner mystery” and new forms of speech provide a convenient link to Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s ideas of the soul in modern life,

which we will see in the next chapter's exploration of *In Memoriam*. For Barrett Browning, in particular, defying the "conventionality" of gender assumptions (and religious authority) by rejecting "consecrated" speech in favor of "new utterance" is a main goal: she rejects the "conventionality" of social protest through "ferocious" approaches to injustice and inequality; and she challenges the "conventionality" of literary authority by offering a "less usual aspect" in religious verse through devotional poetry. "As if," she argues indignantly, "the word God were not, everywhere in His creation, and at every moment in His eternity, an appropriate word! As if it could be uttered unfitly, if devoutly!" ("Preface" to *Poems* 146).

Chapter 3

“Modern” Devotion: Faith, Doubt, and Progress in Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850)

3.1 Historical and Critical Background: Tennyson’s “Faith”

Like Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point,” and—as we shall see—“The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children” by Christina Rossetti, Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* is not a conventional devotional poem. Also, like Barrett Browning’s poetry, Tennyson’s works are informed by Christianity in a broad sense rather than shaped by any one doctrine.⁵⁴ Yet as his letters to Emily Sellwood (later Emily Tennyson, his wife) demonstrate, Tennyson had an interest in working out via poetry the relationship between God and the human soul: in 1839, while stating that he does not know why human suffering occurs—especially to some more than others—he proclaims,

⁵⁴ Hallam Tennyson reports that his father “dreaded the dogmatism of sects and rash definitions of God” (311). And although Tennyson was informed about the religious controversies of his day—especially as they impacted Cambridge (see an 1834 letter from Robert John Tennant in Tennyson’s *Letters*, Vol. I, pgs. 110-12, in which Tennant explains the major players in the debate over allowing Dissenters to take degrees)—his letters up to 1850 show that he was no controversialist, and they reveal no adherence to a particular Christian denomination or theological perspective. His marriage to Emily Sellwood, who was a devout Christian, surely influenced his spiritual life, as his friend Aubrey De Vere notes in 1850 (See *Letters* Vol. I, pgs. 339-40). But as De Vere observes, “[i]t seems very undesirable that he should get into any region of controversies on such subjects” as Anglo-Catholicism (339-40).

“[l]et us be silent for we know nothing of these things and we trust there is one who knows all” (*Letters* 175). Yet Tennyson himself does not remain “silent,” he continues with a working definition of the soul’s relationship—via knowledge and language—to God:

God cannot be cruel. If he were, the heart could only find relief in the wildest blasphemies, which would cease to be blasphemies. God must be allpowerful [sic] else the soul would never deem him worthy of highest worship. Let us leave it therefore to God, as to the wisest. Who knows whether revelation be not itself a veil to hinder the glory of that love which we could not look upon without marring our own sight and own inward progress. (175)

His views of God’s characteristics, while they emerge from a partial or “veiled” disclosure, account for seeming inconsistencies in God’s power and love, even as they appeal to both qualities as referents for the soul’s speech (blasphemies), vision (“our own sight”) and action (“inward progress”). Like the Tractarian notion of Reserve, Tennyson’s idea of “revelation” as a “veil” suggests that humans’ incomplete knowledge of God is an act of mercy on God’s part. Yet in contrast to the Tractarians, Tennyson considers “inward progress” as the purpose of such a “veil.” As I see it, this focus on the progress of the soul relates to notions of progress as a definitional feature of Victorian modernity which appear in *In Memoriam*. One poem written during Tennyson’s time at Cambridge (1828-21) draws together with a kind of arrogant humility these two kinds of progress: “O God, make this age great that we may be / As giants in Thy praise” (“To Poesy” 1-2).

This self-consciousness about his “age” and its capacities for progress situates Tennyson historically: to be Victorian was to be “modern”; and for Tennyson, “modern”

meant “progressive” in a variety of forms.⁵⁵ Armstrong explains Victorian ideas of modernity as they relate to the present and the past:

Victorian modernism sees itself as new but it does not, like twentieth-century modernism, conceive itself in terms of a radical break with a past. Victorian modernism, as it emerges in its poetics, describes itself as belonging to a condition of crisis which has emerged directly from economic and cultural change. In fact, Victorian poetics begins to conceptualize the idea of culture as a category and includes itself within the definition. To be modern was to be overwhelmingly secondary. (*Victorian Poetry* 3)

Armstrong borrows Harold Bloom’s word for this idea of being “secondary”—

“belatedness”—and expands the definition:

It was post-industrial and post-technological [...]. It was post-teleological and scientific, conceiving beliefs, including those of Christianity, anthropologically in term of belief *systems* and representations through myth. Simply because of its awareness of teleological insecurity, Victorian poetry is arguably the last theological poetry to be written. (3)

In accordance with Armstrong’s notions of “Victorian modernism,” I assert that Tennyson’s poetry—more than Barrett Browning’s or Rossetti’s—strives to represent the modernity of Victorian spirituality, particularly through a “condition of crisis” in the particular “belief *systems*” of faith and doubt. Struggling with his own relationship to those systems, and to the larger belief system of Christianity from which they derive, Tennyson employs the “condition of crisis” not in the familiar binaries of faith versus doubt, science versus religion, or sacred versus secular: rather, he establishes the “condition of crisis” as the context for tropes of the soul which reveal the processes of spiritual formation made possible by that crisis and which promote the kind of progress required of the modern soul.

⁵⁵ As we saw in Chapter 1, one of Tennyson’s early reviewers, William Johnson Fox, fuses the industrial with the literary as a means to depict Victorian modernity in his comments on *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830): see pages 24-25, above.

One obvious place to begin an investigation of faith, progress, and modernity in *In Memoriam* is in the apparent tension between science/Nature and religion which culminates in Stanzas 54-56 (which I will discuss in more detail later):

Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type she seems,
So careless of the single life [...] (55.5-8)

Man, her last work, who seemed so fair,
Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies
Who built him fanes of fruitless prayer,

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law –
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed – [...] (56.10-16)

Among others, it is these passages which seem most incongruous with the opinion of Tennyson's contemporaries that *In Memoriam* is “a message of hope and reassurance to their rather fading Christian faith,” as T. S. Eliot puts it (“In Memoriam” 196).⁵⁶ For instance, Coventry Patmore placed the poem alongside the work of George Herbert, saying that *In Memoriam* included “the best religious poetry that has ever been written in our language” (Qtd. in Shannon 145). Quite by contrast, a June 29 review in the *Britannia* censures *In Memoriam* for its “almost total absence of those higher consolations which religion should suggest” (Qtd. in Shannon 149).⁵⁷ Seeming to say

⁵⁶ Thinking of “reassurance,” consider one of the early reviews of *In Memoriam* from *The Examiner* (June 8, 1850), which argues that “[t]he effect of the poem, as a whole, is to soften yet strengthen the heart” (Forster qtd. in Shannon 142). *The Spectator*, on the same day, concluded that “[t]he volume is pervaded by a religious feeling, and an ardent aspiration for the advancement of society [...] These two sentiments impart elevation, faith, and resignation” (Anonymous qtd. in Shannon 143).

⁵⁷ Shannon notes that “[t]he critic for the High Church *English Review* alone examined in detail Tennyson's theological position,” which the critic found wanting (150). *An American Catholic Quarterly Review*

both of these things at once, Eliot, after quoting from Stanza 56 and discussing Tennyson's uneasy relationship with progress, contends that "*In Memoriam* is a poem of despair, but of despair of a religious kind" ("In Memoriam" 201). In this despair, Eliot sees a Tennyson rebelling "against the society in which he was the most perfect conformist" and against any sense of permanence: "he had nothing to which to hold fast except his unique and unerring feeling for the sounds of words" (202). Ultimately, Eliot marks Tennyson's rebellion against the Victorian age and his use of instability by celebrating *In Memoriam* as a text of doubt rather than faith: "*In Memoriam* can, I think, justly be called a religious poem, but for another reason than that which made it seem religious to his contemporaries. It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience" (200-01).

I do not disagree with Eliot's view of the "intense experience" registered by doubt in Tennyson's text. To be sure, various sections of *In Memoriam* that express religious doubt—like Stanza 3, in which "Sorrow" questions whether the natural world holds any meaning; Stanza 5, where "grief" itself is "half a sin" (1-2); Stanza 35, which considers whether or not humans are material beings only; Stanza 41, in which a "spectral doubt" makes the speaker "cold" (19); or Stanza 76, which tells of "The secular abyss to come" (6)—reveal the complexity of that doubt. Tennyson's doubt is no straw man who is easily toppled by faith; but neither is Tennyson's faith so transparent as to be weak. The final four lines of the Epilogue,

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,

article in 1900 came to a similar conclusion (Cf. George Lee, C.S.Sp., "Tennyson's Religion," *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* 25 [1900]: 119-320).

And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves (141-44),

though often explicated as the passage wherein Tennyson's "grief is turned to hope, his weeping into tranquil joy" (Bradley 238) and his skepticism into belief, is not the poem's last word. *In Memoriam* is not a linear narrative—the jumbled chronology of its composition is well known⁵⁸—and just as the form of the poem experiments with sequence, so the faith and doubt of the poem work dialectically, moving the "processes of spiritual formation" in many directions rather than towards only one end. This dialectical process challenges Eliot's assumption about the role of doubt and brings to the fore the intensity of faith *in relation to* that doubt. Highlighting faith in response to Eliot's claim, Cecil Y. Lang and Edgar F. Shannon, Jr. argue in their introduction to *The Letters of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Vol I: 1821-1850* that "[t]he terms" Eliot imposed on *In Memoriam* "ought to be reversed. Its doubt now seems old fashioned [...] its faith modern; its doubt quaint, its faith fresh; its doubt (though not the less 'a very intense experience') a historical curiosity, its faith a living force" (xxxv). While I think Lang and Shannon may have overstated the case a little by exchanging one straw man for another, I think their point is well taken. Through a reading of devotional aesthetics in the text, I hope to reveal ways in which the "living force" of faith and the intensity of doubt work dialectically to suggest a modern soul embodied in a non-sequential text.

In particular, tropes of the soul in *In Memoriam* feature struggle or contest, wherein (as Tennyson explains in an early unpublished poem) "we come / Into the light of spiritual life" only "From the tomb / And charnel-place of purpose dead" and from "change" ("To ——" 3-6, 8). In such a place of "light," the soul has become "waters"

⁵⁸ See, in particular, Shatto and Shaw, "Introduction: The Growth of the Poem, 1833-1870" in *Tennyson: In Memoriam*, pgs. 8-26.

stilled, like the stormy Sea of Galilee, by God—a place in which “power divine” engages human internal “strife” (9, 2). Yet as *In Memoriam* demonstrates, the soul is not without agency in its interactions with the divine: it is often the *acting* and not only the *acted upon*. “Sweet soul,” says Tennyson in Stanza 65, “do with me as thou wilt; / I lull a fancy trouble-tost” (1-2). Moreover, he contends, it is through “painful phrases wrought” that a “happy thought” may emerge (6-7). Presented as “non-being” through faith and despair, the “self” of *In Memoriam* takes shape at least in part via the soul: and as the various forms of identity grapple with challenges to that identity itself throughout the text, the form of the poem collaborates with its themes to portray “the light of spiritual life,” the relationship of the soul to others and to God.

Critics and biographers suggest that the development of Tennyson’s own soul started with tension and difficulty. Specifically, as the poet’s grandson Charles Tennyson explains, Tennyson’s childhood was shaped by a “clash between the personalities and beliefs of his parents and by the gradually increasing memories of home life in the Rectory at Somersby” (75). Tennyson’s father, Dr. George Clayton Tennyson, was an Anglican Clergyman unhappy in his vocation, “distrustful of enthusiasm in all forms and a strong upholder of the political and social pretensions of the Church of England—essentially a scholar and a gentleman, only secondarily a priest” (75). Likewise, as the poet’s son Hallam explains: “[m]y grandfather had no real calling for the ministry of the Church, yet he faithfully strove to do his duty” (Tennyson *Memoir* 14). Hallam emphasizes the academic qualities of George Tennyson’s efforts—qualities often that alienated him from his parishioners (14). Moreover, George’s mental illness and

drunkenness “drove Alfred during his boyhood more and more within the scope” of his mother’s earnest and pious Evangelicalism (Tennyson *Six Tennyson Essays* 75).

Another influence on Alfred Tennyson’s early ideas of faith was his aunt, Mary Bourne, “a rigid Calvinist, who would weep for hours because God was so infinitely good. ‘Has He not damned,’ she cried, ‘most of my friends? But *me, me* He has picked out for eternal salvation, *me* who am no better than my neighbors’” (Tennyson *Memoir* 15). Moreover, this aunt took the young Tennyson aside at one point and “said to her nephew, ‘Alfred, Alfred, when I look at you, I think of the words of Holy Scripture—‘Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire’” (15). Charles Tennyson notes that the poet “described” this aunt “as one of the most wayward and at times violent of human beings” (*Six Tennyson Essays* 76), one who contributed to the “inner conflict” (76) encouraged in Tennyson as he navigated the types of Christianity evidenced by the adults around him. Although I do not seek to read Tennyson’s poems strictly from a biographical perspective, his early sense of the conflicting aspects of Christianity appears in later poems—including his 1830 and 1842 volumes, as well as *In Memoriam*—which feature mood, introspection, belief and doubt. “[F]or myself,” he explains to his aunt, Elizabeth Russell, in an 1833 letter, “I drag on somewhat heavily through the ruts of life” (*Letters* 89). The poems of 1830-1850 suggest that this heaviness was pervasive in the first decades of his career, and that the struggle to find “a resting place” (Tennyson “Sonnet” 14), a place in which the soul “hear[s] God speaking audibly” (11), was a driving force in his poems.

I do not believe that any of Tennyson’s texts ever display a full resolution of this struggle, though his efforts to navigate the various aspects of a conflict active in an

unquiet soul make for good poetry in *In Memoriam*. Likewise, some of Tennyson's early poems explore the inner conflicts of the self-as-soul: in "Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind" (1830), the speaker struggles with "weary life," with "weary death," and with a "spirit and heart made desolate" (188-89). "O damned vacillating state!" he concludes (190), leaving unresolved the perplexities inspired in him by "common faith" (33) he sees in others but does not himself possess. Moreover, "The Vision of Sin" (1842) depicts a withdrawn God and an undecipherable answer to the question, "Is there any hope?" (220). In addition, "The Palace of Art" (1833 and 1842) displays the soul as dwelling in "a lordly pleasure-house / Wherein at ease for aye to dwell" (1-2). After "three years" in such a sensuous place, "she [the soul] fell," but

Lest she should fail and perish utterly,
 God, before whom ever lie bare
 The abysmal deeps of personality,
 Plagued her with sore despair.

When she would think, where'er she turn'd her sight
 The airy hand confusion wrought,
 Wrote "mene, mene," and divided quite
 The kingdom of her thought. (221-28)

Drawing on the biblical account of the prophesy written on the wall by an invisible hand in King Baltassar's palace, which was read and interpreted by Daniel on the night that the king was killed (Daniel 5), Tennyson's poem relates the soul's fall to her ascension in the "palace of art." Using the Old Testament scene as a trope of the soul, Tennyson highlights both that soul's weakness—insofar as it depends solely on sensuality—and the inscrutability of "personality" as one of the soul's many features. The struggle of the soul in "The Palace of Art" to negotiate sensuality, sin, and guilt highlights the activity of

troping whereby various notions of the self come into focus as the soul relates to God and to the various (mostly destructive) features of herself.

While these early poems are valuable examples of the “self” and soul in Tennyson, the “processes of spiritual formation” which for me indicate a devotional aesthetic are most fully articulated by *In Memoriam*. And although later poems, like “The Passing of Arthur” in the *Idylls of the King* (1859) as well as “Crossing the Bar,” first published in *Demeter, and Other Poems* (1889), suggest a sense of spiritual accomplishment, *In Memoriam* represents Tennyson’s most extensive treatment of the complexities of faith in modern life. “Dowered with the modern consciousness that not only suffers but watches itself suffer,” explains Vida Scudder, “Tennyson [in *In Memoriam*] adds to his natural sorrow ‘the imaginative woe, / That loved to handle spiritual strife’ [85.53-55]. Furthermore, “[t]o see yourself as modern,” argues Isobel Armstrong, “is actually to define the contemporary self-consciously and this is simultaneously an act which historicises the modern” (*Victorian Poetry* 3). The faith and the processes of spiritual formation which emerge in the devotional portions of *In Memoriam* are self conscious, and they reflect Tennyson’s role in “an age immersed in anxious moral speculation” (Young 33). In *In Memoriam*, though, we see a “process of spiritual formation” that, through poetic structure and themes, articulates the fragmentation of identity effected by death and grief as well as the assertion of a spiritual subjectivity found in a “Strong Son of God” who is both Arthur Henry Hallam and God himself.

3.2 Tropes of the Soul: *In Memoriam* and Form

We know that Tennyson was experimenting with traditional English (that is, Latin-derived) verse forms as early as his 1830 volume, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, which “suggest[s] that [he] was trying to find a new basis for English poetry which would combine the old Anglo-Saxon emphasis on leading syllables and the normal emphasis of speech” (Tennyson *Six Tennyson Essays* 130).⁵⁹ He first uses “the metre of *In Memoriam*” in his 1833 volume⁶⁰—though only in a few poems (132-33)—which makes sense because he began the first drafts of texts he would include in *In Memoriam* in October of 1833, immediately following Arthur Henry Hallam’s death (Shatto and Shaw 8-9). As many critics point out, the “haphazard” composition of Tennyson’s elegies over the period of seventeen years (Tennyson *Six Tennyson Essays* 137) and beyond—he revised the poem extensively after its first publication in 1850—seems paradoxical in relationship to the controlled form of his stanzas (136).⁶¹

Another paradoxical feature of the poem’s form is its organization, which seems to encourage simultaneously the view that “each of the 131 sections is, in a sense, a poem complete in itself” as well as the view that “a single section is not really thus independent

⁵⁹ Although Coleridge did not like this experiment, and accused Tennyson of not having “any clear idea what metre was” (Tennyson *Six Tennyson Essays* 131), Charles Tennyson points out that the idea of combining Anglo-Saxon emphasis and “the normal emphasis of speech” in a new type of poetic meter “was taken up again thirty or forty years later by Robert Bridges and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and resulted in the evolution of Hopkins’s ‘sprung rhythm,’ which has so greatly influenced modern poetry” (130).

⁶⁰ Iambic tetrameter in arrangements of four-line segments (“stanza” in *In Memoriam* is typically used to designate the grouping of several segments under a numbered heading provided by Tennyson). The rhyme scheme is *ab ba*.

⁶¹ Also paradoxical is the tension between such a controlled form—the rhyme scheme and meter are sustained throughout the nearly 3000 lines—and Tennyson’s thematic emphasis on progress. As Christopher Ricks observes, “*In Memoriam* does not impose words for ideas; it does not much claim—in argument, as distinct from mood and feelings—to be going forward but rather is turning round. Indeed, the *In Memoriam* stanza (*abba*) is especially suited to turning round rather than going forward” (222)

of its predecessor and successor” (Bradley 23-24). The unstable relationship between stanzas contribute, in my view, to what Armstrong sees as “Lyell’s modes of ‘gradual change in the living creation,’” modes “negotiated in the movement of *In Memoriam* itself, which uses the myth of geology structurally as well as absorbing its language” (*Victorian Poetry* 253). According to Armstrong, this “geological model makes it possible to reconstruct continuities out of rupture itself, as the massive diachronic subsidence and shift of deposits from one era to another creates an ‘economy’ (Lyell’s word) which destroys in one place and repairs with the residues of a former age in another” (254). We see, as the most important example of these “continuities” created through “rupture” the significant relationship between the poem’s “Introductory Stanzas” and the rest of the text—an interaction in which the devotional scheme of the poem creates a gloss through which the rest of the elegy may be read.

The most important structural issues to consider in this exploration of Tennyson are the placement and role of *In Memoriam*’s Introductory Stanzas. Situated at the start of the text but written last, these stanzas comprise a complex devotional poem as well as the clearest example of devotional verse in the entire text.⁶² Set apart from the rest of *In Memoriam* not by genre—it is identical to all the *In Memoriam* stanzas in rhyme and metrical form—but rather by subject and audience, the Introductory Stanzas emphasize tropes of the soul that feature human identity defined by progress, knowledge, mortality, and a kinship with other humans. The three main portions of these Stanzas—lines 1-12, 13-32, and 33-44—are representative of the three main movements in *In Memoriam*

⁶² Although Tennyson wrote some of the poems he included in *In Memoriam* as early as 1833, he drafted the “Introductory stanzas” in March, 1849 for a “fair copy for the press” (Shatto and Shaw 5). A privately-circulated trial issue of *In Memoriam* appeared in March of 1850 (20), and the first edition of the poems were “published by [Edward] Moxon anonymously on 1 June 1850” (22). It went through three editions by August (23).

overall. By looking at these three portions in detail, we may see the ways in which Tennyson develops tropes of the soul as a significant formal feature of his text.

Lines 1-12 comprise what I see as the “dogma” of the elegy’s introduction: speaking in first person plural, Tennyson begins with what sounds like a traditional devotional poem or a hymn:

Strong Son of God, immortal Love,
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,
Believing where we cannot prove [...] (1-4)

Thinking of these lines as the first things readers encounter, it seems fitting to read them in the vein of “popular religious poetry,” as Marion Shaw suggests: “[i]n form, in imagery, and even in some of their declarations of faith and doubt, the lyrics of *In Memoriam* echo hymns sufficiently to exploit familiar devotional responses in their readers” (1) as well as to reveal their “field of force,” or “extra-poetical dimension in a whole world of Biblical and church authority and association lying behind their poems” (2). In these lines Tennyson draws on Old and New Testament passages as well as modern Victorian issues of faith versus scientific “proof”; and, as Shaw points out, he echoes the poetry of Charles Wesley (7). But where Shaw sees such uses of popular devotional forms as a tactic meant to “mask the uncertainty, secularism, and unorthodoxy of the poem” (8), I see in these lines and in the eight lines that follow the beginning of an extended reflection about the relationship between lively faith and rigorous doubt in Victorian Christianity: “Thine are the orbs of light and shade,” says the speaker (5), who affirms also that God “madest Death” (7) even while that same God “wilt not leave us in the dust” (9). Working through fundamental ideas about God’s role in the universe and in the life of humankind, the opening lines of *In Memoriam* sound a bit like the

“vacillating state” of the poetic speaker in “Supposed Confessions of a Second-Rate Sensitive Mind”: he wants to believe, as Christianity tells him, that God is “just” (12) but God’s hiddenness and the power of “Death” eclipse that certainty.

The speaker’s response to such uncertainty develops in lines 13-32, which reveal what Alan G. Hill explains as the “precedence” of faith “over institutions” (29). While some critics such as George Lee, H. N. Fairchild, and T.S. Eliot have found many theological weaknesses in Tennyson’s broad-minded approach to Christian ideas, I do not seek to situate him in relationship to either Christian orthodoxy or liberalism. Rather, I see his treatment of Christian issues in *In Memoriam* as part of his effort to “familiarize his elegiac material” (Shaw 5) and make it appealing to a broad audience who by 1850 was well-acquainted with the use of religious controversy in literature.

Moving away from the dogma of God-as-creator, which the speaker uneasily maintains, Tennyson develops in lines 13-32 a discussion of human knowledge and will. Crafting as a trope of the soul the relation between a God who “seemest human and divine” (13) and humans whose “wills” are God’s, whose “little systems” fall short, and whose “knowledge is of things we see” (15, 17, 22), Tennyson creates a dialectic of faith and doubt that encourages what Hallam Tennyson calls “faith beyond the forms of faith” (311). Calling into question the twelve opening lines of the poem, lines 13-32 undermine conventional “forms of faith” which are not willing to account for “the mind and soul” (27) of those who “have but faith” because they “cannot know” (21)—those who foolishly “bear thy [God’s] light” (32) as the “beam in darkness” (24) of their own ignorance. According to Hallam Tennyson, the poet believed in an “All-loving God who

has revealed Himself through the human attribute of the highest self-sacrificing love”

(311). Moreover, he

allow[ed] that God is unknowable in “his whole world-self, and all in all,” and that therefore there was some force in the objection made by some people to the word “Personality,” as being “anthropomorphic,” and that perhaps “Self-consciousness” or “Mind” might be clearer to them: but at the same time he insisted that, although “man is like a thing of nought” in the “boundless plan,” our highest view of God must be more or less anthropomorphic: and that “Personality,” as far as our intelligence goes, is the widest definition and includes “Mind,” “Self-consciousness,” “Will,” “Love,” and other attributes of the Real, the Supreme, “the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth Eternity Whose name is Holy.” (312)

Much like Barrett Browning’s search for the right devotional language to “shape images of incarnate spirits,” Tennyson’s catalogue of definitions listed above—along with the middle verses of *In Memoriam*’s Introductory Stanzas—represents an assertion of authority, literary and religious, at the same time that it claims humility as a creature of “nought” before a God who is “unknowable.” Yet in the end that God becomes knowable through his self-revelation, namely his love. This love is typically embodied by Christ and features the instability of self via “self-sacrifice” even as it offers a stable kind of selfhood: he is, after all, “the Real, the Supreme.” In lines 13-32 of the Introductory Stanzas, Tennyson’s readers are acquainted with the complex relationship between “the Real, the Supreme” and the human self. In the lines that follow, which conclude the first portion of *In Memoriam*, we see the interaction between the human and divine depicted more clearly in tropes of the soul that feature human relationships.

Although, as Aiden Day argues, “Tennyson’s sympathies are with a way of thinking that internalises spiritual impulse within the world and, most important, within the human mind” (114), the final thirteen lines of the Introductory Stanzas display not a turning away from, but an association between, the external world and an internalized

“spiritual impulse.” Beginning all three final stanzas with the imploring word “Forgive,” Tennyson investigates his “worth” as defined by human “merit” (34, 36), his “grief” as defined by his friend’s absence (37), and his “cries” as defined by their lack of “wisdom” (41, 44). In this section he seems at first to internalize his thoughts by moving from first-person plural to first-person singular voice: after meditating on what “We are” in relation to God’s “light” (29, 32), he shapes what sounds like a private prayer of confession. However, if we consider (following Bradley’s lead) lines 37-40 in association with Stanza 85 (83), we see how the movement toward the “I” as well as towards “Thy creature” opens out the relation between self and other:

Whatever way my days decline,
 I felt and feel, tho’ left alone,
 His being working in mine own,
 The footsteps of his life in mine;

A life with all the Muses deck’d
 With gifts of grace, that might express
 All-comprehensive tenderness,
 All-subtilising intellect:

And so may passion hath not swerved
 To works of weakness, but I find
 An image comforting the mind,
 And in my grief a strength reserved.

Likewise the imaginative woe,
 That loved to handle spiritual strife,
 Diffused the shock thro’ all my life
 But in the present broke the blow.

My pulses therefore beat again
 For other friends that once I met
 Nor can it suit me to forget
 The mighty hopes that make us men. (41-60)

Like the “condition of crisis” Armstrong describes as a characteristic of modern Victorianism, the “spiritual strife” enjoyed (literally, “loved”) by the speaker via

“imaginative woe” suggests a version of the self that relates to a human Other (who in the singular is Hallam and in the plural is “other friends”) through spiritual crisis. In Stanza 85 we see the ways in which Hallam set a precedent for Tennyson (“The footsteps of his life in mine”): his capacity for writing (“Muses”), “tenderness,” and intellectual effort taught Tennyson how to use the faith/doubt dialectic productively. The “spiritual strife” described in this stanza and suggested in lines 37-40 in the Introductory Stanzas produces “an image comforting the mind” only insofar as that strife is *not* resolved (rather, he “love[s] to handle” it) but rather processed through the “being” (43) of his friend.

Thus the “wild and wandering cries” of line 40 in the Introductory Stanzas need forgiveness insofar as they voice the “inner trouble” of “[a] spectral doubt” (41.18-19) without considering also those “delights” experienced by “one that loves but knows not,” who “reaps / A truth from one that loves and knows” (42.9, 11-12). As the Introductory Stanzas demonstrate, that “one” may be both a divine and human Other who relates to the human self via tropes of the soul. Moreover, that “one” encourages through those tropes a kind of spiritual progress rooted in the dialectic between “faith” and the doubt which says “we cannot know” (21). In the final portion of the Introductory Stanzas, when the speaker asks God to “make me wise,” he reminds readers of his own self-conscious engagement with faith and doubt, which through the form of the eleven stanzas upset the progress of “little systems” and reveal the deeper spiritual progress afforded by a faith/doubt dialectic. Thus he reveals his Victorian concerns while shaping a devotional aesthetic that will serve as one important interpretive method for the longer text that follows.

As H. N. Fairchild argues, “The concretizing and personalizing of those unspeakable truths which lie ‘deep seated in our mystic frame’ might be mere myth-making,” in Tennyson, “but there was much to be said for myths on grounds both ethical and aesthetic. Tennyson knew the power of images. Although he felt superior to all sects and creeds, he was never more sincere than when he said, ‘I dread the losing hold of forms’ (119). Moreover, Fairchild suggests that Tennyson’s commitment to “forms” encouraged his view of Christ as “*the son of Man,*” without whom the morals of Christianity “would become cold” (Qtd. in Fairchild 120). Although “Jesus was never a reproach and a crisis and a judgment, but simply a model of human conduct not very clearly distinguishable from Arthur Hallam” for Tennyson, the poet grounded his religious poetics in the figure of Christ as the embodiment of love, the form of “the progressive development of mankind” (Fairchild 121). Reading Tennyson’s own statement about forms from a variety of angles, we may see his commitment to form as an important aspect of his elegy; we may also read “hold of forms” as something Tennyson sees as “losing” (i.e. waning) and by which he is encouraged: for “unspeakable truths” to be uttered, forms may need to be lost. And yet Tennyson suggests tropes of the soul in the devotional processes of spiritual formation as one of the still-useful forms, forms that may not always “fail in truth” (43) insofar as they embody the conduct of Arthur Hallam and “the progressive development of mankind.”

3.3 Spiritual Formation and Progress: The Faith/Doubt Dialectic

The relationships made clear in Tennyson’s tropes of the soul, first in the Introductory Stanzas and then in the body of *In Memoriam*, illuminate the role of progress as the positive result of the faith/doubt dialectic. Using a non-linear poetic form,

Tennyson disrupts the “little systems” of mechanized, scientific, rational reality, even while he uses crucial scientific terminology and concepts to underscore his fascination with such “systems” and the progress they create. Developing his vision of Hallam through the faith/doubt dialectic, Tennyson creates a “noble type [...] who lives in God” and who moves beyond the idea of “type” in the biblical (typological) or evolutionary (variety) sense even while it draws strength from both principles. Although Michael Tomko contends, in his valuable and textured discussion of *In Memoriam* and Lyell’s *Principles of Geology*, that in the poem a “spiritualized inner life founded on the impassible barrier of soul and body, pearl and shell, has replaced any external basis of religion” (127), I assert that the “barrier” between the soul and body in Tennyson’s text is not impregnable. The devotional aesthetic in *In Memoriam* relates the human soul to the “body” of the text as well as the “body” of material realities the text engages. Rendered in a devotional form, the soul of *In Memoriam* emerges as both “I” and “We” in the text’s “processes of spiritual formation,” bringing into the foreground the means by which the poem may speak a language “no man understands” in its efforts to depict that soul’s relation with the divine. This incomprehensible devotional language—like Barrett Browning’s daring speech and Rossetti’s poetics of secrecy—drives the poem’s idea of progress, insofar as “progress” is defined not by Victorian conventions of industry or technology but rather by the human capacity to embrace (in a very Keatsian way) the “Power in darkness” (124.4) that is both divine and human.

Just as the Introductory Stanzas highlight a lack of understanding in the poem’s speaker through terms like “seemest”/“seem’d” (13, 33) and lines such as “We have but faith: we cannot know” (21), “Forgive these wild and wandering cries” (41), and

“Believing where we cannot prove” (4), other stanzas in *In Memoriam* feature inconclusive or fractured knowledge as a key aspect of the modern human “self.” It is through this broken-down knowledge that we see the faith/doubt dialectic emerge in several key places in the text. For example, Stanza 96, which seems to address Emily Sellwood directly, surveys the positive qualities of faith, doubt, and perplexity all at once:

You say, but with no touch of scorn,
 Sweet-hearted, you, whose light-blue eyes
 Are tender over drowning flies,
You tell me Doubt is devil-born.

I know not: one indeed I knew
 In many a subtle question versed,
 Who touch'd a jarring lyre at first,
But ever strove to make it true:

Perplext in faith, but pure in deeds,
 At last he beat his music out.
 There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.

He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,
 He would not make his judgment blind,
 He faced the specters of the mind
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;
 And Power was with him in the night,
 Which makes the darkness and the light,
And dwells not in the light alone,

But in the darkness and the cloud,
 As over Sinai's peaks of old [...] (1-22),

Drawing together vital elements from the Introductory Stanzas, Tennyson reveals the dogmatic position of faith in Emily's views (“You tell me doubt is Devil-born”) and, by contrast, the tropes of the soul embodied in Arthur Hallam's approach to faith. In the latter case, Tennyson uses Hallam as an Old Testament type (Moses, whose antitype was

Christ) in a trope that relates the self who is “Perplexed in faith” but persistent with the divine Other who is powerful and hidden. This portrait of faith, so to speak, which is informed by doubt, demonstrates Emily’s Christianity to be more conventional than his own: “There lives more faith in honest doubt, / Believe me, than in half the creeds.” And yet it is the lack of knowledge which draws the speaker into a relationship with both Emily and Hallam: Emily depicts the modern retrenchment of religious authority in the face of challenge, and Hallam demonstrates the graceful though tricky navigation of that challenge.

Nevertheless, as skillful as Hallam may be in leading the speaker through perplexities of faith and doubt, Tennyson finds a variety of ways to depict the “specters of the mind”; and this variety adds more texture to the “self” in its relation to the divine other. In a curious, Blakean stanza mid-way through *In Memoriam*, Tennyson suggests an extremely close relation between the self and God through a trope of the soul that places the self in the role of the suffering Christ who navigates the “scorn” of the shallow modern world:

I dream’d there would be Spring no more,
That Nature’s ancient power was lost:
The streets were black with smoke and frost,
They chattered trifles at the door:

I wandered from the noisy town,
I found a wood with thorny boughs:
I took the thorns to bind my brows,
I wore them like a civic crown:

I met with scoffs, I met with scorns
From youth and babe and hoary hairs:
They called me in the public squares
The fool that wears a crown of thorns:

They called me fool, they called me child:
I found an angel of the night;
His voice was low, the look was bright;
He looked upon my crown and smiled:

He reached the glory of a hand,
That seemed to touch it into leaf:
The voice was not the voice of grief,
The words were hard to understand. (69.1-20)

Set between a stanza about the relationship between sleep and death (68.1-4) and a stanza that expresses anxiety over the speaker's inability to remember/discern the facial features of a lost loved one (70.1-4, 13-16), Stanza 69 seems like an anxiety dream, so to speak, in which the dreamer suffers "scorns" and finds the enlightenment he seeks just out of reach. Yet the Wordsworthian image of the self as appreciative of "Nature's ancient power" and disgusted by its loss among the "black," smoky "streets of a town filled with trivial chatterers suggests an alienation from modern life that is revealed, in reality, to be a rejection from what Tennyson sees as true modern progress. In this stanza, the trope of the soul takes shape as the "I" of the poem transforms into a Christ figure, thus associating the self whose identity is defined against industrial, urban life with a divine Other. In such "divine form," this self is mocked as Christ was mocked prior to his crucifixion—"They called me fool, they calle'd me child" (13)—but unlike Christ, the self in this poem finds "an angel of the night" who seems to understand the self's identity ("He look'd upon my crown and smiled") even while, as an angel, he is incomprehensible to that self ("The words were hard to understand"). When viewed in relationship with the Introductory Stanzas and with Stanza 96 (among others), we see that this move to incomprehension marks the progress of the poem: the trope of the soul relates the self of industrial society with a divine Other who is both rejected by that society and who moves

in the hard-to-understand realm of faith. Thus the “process of spiritual formation” evidenced by the devotional aesthetic at work in this stanza involves the dialectic between faith and confusion (if not exactly doubt) which shows true progress by illustrating its opposite.

Thus Tennyson can argue “Sweet soul, do with me as thou wilt; / I lull a fancy trouble-tost” (65.1-2), knowing that “My darkened ways / Shall ring with music all the same” (77.14-15), even while “modern rhyme” (including his own) may eventually “bind a book” or “line a box” (6) rather than achieving “fame” for its author (15). And thus he may exhort his reader to

Contemplate all this work of Time,
The giant labouring in his youth:
Nor dream of human love and truth,
As dying Nature’s earth and lime;

But trust that those we call the dead
Are breathers of an ampler day
For ever nobler ends. (118.1-7)

In this stanza, one of the most “geological” of the poem, Tennyson seems to encourage an understanding of scientific evolution that believes in the ultimate human transcendence of evolutionary processes: “Move upward,” the final two lines command, “working out the beast / And let the ape and tiger die” (118.27-28). This assertion seems in direct opposition to some of the most famous stanzas in the poem, 54-56, which express in unequivocal terms the problem of religious faith in the context of evolutionary progress: Oh yet we trust that somehow good / Will be the final goal of ill [...],” begins Stanza 54, “That not a worm is cloven in vain,” and that though “we know not anything; / I can but trust that good shall fall (1-2, 9, 13-14); and yet, the speaker says, “but what am I? / An infant crying in the night / An infant crying for the light: And with no language

but a cry” (17-20). In the spirit of that darkness, the speaker in Stanza 55 exposes his weakness in a way that seems both meek and assertive:

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
Upon the great world’s altar-stairs
That slope thro’ darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
And faintly trust the larger hope. (13-20)

The intensity of doubt in these lines is, as Eliot suggests, larger than any faith—but only for a short time. While Stanza 56 spurns the Christian idea that Nature, like God, is “careful of the type” (1), and encourages resignation—“What hope of answer, or redress? / Behind the veil, behind the veil” (27-28)—Stanzas 69 and 96 point to a vigorous, energetic response to faith and doubt that accounts for both. Moreover, that response locates, in the devotional aesthetics of the text, a space for tropes of the soul which embody the spiritual progress that comes of loving the “beauty” of “Knowledge” but loving “Wisdom” more: “For she is earthly of the mind, / But Wisdom heavenly of the soul” (114.21-22). In this way, the Introductory Stanzas serve both knowledge and wisdom through the dialectic of faith and doubt:

We have but faith: we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow. (Intro. Stanzas 21-24)

Aiden Day argues in *Tennyson’s Skepticism* that such darkness is ultimately illuminated in the poem:

In Memoriam asserts finally that it has successfully countered all the dubieties voiced in the course of the poem. As the poet intuits the spiritual reality of the dead Hallam, so he achieves his own psychic and spiritual

regeneration, engaging once more the spiritual reality that informs his own and Hallam's being. Though *In Memoriam* is soaked in nostalgia, the speaker of the poem is not presented, at the last, as caught in a state of regret. (130)

While I do not agree with Eliot that *In Memoriam* is ultimately a poem of "religious despair," I cannot—in view of the poem's non-linear form and its devotional tropes of the soul, which destabilize the "self" through the faith/doubt dialectic—concur with Day that *In Memoriam* conquers "all the dubieties voice in the course of the poem." Always working simultaneously from positions of spiritual darkness and light, the poem's speaker underscores the "problem of language" even as he wields devotional speech: ultimately, devotional experience (like the experience of grief, or joy) is unutterable—it is secret—and yet the poem embodies that experience in such a way as to relate that secret to others and to encourage spiritual modernity.

As we will see in the next chapter, the role of faith and devotional poetics can tend toward what is unseen—what is secret. In her development of a poetics of secrecy, Christina Rossetti reveals the power of devotional aesthetics in relation to social injustice; and in doing so she echoes the sentiments of Arthur Henry Hallam. In his last letter to Alfred Tennyson, he included six lines about the soul that highlight the dialectic of faith and doubt and feature the relationship between the striving self and the "body" of God as the trope of the soul. In this trope, the text conveys the "pure immediacy" of the soul's questionings and the indeterminate response to those questions offered by the "secret truth" of the "body of the Infinite God":

I do but mock me with the questionings.
Dark, dark, irrecoverably dark
Is the soul's eye; yet how it strives and battles
Through the impenetrable gloom to fix
That master light, the secret truth of things,

Which is the body of the Infinite God. (Qtd. in Tennyson *Memoir* 104)

Like the body of Tennyson's text, Hallam's poem creates a dialectic of faith and doubt that underscores the form of devotion: modern in its self-consciousness ("I do but mock me") and in its efforts to "fix / That master light" (with the term "fix" as the crucial word), Hallam's brief lines demonstrate a trope of the soul that engages a devotional aesthetic by relating the "self" to a God who is simultaneously knowable and unknowable. Holding in tension his faith and knowledge, Tennyson accomplishes a similar purpose in *In Memoriam*, showing in the devotional space of the text a textured Victorian response to the most pressing issues of his day.

Chapter 4

“A hiding-place for thee”: Christina Rossetti and the Power of Secrets

Let us say Good-bye for this life but that is not really for long; let me thank you for your friendship which is precious to me, let me beg your prayers for a poor sinful woman who has dared to speak to others and is herself what *God* knows her to be.

—Christina Rossetti to Frederic James Shields, September, 1894, two months before her death (*Letters* 4.389)

4.1 Introduction

When Christina Rossetti speaks of secrets, everyone listens. Readers are fascinated by the methods of concealment used by this deeply religious poet, though they do not agree about what the secrets reveal. Some are certain that Rossetti’s emphasis on secrecy belies personal experiences—a broken heart, a sexual trauma—that she sought to conceal behind what her brother William Michael calls her “one serious flaw”: her “over-scrupulous” nature (lxvii).⁶³ Such perspectives—like the impulse to read Rossetti’s texts biographically—reveal critics’ tendencies to view women’s poetry as rooted in subjective

⁶³ Among her biographers, Jan Marsh, suggests that Rossetti may have been abused sexually by her father (see Marsh 258-64); Lona Mosk Packer, offers Rossetti’s “love affair” with William Bell Scott is something she conceals (see Packer, Chapter 4); and her brother William Michael, claims that Rossetti “was extremely reticent in all matters in which her affections were deeply engaged” (“Memoir” liii). In his view, her poems participate in this “reticence”: for example, he states that “[i]t is indisputable that the real veritable speaker” in Rossetti’s sonnet sequence *Monna Innominata* “is Christina herself, giving expression for her love for Charles Cayley,” an expression she masks in the preface to the sequence (qtd. in *Flowers* 954). Cayley proposed to—and was refused by—Rossetti in 1866.

experience rather than an “objective,” intellectual, artistic mastery of poetic form and ideas. Recent critics of Rossetti work against this type of reading by finding her emphasis on secrecy subversive: as Angela Leighton suggests, Rossetti’s “aesthetics of secrecy, self-containment, and caprice” enables “at the very heart of this poet’s emotional and religious consolations, a vague, obsessional dreamland of uncertainty and delay” (376), a place “where doubt shadows faith” (375). However, approaches to Rossetti’s texts that solely feature notions of personal repression or artistic playfulness offer a reductive view of the complicated discourse of secrecy that her poems engage, especially insofar as such approaches focus on the uncertain and “over-scrupulous” aspects of her faith. To neglect the part her devotional poems and her poems about fallen women play in her discourse of secrecy is to overlook significant features of that textured discourse.

Taken together, Rossetti’s devotional and fallen women poems engage secrecy and hiddenness in ways that reveal the transformative power of secrets in Victorian social discourse. In particular, her verses that address fallen women depict secrecy as ambivalent, capable of enforcing painful social stigmas and also empowering the female self as an agent in her own negotiations of public and private life. In Victorian England, a “fallen woman” had lost her power to control and negotiate the influence of her private acts on her public persona. Rossetti’s poems investigate ways in which that power might be restored, though not necessarily in its original form. For Rossetti, the public reputation of a devotional “self” is not isolated from spiritual health; and, according to the Christian theology she embraced, all humans –without exception—are fallen beings. Moreover, restoration of personhood—the kind of redemption Rossetti demonstrates in “Goblin Market,” when one sister saves another—is contingent on that fallenness. Thus

the value of humans (male and female) in public and private space alike has very little to do with social respectability; and, informed by this view, Rossetti's poems evaluate and critique Victorian norms of women's fallenness, working to "identify self *with* the fallen woman rather than *against* her; [and to] encounter the Other rather than use her" (Watt 397). While emphasizing a complicated theme of secrecy throughout her volumes, Rossetti works in her poems to create tropes of the soul in which the "self" falls and is redeemed in a spiritual sense, and in which the moral and physical fallenness of a female "self," and the "social ostracism" which follows such a fall, "generates social critique rather than self-abasement or violence" (Eberle 4). Thus her devotional texts and fallen women poems may be read in conversation with each other, linked through ideas of fallenness, through the hiddenness and secrecy that accompany both spiritual health and moral degradation, and through a rigorous resistance to that degradation in Victorian public life. In speaking for themselves, and by embodying the qualities of the devotional "self," Rossetti's fallen women critique the cruel manner in which they are forced into social exile; and they affirm the renovated power of voice and selfhood that accompanies spiritual regeneration.

4.2 "There's No Friend Like a Sister": Fallen Women and Their Advocates

Perhaps more an idea than a real person, the nineteenth-century fallen woman appears in many forms. In Victorian society, as Deborah Logan observes, a strict social hierarchy that placed "[a]ngels in the house, elevated by their chaste morality" at "the topmost position" (6) enforced a dichotomous view of fallen women that situated the "madonna" and the "harlot" at opposite poles of female sexuality (6-7). This polarity discouraged "such notions as degrees of fallenness or a hierarchy of fallen behaviors and,

by association, the possibility for redemption and social integration” (Logan 7). By refusing to recognize shades of fallenness as well as the complex relationship between women’s subjectivities and their sexual experiences, strict notions of morality maintained the power to excommunicate a woman for her deviancy: she was cast out of a community and the decision—like damnation—was irrevocable. Yet Victorian literary discourse did not always comply with strict moral codes. To be sure, fallen woman characters in Victorian literature often seem complicit with the madonna-harlot dichotomy: Thackeray’s *Becky Sharpe* demonstrates the effects of a degraded life; Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* reveals the virtue of a woman who resists such a life; and Barrett-Browning’s *Marion Ehrle* exemplifies the means by which such a life might be helped through benevolent reform efforts. Yet, as George Watt emphasizes in his review of Amanda Anderson’s *Tainted Souls, Painted Faces*, “the limitations of sympathy itself and the complex fears that can lurk beneath compassion” reveal the dilemma of reformist discourse (396):

Behind Dickens’s sympathetic visage lie three threatening notions: one on the power of environment to determine character; another on the aberrant self-consciousness of the fallen woman that compounds her self-condemnation and isolation; and the third, the most interesting of all, on the manner in which stories, once told, shape the tellers. *David Copperfield* ingests these fears: by the foul Thames, the fallen Martha is described as ‘if she were part of the refuse it had cast out’; the story of Annie Strong (though false) becomes true in the telling; and David Copperfield continually endeavors to escape from the obscenity of telling his own story. (396)

However, many writers (conservative and freethinking alike) challenged black-and-white thinking about fallen women by moving away from conventional ideas of fallenness through an emphasis on the ambiguous areas of human experience. In particular, the “polarization” effected by “the rigidity of acceptable sexual standards,” Logan argues, is

one that “Victorian writers repeatedly prove is an unrealistic fiction” (7). Therefore, although the nineteenth-century prostitute—the “harlot” who embodies the Victorians’ so-called Great Social Evil—epitomizes fallen womanhood according to conventional Victorian middle-class morality, Victorian writers demonstrate that the fallen woman was much more polymorphous: she could be a rape victim, an otherwise virtuous woman acting on the promise of marriage (and thus outside the sex trade altogether), an unwed mother from any social class, or a woman who was perceived by others as fallen because of her class status, her social network, her behavior, or her dress.⁶⁴

Yet writers’ various representations of fallen womanhood had more to counter than a simple, strict moral standard that distinguished pure maidens from brazen hussies. The idea of fallenness firmly controlled women’s negotiations of public and private experience, and worked in insidious ways to commingle class status, racial difference, and gender expectations with ideas about sexual experience. “The prominence of the period’s middle-class sexual ideology,” explains Logan,

defined in terms of angels, madonnas, and magdalens, even when its inadequacy to experience was evident, manifests itself in a powerful code of ethics that categorizes deviancy in any form (this includes all women of other classes and races) as fallenness. Fallen characters and the issues they raise function as what W. R. Greg deems “anomalies,” and what Mary Poovey calls “border cases,” exceptions, in other words, to what is presented as a seamless ideological norm. (9)

Thus, paradoxically, the Victorian fallen woman is everywhere present and everywhere avoided. While she might often be characterized symbolically as either madonna or a

⁶⁴ As Logan notes, even “the ‘harlot’ component of the madonna-harlot equation cannot so easily be reduced to a generic category. This is most dramatically demonstrated by spinsters, who are culturally rejected as nonreproductive women, though it seems ludicrous to relate them, as many did, with harlots. Nor can seduced or raped women ([Gaskell’s] Ruth, [Barrett-Browning’s] Marion) be compared with the prostituted Lizzie Leigh or Esther, who in turn complicate the raucous prostitute stereotype by turning to this occupation solely for the purpose of feeding starving children” (8).

harlot, social discourse worked against her in a much more complicated way: any woman (and especially one from the lower classes or in the racial minority) could fall or was threatened with fallenness at every intersection between her own experience and the “ideological norm.” Thus the young woman who narrates her own shameful story as the illegitimate child of a high-born “Lady” in Rossetti’s “The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children” clearly presents her situation as a double-bind. “I was sent away,” she explains to us, “That none might spy the truth” (28-9) of her origins; and, brought up by a nurse, she experiences social alienation from “the village boys and girls” who think her “proud” because she “found so little to say” to them (33-5). Yet when she discovers that her mother is “My Lady at the Hall,” with “the oldest name / In all the neighbourhood” (59, 61-2), who yet will not reveal her identity to her daughter because of shame, the young woman finds herself in social exile again: living with her mother at the Hall, she experiences either “women” who “speak and stare,” feigning concern for the sake of gossip or women who ignore her outright (334-42). When men visit, she explains,

My lady seems to fear
Some downright dreadful evil,
And makes me keep my room
As closely as she can:
So I hate when people come,
It is so troublesome. (346-51)

Not a fallen woman herself, the speaker in Rossetti’s poem is one whose social exile is assured by her mother’s fallenness. In a later portion of the chapter we shall see the transformative power that emerges from secrecy in this text; yet even a cursory reading of Rossetti’s poem reveals the complicated ways in which “deviancy in any form” is equated with “fallenness.” For this young woman, the intersection between public and private life results in alienation and shame.

A key figure who mediates this intersection—a person whose concern for fallen women as “border cases” (qtd in Logan 20) instead of social pariahs challenges the “ideological norm”—is the sister-advocate, the woman who advocates on behalf of a fallen woman, drawing her back from exile and encouraging redemption in the moral and social sense (while possibly risking her own reputation). We shall understand presently the significance of sisterhood in homes for fallen women, or penitentiaries, which in Rossetti’s day were reorganized in order to promote a model of sisterly guidance rather than strict vigilance by matron-guards. Rossetti’s own volunteer work in the penitentiary movement suggests a link between the ideology of sisterhood in Victorian reform movements and Rossetti’s poetic representations of fallen womanhood. In “Goblin Market,” for example, sensual imagery, ideas of economic exploitation, gender difference, and Eucharistic imagery transform the text’s final lines (which on first glance read like a facile expression of cheery sisterhood) into a mission statement for home for fallen women:

For there is no friend like a sister
In calm or stormy weather;
To cheer one on the tedious way,
To fetch one if one goes astray,
To lift one if one totters down,
To strengthen whilst one stands. (563-67)

For Antony Harrison, this “moral tag” at the poem’s end

reminds us of Coleridge’s similarly understated and ironic conclusion to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a poem that parallels Rossetti’s in its narrative treatment of the experience of fall and redemption, but also in its creation of a fantasy world that focuses the reader’s attention more powerfully on the aesthetic and psychological experience the poem generates than on the moral precepts it is intended to convey. (115)

Yet to separate the “intended” moral message from the “aesthetic and psychological experience” is to miss the power of the sister-advocate, the mediator capable of helping fallen women to negotiate the public and private spaces that have been circumscribed for them by the “ideological norm.” Rossetti’s depiction of this advocate helps us understand her contemporaries’ views of fallen womanhood. Moreover, it helps us see the ways in which Rossetti, as a writer and volunteer at the Highgate Penitentiary for fallen women, exposes the “unrealistic fiction” of the madonna-harlot dichotomy and rejects the categorization of “border cases” as outcasts. In particular, Rossetti disrupts the “ideological norm” by allowing devotional subjectivity and women’s subjectivity to inform one another. Viewed through her theological lens, fallenness is a universal experience; definitions of fallenness are no longer controlled by social hierarchies; and those who level the charge of “deviancy” against others no longer have the power of excommunication.⁶⁵

The interesting aspect, for me, about the Victorian fallen woman is that she existed in an age so intent on reforming her—even while she was an “unregenerate” figure. Consistently portrayed in paradoxical terms, the fallen woman—in whatever form she appeared—was embraced zealously as a Victorian cause, and yet was deemed a corrupt(ing) influence capable of tainting society by threatening the virtue of all who came in contact with her, but especially the virtue of other women. Moreover, her first fall made her vulnerable to successive falls that, ultimately, would lead to her total ruin

⁶⁵ In arguing for Rossetti’s reshaping of fallenness, I do not think that her discourse wholly “innocent” in the sense that her theological perspective shielded her from implications in social inequalities. I am not naïve about discrepancies between ideals and practice, even though I do not think Rossetti worked from a position of elitism. As Logan notes, while many authors of “social-problem literature seem sincerely motivated to give—not appropriate—voice to those unable to articulate for themselves,” such writers “did so from a superior socioeconomic perspective, with the inevitable (though probably unintentional) result that marginalized groups were objectified in terms often irrelevant to their class” (10).

and (most likely) her death. The inevitability of a fallen woman's repeated falls and her capacity to appear in so many forms have a historical precedent that dates before the Victorian Age. Roxane Eberle argues that in the late eighteenth century,

[i]n response to romances structured by the conventional narrative of courtship and marriage, radical women writers turn toward yet another highly ritualized 'heroine's text': 'the harlot's progress.' The narrative of the 'harlot' or 'fallen woman' presents itself as an attractive rhetorical tool for early feminists precisely because of its seemingly inevitable trajectory as well as its paradoxical ability to allow for variation. William Hogarth's 1731 engraved series, entitled 'The Harlot's Progress', succinctly depicts the dominant narrative of female transgression throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first plate depicts the arrival of a country girl, Mary "Moll" Hackabout, who immediately falls prey to a procuress [...] Subsequent images represent her sinking into ever-increasing degredation and vice until she dies from a venereal disease [...] Hogarth's series captures the fundamental textual elements of the prototypical "harlot's story": the loss of virginity (and/or reputation), shame and exile from respectable society, and ultimately death. (4)

According to Eberle, radical women writers on the eve of the nineteenth century intervene in this narrative of fallenness by offering alternatives to the virtuous, domestic woman "of the conduct book and domestic novel" (4). In contrast to a conventional view of women's morality, "women authors write into being a virtuous heroine who has been 'robbed' of her chastity by men uninterested in the marriage contract" (4). Such women may not avoid "aggressive masculine desire but [their] subsequent social ostracism generates social critique rather than self-abasement or violence" (4). Taken together with the nineteenth-century writers who expose the "unrealistic fiction" of rigid sexual ideologies, the eighteenth-century thinkers who foreground social critique as a response to the social ostracism of the fallen woman suggest a strain in literary discourse that developed throughout the Victorian Age. Part of this strain, Rossetti's texts adopt an approach that resists social ostracism and challenges inflexible norms by recasting

fallenness altogether. Moreover, Rossetti's own work among fallen women positions her in the complicated role as an earnest Victorian reformer who challenges the assumptions behind reform.

While I resist a solely biographical reading of her texts, I consider Rossetti's work among fallen women at Highgate Penitentiary a significant context for her fallen women and devotional poems, especially insofar as both types of verse address issues of secrecy. It is well known that Christina Rossetti had begun volunteer work at a home for fallen women at least by 1859, though it is difficult to discern exactly the nature of her work. As D'Amico notes, the women at Highgate were prohibited from sharing any details of their previous lives with the volunteers (107). Moreover, Rossetti herself mentions her connections with Highgate only sparingly⁶⁶ and without providing specific details of the institution, the women she met, or the guiding ideologies whereby "fallen" women were reclaimed for "respectable" society.⁶⁷ Yet she first mentions Highgate in her letters—in August of 1859 she says she missed seeing a visitor in London because she "was away almost the whole time at Highgate" (125)—during a period in which her poetry distinctly engages fallen womanhood as a theme and image. As D'Amico observes, it is "during the 1850-1870 period" that "Rossetti...writes her fallen woman ballads, in which she

⁶⁶ In the first volume of her letters edited by Antony Harrison, which covers the years 1843-73, Rossetti only refers to Highgate in four pieces of correspondence. Her references are brief and informational, noting a few stays (or forthcoming stays) at the institution and a "general meeting" meant for raising funds (see pgs. 125 and note, 128, 132, and 150). D'Amico also notes that "[t]hus far, no biographer has yet identified precisely what Rossetti did [at Highgate]" (107).

⁶⁷ Highgate "was established as the deed reads, 'for the reception and reformation of penitent fallen women with a view to their ultimate establishment in some respectable calling'" (D'Amico 104). For more information on the "Church Penitentiary Association," which supported the founding of homes like Highgate, see D'Amico, pg. 104. A description of Highgate's basic structure is as follows: "After a stay of not more than two years, during which time the women received training in needlework, laundry, cleaning, and kitchen work, the penitents left the home and often went into domestic service, the penitentiary having found them what the annual reports refer to as 'good situations.' In other words, proper middle class families did hire these reformed prostitutes" (105).

questions the wife's dominant position in the Victorian female hierarchy by blurring distinctions between pure and fallen" (67). Also during this time, Rossetti publishes *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), the title text of which continues to enjoy widespread critical acclaim. Set in the context of Rossetti's work at Highgate, and appearing at the start of two decades in which poems about fallen women comprise a significant portion of her volumes (including *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, published in 1866, as well as *A Pageant and Other Poems*, published in 1881), "Goblin Market" is her best-known "fallen woman text," a fantastical narrative poem about the fall and redemption of one sister through the self-sacrificial work of another.

The paradigm of the salvific sister is, as D'Amico recounts, a central feature of Rossetti's poem as well as the Victorian penitentiary movement, through which institutions like Highgate were established in order to rehabilitate, with the aid of religious influence, women whose sexual experiences marked them as social outcasts (106). God's saving grace for these women would come from "sisters" dedicated to showing such outcasts the way to salvation. The Rev. John Oliver, who became warden of Highgate in 1856, suggests that reclamation work offered by volunteers might

by sympathy, by cautious discipline, by affectionate watchfulness...teach [the fallen women] to hate what has been pleasant to them, and to love what they have despised, that so after a while they may go forth again into the world and be able to serve amid the ordinary temptations of life, the merciful Saviour whom they have learnt to serve and love in retirement. (qtd. in Marsh 220)

Specifically—and significantly for Rossetti—the idea of "sister" rather than "matron" as key to women's reform was overtaking the ideology of the penitentiary movement:

One of the major points stressed by Revs. John Armstrong and Thomas Carter, two prominent figures in the early stages of the penitentiary movement, was that the old system of caring for the penitent with a paid

matron and a few visiting ladies was not working. A new system was needed in which a special type of self-sacrificing pure woman played the central role: 'They [the penitents] need some such sisters to be ever at their side, watching them in weak moments, encouraging them in seasons of over-whelming gloom, checking outbreaks of temper and light words, directing and controlling their conversation, moving about them like a moral atmosphere, acting on them in many ways of indirect as well as of direct influence, being present with them at their meals, their work, their relaxations; not as spies or jailers, but as friends and guardians' (D'Amico 106).

This shift in penitentiary ideology was one in which Rossetti played a part, personally and professionally: as Mary Arseneau notes, volunteers at Highgate were encouraged to consider themselves a "sisterhood," though they did not take formal vows (nor were they part of a specific order of Anglican sisterhood, like the one to which Rossetti's sister Maria belonged). "While on duty at Highgate," Arseneau observes, "Rossetti was known as 'Sister Christina' and wore habit-like attire" (27). Rossetti's experience with this unique type of "sisterly" work is significant to her poetic efforts, wherein texts such as "Goblin Market" rely on a similar understanding of sisterhood as one form of female community that acts as a powerful means of intervention in the lives of fallen women. Like the "self-sacrificing pure woman" recommended by the proponents of the penitentiary movement, Lizzie in "Goblin Market" has the responsibility of "watching" Laura "in weak moments, "encouraging" her sister "in seasons of over-whelming gloom," and acting as both "friend and guardian." Even more powerfully, Lizzie moves beyond the image of the "directing and controlling" guardian imagined by the penitentiary movement by becoming her sister's savior and effecting Laura's redemption itself. Thus Lizzie transforms the power of fallenness to degrade and destroy female identity into the power of healing and reconciliation for the female self and community. "Goblin Market," then, echoes to some extent the language of sisterhood informed by the

vocabulary of institutional reform. In her poem, Rossetti crafts a kind of equality between the fallen women and their “pure” counterparts, much like in the way Rossetti during her time at Highgate acts as “Sister Christina” and not as a matron-jailer.

“Goblin Market” is certainly Rossetti’s most extensive and vivid depiction of sisterly intervention in fallen womanhood. Yet in order to fully identify the texture of Rossetti’s efforts to depict the transformations in fallen women made possible by the relations between sisters, and to understand ways in which these efforts were radical in their challenge to Victorian social and cultural assumptions, we must do two things: look at Rossetti’s fallen women poems in order to grasp her development of the fallen woman image and theme, and consider these texts in the context of her devotional poetics, which provides coordinates for understanding fallenness in a theological sense. Unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Rossetti is known primarily as a devotional poet: in her seven published volumes, as well as poems she published separately or did not publish at all, devotional poetry occupies a central place. Moreover, the devotional discourse of spiritual formation in Rossetti’s texts takes a different shape from devotional discourse in Barrett Browning’s poems, even while many likenesses might be found between the two poets. As Jan Marsh suggests, Rossetti participated in the “female tradition” of poetry whose “younger generation was represented by Elizabeth Barrett” (68); and yet, many readers of both poets find Barrett Browning a “political” poet and Rossetti a “religious” one, thus suggesting that Rossetti has less to say about material existence than she does about transcendent or eternal realms. In fact, as D’Amico observes, Rossetti’s nineteenth-century readers tend to emphasize her saintly reputation at the expense of her relevance to contemporary issues:

Although Victorian critics indeed saw Rossetti as a woman of faith, and saw her poetry as a product of that faith, the saintly image they present tends to diminish her power and importance by removing her from her own time; in other words, she is seen as an idealized figure responding to her god but not her age. The Victorian image of Rossetti excludes from consideration her involvement in and response to some of the controversial issues of her day, such as the establishment of Anglican sisterhoods, the treatment of fallen women, and the extension of the franchise. (15-16)

By contrast, when late-twentieth-century critics begin to consider her a significant Victorian poet, Rossetti's saintly image is replaced by the idea of Rossetti "as a strong-minded woman asserting the feminine self and subverting the patriarchal ideologies of her time" (7). Thus the binary of political/religious is established in her critical history as a common means of understanding her: at no point can her faith intersect with her (or her society's) material concerns.

Several recent critics such as D'Amico, Arseneau, Lynda Palazzo, and Dinah Roe, among others, have resisted this binary by suggesting that Rossetti's faith is relevant to and informed by her investment in material culture and the issues of her age—political or otherwise. Moreover, they argue that an understanding of her faith is essential to anyone seeking a textured conceptualization of her poems. In particular, Arseneau challenges the disparity between spiritual and material existence in Rossetti's texts by arguing that "Rossetti's commitment to a vision of concurrently present material and spiritual realities inheres in her poetic representation" (190). Calling Rossetti's "vision" an "incarnational poetics," Arseneau situates Rossetti's poems in the context of her complex ideas of community and theology, offering a nuanced perspective of the relationship between Rossetti's texts and her age. Inspired by the work of these and other scholars, I seek to continue this line of inquiry—which rejects a simple distinction

between the spiritual and material in Rossetti's texts, and which dismisses the idea of Rossetti as a religious poet with a mind for nothing other than saintly subjects—by investigating ways in which readings of her devotional poems may be useful in conversation with ideas of the “fallen woman” as a powerful Victorian image. Moreover, I argue that devotional poetry—perhaps more than other forms of religious verse—features the intersection between personal and public, spiritual and material life.

In particular, I will investigate the “blurring” of “distinctions between pure and fallen” that Rossetti's fallen women address—a slippage of categorical meaning(s) that is also addressed in her devotional poems through their emphasis on general human weakness and the need for redemption that crossed all social boundaries. Even so, while an altered vocabulary in the penitentiary movement made fallen women and volunteers “sisters,” the relationship between the socially alienated and the socially respectable remained a vexed and firmly hierarchical one: fallen women were “wretched moral orphans” (Mary Carpenter qtd. in Marsh 218) whose participation in prostitution often resulted in socioeconomic advancement at the same time it made them vulnerable not only to one but also to many kinds of social, spiritual/moral, and physical (i.e. suicidal) falls (Marsh 219). Yet Rossetti emphasizes two important aspects of fallen womanhood that later critics like Deborah Logan and Roxane Eberle have emphasized: first, not all fallen women were prostitutes; and second, that fallen women did not make these choices alone, isolated from society or from spiritual temptations that all humans face. As I see it, Rossetti's inclusion of fallen women poems and devotional verses in many of her volumes raises important questions about their potential conversations with one another: Are fallen womanhood and the fallen soul depicted in similar ways? Does the emphasis

on secrecy that appears in the fallen woman poems correspond, in any way, to the implied secrecy that accompanies the devotional act? How do fallenness and secrecy engage women's devotional subjectivity, especially with respect to Victorian society and culture? With these questions in mind, I hope to demonstrate that Rossetti's devotional poems encourage us to read the "fallenness" of her "fallen" women poems in new ways. Specifically, her devotional poetics undermine the stringent conventions of fallenness in Victorian women's lived experience. By critiquing the madonna-harlot dichotomy as well as the charge of "deviancy" for all "border cases" of fallenness, Rossetti offers a textured understanding of the physical and spiritual female self that challenges readers to identify themselves with their fallen sisters rather than using them as demarcations of corruption and otherness. Moreover, secrecy is significant to this physical and spiritual selfhood in two key ways: in the devotional self, which features numerous aspects of fallen womanhood in the context of the implied secrecy between the soul and God; and second, in the "fallen woman" of society for whom enforced and chosen forms of secrecy surround her temptation, her resistance or acquiescence, and her redemption.

In the case of devotional poems, "distinctions between pure and fallen" are made less stable than they might seem for religious texts (and a religious audience), and all humans are implicated in the causes and effects of sin. By extension, Rossetti's idea of fallenness in a spiritual sense informs her ideas of women's fallenness, which she demonstrates to be the responsibility of men as well as women and of society as well as individuals. Taken together, with a particular emphasis on the key aspects of devotional poetics, Rossetti's devotional and fallen women poems work throughout *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, and *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* to challenge conventional

ideas of fallenness and to create ideas of spiritual transformation aimed at the whole woman—not just her “innocent” self. While Rossetti’s ideal is always purity, her poems emphasize that all humans, to some degree, are impure and that true purity is only achieved through redemption, a spiritual process with material results that often challenge—rather than conform to—conventions of gender or religious devotion.⁶⁸ Thus with subtlety and complexity, Rossetti’s devotional poems function, like Barrett Browning’s, in ways that intervene in material existence rather than withdrawing from it.

4.3 Secrecy and the Poetics of Reserve

Specifically, Rossetti’s devotional verse demonstrates that one of the most significant threats to female communities, as well as one of its most powerful allies, is secrecy. Crafted as a strategy of silence and hiddenness or concealment either enforced by culture or chosen by a woman herself, Rossetti’s poems negotiate the conflicted ways in which secrecy has two kinds of power: it may shame and denigrate women, but it may also empower women through the links it creates between spiritual reflection and lived experience in devotional texts. We see these conflicting roles of secrecy in several poems from *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862) that do not feature fallen woman as such, but are useful for understanding the ideas of secrecy that Rossetti brings to bear on her fallen women texts.

In particular, “Winter: My Secret” is a key example of a kind of secrecy that is not related to shame or vice, but is instead the kind of the secrecy one chooses, controls, and—at times—needs. Though it is important to contextualize Rossetti’s notions of secrecy within Tractarian discourse, and especially in the doctrine of Reserve, the secrecy

⁶⁸ For more on Rossetti’s approach to purity, especially in her later verse, see Emma Mason, “Christina Rossetti and the Doctrine of Reserve,” 210-15.

set forth in “Winter: My Secret” may also be interpreted as an empowering context for self-assertion within social constraints and thus as an important poem for the exploration of women’s subjectivity and social roles.

In the text, the poetic speaker crafts an unsettling display of secrecy in a “fictive enigma” governed neither by “events” nor “extrinsic reference” (Harrison 19). In fact, the original title of the poem was “Nonsense” (Crump 247). Although some scholars read the poem’s secret biographically, suggesting Rossetti’s religious faith, sexual repression, or her poetry’s display of “all sound and little sense” as the source of her secret, other scholars, as D’Amico notes, emphasize that “keeping silent on some point was for Rossetti a way of achieving independence and even power” (176).⁶⁹ In consonance with the notion of secrecy’s power, and yet seeking to move beyond a biographical approach to the text, I argue that the text is a celebration of the speaker’s capacity—and complete refusal—to reveal her secret, in spite of her interlocutor’s requests (which she teases by feigning hesitation in line five):

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:
Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows, and snows,
And you’re too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? well:
Only, my secret’s mine, and I won’t tell. (1-6)

As Dolores Rosenblum suggests, this poem displays the playful “usefulness of masks” as well as “the speaker” as “the owner of the ‘mask,’ [who] asserts her right to think her own thoughts” (122-23). Toying with the reader, the speaker asserts (regarding the secret

⁶⁹ To me, it seems that a key dilemma at this point in my argument is the extent to which a reader of Rossetti must always interpret secrets in her texts through the doctrine of Reserve. My approach here suggests that while Reserve is important to consider, there are other aspects of secrecy (like the secrecy one employs or is forced to accept in social life) at work in her verse. In this way, I am thinking of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, John Keble’s poetics, and, more practically, Rossetti’s own work at Highgate.

itself) that “perhaps there’s none: / Suppose there is no secret after all, / But only just my fun” (7-9); and then she shifts the tone by suggesting something more serious about her “useful mask,” which works as a shield as well as a “fun” disguise: “Today’s a nipping day, a biting day; / In which one wants a shawl, / A veil, a cloak, and other wraps: / I cannot ope to every one who taps” (10-13).

Drawing from seasonal imagery, Rossetti depicts the role of secrecy in its capacity to prevent the effects of “biting” cold through protective garments like veils and cloaks, thus crafting secrecy as a measure of defense as well as an empowering form of control for the speaker. “I wear my mask for warmth,” the speaker asserts,

who ever shows
His nose to Russian snows
To be pecked at by every wind that blows?
You would not peck? I thank you for good will,
Believe, but leave the truth untested still. (18-22)

Here the speaker conveys ambiguity toward her social situation: her expressions of politeness and good faith—undoubtedly what is expected of one who supposedly trusts the members of one’s community—are accompanied by a deliberate distancing from others. Paradoxically, this distance encourages the social bond rather than severing it entirely.

Moreover, the speaker reveals her capacity for rejecting social relationships that risk her exposure: though she responds to her questioner in a mannerly and trustful way by “Beliv[ing]” the promise “not [to] peck” at her vulnerability, she will “leave that truth untested still,” thus holding the listener at a safe distance. Her choice to retain her secret is thus crafted as both a personal and social one that asserts her specific position and maintains that position in the face of others’ expectations. Her choice affects the social

arrangement without undermining it entirely: she characterizes her listener's supplications as "truth." Thus the social fabric displayed by the poem remains intact, albeit in an altered form. This alteration is best seen through the speaker's second complicated gesture of good faith, which appears at the end of the poem when she suggests that on "some languid summer day...Perhaps my secret I may say, / Or you may guess" (28, 33-34). In this offer, the speaker demonstrates some belief in the listener's capacity to know her, even while she maintains a protective distance and a complete control over the secret itself. Such protection and control becomes an important quality in the role of secrecy in Rossetti's fallen women poems, which reveal the capacity and consequences of choices in women's fallenness and redemption.⁷⁰

Rossetti's devotional poetry emphasizes a secret space between the human soul and God where all humans are implicated in their fallenness, where all who cannot "will" or "wish" ("A Bruised Reed" 8, 16) their own redemption may discover the "hiding-place" in the "heart" and "the love of Christ" ("The Love of Christ" 23-24). Informed by Christian theological notions about original sin and Christ's redemption, these texts suggest that Victorian assumptions about fallenness must be re-formed. By complicating the boundaries of purity and fallenness, Rossetti's devotional and fallen women poems reject social conventions that mark fallen women as outcasts, body and soul. They also feature the redemptive "hiding-place" of the human soul as a space where secrets transform women's roles in Victorian society. Recasting secrecy as a space where one

⁷⁰ I fully realize that I assume a female-gendered speaker in "Winter: My Secret," which looks like a conflation between Rossetti and the speaker of her poems. Although we may not, in a strict sense, be certain of the speaker's gender in this poem, I read the text in conversation with Rossetti's other verses about female subjectivity. In doing so I use the poem's reflection on secrecy as a means for understanding the complicated nature of secrecy, social relationships, and fallenness in "The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children" in *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, and "Brandons Both" in *A Pageant and Other Poems* (among others).

can meet God as well as one's self, Rossetti transforms a place of shame and silence into a form of empowerment. Thus for her devotional audience, Rossetti creates a trope of the female soul that relates a fallen self to a redeemed one—in other words, a trope which illustrates the kind of woman who lives as Rossetti had done, according to her letter to Frederic Shields that I quote in the epigraph to this chapter: perhaps as “poor” and “sinful,” but not in ways defined by social strictures; and certainly with daring speech as well as the confidence that she “is herself” not due to others' esteem but because “God knows her.”

Such a quotation is illuminating because Rossetti, unlike Barrett Browning, does not provide a clear introduction to her poetic theories in prefaces to her volumes.⁷¹ The contrast between Barrett Browning's and Rossetti's strategies for compiling a volume, especially with regard to prefatory material, directs our attention to two separate—but related—issues: first, Barrett Browning's inclusion and Rossetti's exclusion of prefatory material is significant because both women were conscious of the added dimension of gender in their negotiation of a reading public. As I suggest in Chapter 2, Barrett Browning's strategy for engaging readers' expectations in light of her gender and her sense of poetic vocation is the implementation of “daring” speech and the straightforward engagement of literary discourse. Rossetti's method is a different one, and, while her engagement with literary discourse is less direct than Barrett Browning's, it is every bit as daring. This is especially the case if we consider her poems as part of an overarching

⁷¹ One way to consider Rossetti's approach to poetic theory is through her several volumes of devotional prose. As Dinah Roe suggests, such prose is “an intrinsic part of her achievement as a writer,” a part that has been overlooked in the past and is starting to gain more prominence in Rossetti scholarship (2). A fruitful area of further research would be a study of the contribution that Rossetti's devotional prose makes to her devotional poetics, especially because two of her texts, *Time Flies* and *The Face of the Deep*, “weave verse into their prose fabric” (Roe 2).

effort to address Victorian literary discourse, even if we must assume that she deemed a critical commentary as such unnecessary for her volumes.⁷² Yet both Barrett Browning and Rossetti display a keen interest in the issues of women's poetry, literary discourse, and religious discourse—and thus Rossetti's exclusion of prefatory material brings us to the second issue worth mentioning: that she may have refrained from writing prefaces for her volumes in keeping with her Tractarian sympathies, which emphasize Reserve; in keeping with her own commitment to "conciseness" as a writer; and in keeping with what Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds (among others) have identified as a playful elusiveness and secrecy in her poetics.⁷³ In Rossetti's view, a systematic delineation of her poetic strategies may have been counter to what she understood as the purpose of poetry, which emphasizes—perhaps for all of the reasons listed above—some measure of concealment rather than full disclosure.⁷⁴ The issue of concealment or reserve/Reserve in her writing displays a clear means by which Rossetti envisioned secrecy as a key aspect

⁷² For Rossetti, "Victorian literary discourse" manifested in more personal and immediate ways than public reviews of her texts: for her first two volumes especially, Rossetti's brother Dante Gabriel was intimately involved in the editing and publication process, and "liked," as Dorothy Mermin explains, his sister "to talk only in the lyric tones he considered feminine and her own. She generally adhered to his standards...but she often expressed rebellious feelings in verse that seemed on the surface femininely tame" (*Godiva's Ride* 71). He disagreed with her inclusion of a fallen woman poem in her 1866 volume because he disapproved of the topic. She kept the poem.

⁷³ In an 1888 letter, Rossetti explains, "Perhaps the nearest approach to a 'method' I can lay claim to was a distinct aim at conciseness: after a while I received a hint from my sister that my love of conciseness tended to make my writing obscure, and then I endeavoured to avoid obscurity as well as diffuseness" (*Letters* 4.65). Angela Leighton, "'When I Am Dead, My Dearest': The Secret of Christina Rossetti," *Modern Philology* 87.4 (1990): 373-88, and Margaret Reynolds, "Speaking Un-Likenesses: The Double Text in Christina Rossetti's 'After Death' and 'Remember,'" *Textual Practice* 13.1 (1999): 25-41.

⁷⁴ According to her nineteenth-century biographer, Mackenzie Bell, Rossetti saw the imagination as something to be used carefully in religious writing. His assessments of Rossetti's devotional prose recall the debate over the appropriateness of religious topics for poetry that I addressed in the Barrett Browning chapter. He asserts that a "restraining of the imagination" in her first work of devotional prose (*Annus Domini* (1874), subtitled "a prayer for each day of the year, founded on a text of Holy Scripture") "may have arisen on her part from her keen reverence for prayer as prayer, and her feeling, once or twice expressed to me, that no human creature, however skilful, ought wantonly to embroider with his own ability petitions to the Almighty" (285-86). Barrett Browning's approach toward imagination and poetics (especially as she did not embrace—or even agree with—the Tractarian movement, and thus would not have ascribed to the doctrine of Reserve) is quite a different one.

of poetics and of composition. Thus thematic treatments of secrecy in a given text are part of the act of writing as well as part of the emotional, spiritual, and psychological impact of the text itself.

Rossetti's role as a poet informed by the doctrine of Reserve placed her in a unique position: one that enabled her to articulate her ideas with daring speech without raising too much suspicion that she forgot her place as a woman in her efforts at theological interpretation. As Julie Melnyk observes, "[w]omen's writing on religious topics – those related to devotion, conduct, worship – was tolerated and even encouraged" in the nineteenth century; and yet, "[b]arred from university and pulpit," women "were also forbidden to write in the traditional genres of theology, the treatise and the sermon," and so they employed "nontraditional genres" in order to present theological concepts "disguised as uncontroversial religious writing" ("Introduction" xi, xii). Although Rossetti was not a radical thinker, and thus would not have employed such methods of disguise as part of a progressive feminist poetics, the confluence of Tractarian Reserve, secrecy, devotional poetics, and fallen women in her texts displays an unconventional approach to what might otherwise have been "uncontroversial" devotional poetry. "Reserve," Emma Mason explains, "allowed a writer like Rossetti to adopt reticently the role of theological commentator in her writing while exempting her from accusations of vainly flaunting religious learning unsuitable for a middle-class woman" ("Christina Rossetti" 198). Yet while Rossetti's Tractarian sympathies clearly inform her use of Reserve, as G. B. Tennyson, Alison Chapman, Diane D'Amico, Mason, and many others demonstrate, treatments of secrecy as they appear specifically in Rossetti's devotional discourse may have another source. The idea of linking devotional

activity and notions of secrecy in Christian ideology is a biblical one that emerges from the precedent of giving to the poor (“doing alms”) and praying to God in secret, as explained by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore, when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do, in the Synagogues, and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know, what thy right doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: And thy Father which seeth in secret, himself shall reward thee openly. And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the Synagogues, and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou has shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:1-6, Authorized Version)

As these verses suggest, providing for impoverished members of society and praying are both devotional activities that involve a similar imperative: as one seeks to combine spiritual reflection with one’s lived experience, one should reject a showy performance of religious devotion. Such display is an obstacle to authentic piety as well as detrimental to one’s relationship with God.⁷⁵ According to Mary Arseneau, many scholars have noted that “a pervasive organizing feature in Rossetti’s devotional writing is a unifying impulse – a tendency to find unity among the various constituent parts making up the Bible and a wish to demonstrate the compatibility of letter and spirit, scripture and creation, Old and New Testament” (97). In my view, Rossetti’s poems suggest that she utilizes secrecy in

⁷⁵ In these verses, “reward” is a key term for the articulation of that relationship: in other words, humans are rewarded by God for devotional activity which is enacted properly (while improper devotion gains no “reward”). While this seems at first to be a simplistic system of exchange, wherein a devotional act is performed in order to receive one’s due, the concept of “reward” in my view suggests a contrast between striving for public praise as an end in itself and striving to fulfill the imperatives for one’s own spiritual and social well-being. The context of the entire Sermon, as recorded in Matthew’s gospel, suggests a textured idea of God’s “reward(s)” for faithful devotion, including blessings, spiritual growth, love, freedom from anxiety, and so on: cf. Matthew, chapters 5-7.

devotional discourse in ways that feature the “unity” between the “letter and spirit” of biblical texts and the practical qualities of devotional activity.⁷⁶ To give alms or to pray “in secret” is a negotiation of fine lines separating public from private spheres and spiritual experience from material existence. In a devotional poem, where both God and an audience of readers serve as interlocutors, Rossetti draws our attention to the dangers of conducting one’s spiritual progress in ways that are not “secret” at least part of the time. While the devotional poems are material representatives of spiritual experience to a reading public, the quality of secrecy relates, through tropes of the soul, the devotional speaker who moves outside the self as well as the devotional speaker who looks inward; and so what appears to be renunciation is, in fact, a means of cultivating the capacity to identify with fallen womanhood rather than to spurn it, use it for one’s own ends, or ignore it altogether.

Insofar as Rossetti is “the true inheritor of the Tractarian devotional mode in poetry,” her texts may be seen as the “fruition” of “[m]ost of what the Tractarians advocated in theory and sought to put into practice” (G. B. Tennyson 198), a strong tenet of which was the aesthetic of Reserve. As Tennyson explains it, Reserve is one of the “two quintessential Tractarian concerns”—the other being Analogy—that emerged from John Keble’s ideas on poetry and “Isaac Williams’ Tracts 80 and 87 (1838 and 1840),” which “are both titled ‘On Reserve in Communicating Religious Knowledge’” (44).

“Briefly,” Tennyson continues,

the idea of Reserve is that since God is ultimately incomprehensible, we can know Him only indirectly; His truth is hidden and given to us only in a manner suited to our capacities for apprehending it. Moreover, it is both

⁷⁶ This view is reinforced by Rossetti’s devotional prose work, *Letter and Spirit: Notes on the Commandments* (1883)

unnecessary and undesirable that God and religious truth generally should be disclosed in their fullness at once to all regardless of the differing capacities of individuals to apprehend such things...Both the sacredness and the complexity of the subject of religious truth are such that they require a holding back and a gradual revelation as the disposition and understanding of the recipient mature. (45)

According to Williams in Tract 80, poetry “is the product of ‘that reserve or retiring delicacy, which exists naturally in a good man, unless injured by external motives, and which is of course the teaching of God through him. Something of this kind accompanies all strong and deep feeling, so much so that indications of it have been considered the characteristic of genuine poetry” (quoted in Tennyson 47). In this emphasis on “strong and deep feeling” there is a significant likeness to Barrett Browning’s conviction (which we saw in Chapter 2) that because religion “is a subject of *feeling*, of real warm emotion & feeling,” it is therefore a fit influence and topic for poetry (*BC* 4.181-82, emphasis original). Yet unlike Barrett Browning, who sought to use “daring speech” to convey a “new utterance” in devotional discourse, Tractarian poets employed the aesthetic of Reserve to convey in art what is enacted in the church itself: as Tennyson explains, regarding Williams’ Tracts 80 and 87, “in the sacraments and in the Episcopal and priestly succession there is ‘something *that hideth itself*, something like the personal presence of our LORD in his incarnation, surrounded with difficulties to the carnal mind, withdrawing itself, and leaving excuses for the Divine Power being denied’ (Tract 80, p. 65)” (48). To be sure, notions of what is concealed or hidden form a significant part of Tractarian aesthetics: but what, in practice, do these notions look like in—and what are their implications for—Rossetti’s verse?

Appreciation for Rossetti’s connection with the Tractarian movement offers exciting ways to mine the rich repository of religious ideas in all of her texts. Diane

D'Amico and David Kent, in a 2006 issue of *Victorian Poetry* devoted wholly to Tractarian poetics, conclude that "Rossetti's relationship to Tractarianism is evidently complex, and many of its dimensions have only to be disclosed" (102). Moreover, G. B. Tennyson's specific call for "a new look...at Christina Rossetti as a devotional poet, one that takes account of the preceding generation of Tractarian poetry as a seedfield for much of her own verse" (198) has been answered in many ways. As F. Elizabeth Gray observes, Linda Schofield, Mary Arseneau, Diane D'Amico, and Robert Kachur, to name a few, provide "subtle and fascinating refractions of Tractarian thought" in Rossetti's texts (62). Even so, as D'Amico has suggested, scholars and critics often find Rossetti's poetics more vexed than enriched by her religion, especially insofar as Christian ideology promotes self-sacrifice. Unlike Barrett Browning's "daring" speech, Rossetti's verses are often characterized as primarily humble and self-effacing, and thus complicit in the ideologies of subordination forced upon women (and embraced by many women writers) in the nineteenth century.

By contrast, I argue that concealment in Rossetti's texts address is not part of a renunciatory pose meant to undermine women's subjectivity and agency; and for this reason, secrecy and renunciation in Rossetti's poems should not be conflated. Yet the strong focus on the issue of renunciation in Rossetti scholarship may make distinctions between the two qualities difficult to ascertain.⁷⁷ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's well-known approach to Laura's redemption in "Goblin Market" is one example of an

⁷⁷ Even while she emphasizes Rossetti's boldness as a writer, Mermin reveals her assumption that terms like "silence," "secrecy," "oblivion," and "self-suppression" are synonymous in Rossetti's poetics: "Rossetti's art," she explains, "is built on the paradox of speaking from the place of silence. Often her poems, like Emily Dickinson's, tease the reader with an enactment of secrecy, flaunting the fact that something is being withheld. She wrote about oblivion and became famous, and her art eloquently espoused self-suppression" (*Godiva's Ride* 71)

emphasis on renunciation as a defining feature of Rossetti's poetics. For them, Rossetti's renunciation is governed by a "ensorious morality" (573); and as they explain, Laura only experiences freedom from her fallenness "at the moment which she learns the lesson of renunciation. In other words, at this moment she reaches what Rossetti considers the height of a woman poet's art, and here, therefore, she is truly Rossetti's surrogate" (573). Another often-quoted example of self-effacing religious renunciation is "The Lowest Room" (originally titled "A fight over the body of Homer"), a complex poem on heroism that that many interpret primarily as a text of Christian humility and as a totalizing explanation of Rossetti as a woman and poet: "Not to be first," says the speaker near the end of the text, "how hard to learn / That lifelong lesson of the past; / Line graven on line and stroke on stroke; / But, thank God, learned at last" (265-68).⁷⁸ One of the sharpest critiques of this "lowest" place, this kind of sacrifice, comes from Gilbert and Gubar, some of the first late-twentieth-century scholars to consider Rossetti seriously from a feminist viewpoint. Ultimately, though, they identify in Rossetti's verses a thoroughgoing "aesthetics of renunciation," a means by which she transforms the "aesthetic of pleasure" at work in her texts "into an aesthetic of pain" through "ensorious morality" (573). Their approach to Rossetti raises an important concern: does Rossetti's participation in the aesthetic of Reserve as proposed by the Tractarians—and not merely her religious commitments in general—create a strong presence of renunciation in Rossetti's verses that emphasizes self-concealment at the expense of identity?

⁷⁸ Kathleen Jones titled her 1991 biography of the poet *Learning Not to be First: The Life of Christina Rossetti*, and uses this quotation as the epigraph to her text.

Moreover, do Reserve, renunciation, and secrecy belie spiritual elitism as well?

As Emma Mason points out, a focus on Reserve in Rossetti's verse coincides with the Tractarian notion that poetry is well-suited for "the textual incarnation of faith," due to its "abstract and indirect element": "Like parables," Mason explains in her discussion of Tractarian aesthetics,

poetry hints at its subject matter, steadily and carefully unveiling the feelings within while at the same time teaching readers how to express their own feelings in a reserved and coded manner... Not only did reserve rule that the religious content of poetry be held back, it showed that God's scriptural laws were deliberately hidden to all but the faithful. Reserved writing employed metaphor, figure, and allegory in a way only the initiated believer and reader could understand. ("Tractarian Poetry" 3)

With Mason's argument about Reserve in mind, Gilbert and Gubar's "aesthetics of renunciation" take on an insidious tinge: through a commitment to the expression of religious ideas in a "reserved and coded manner," the self-sacrifice required of the woman poet becomes an exclusionary social practice as well, restricting "the religious content of poetry" to "only the initiated believer and reader." This paints the portrait of a very small space in which a woman religious poet could live and move: restricted herself by an "aesthetic of pain," her "ensorious morality" restricts her audience as well, excluding all who fall outside the fold. Taken this way, Rossetti's use of Reserve is an elitist, limiting tactic that is strategically marked by secrecy more than disclosure. Thus her devotional texts—not to mention the rest of her works—sit in judgment upon the unbelieving and work only to conceal a woman's self through renunciation.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ The suggestion that Christianity lends a keen sense of restriction and judgmentalism to Rossetti's texts aligns with William Michael Rossetti's emphasis on his sister as a highly scrupulous, unquestioning religious devotee (see "Memoir," pgs. liv-lv, lxvii-lxviii). Angela Leighton accepts this view, suggesting that Rossetti's approach to faith undermined itself: "For all her minute scrupulousness in matters of faith, Christina seems to have suffered from some profound underlying doubt and distrust" (376); her poems convey "a restless and skeptical in-between-land where doubt shadows faith" (375). Margaret Reynolds suggests—especially with regard to William Michael's assessment of his sister, that Rossetti created a

Yet as D'Amico suggests, to approach Rossetti's poems primarily in light of their focus on renunciation amounts to "viewing the renunciatory theme in isolation from the whole of her faith," which "tends to enlarge its importance" (62). Many strands of religious thought inform Rossetti's verses, including Tractarian poetics. Renunciation, rather than emerging solely from a "censorious morality," was, as D'Amico notes, "part of the spiritual journey" whose "goal was always heaven" (64). That spiritual journey, as it appears in Rossetti's texts, involves movement within and outside the self—which is not the same thing as self-effacement. In the context of Rossetti's faith, and in the specific context of her devotional discourse, both renunciation and concealment appear as part of a complex negotiation of the spaces within and among Christian ideology and Tractarian discourse rather than an effacement of female identity. Mason "argue[s] that it was a religious doctrine...rather than a broken heart or abused selfhood, that provoked Rossetti's reticent diction, reflecting her commitment to the Tractarian belief-system" ("Christina Rossetti" 197). According to this view, Rossetti's religious views work for rather than against her poetic art; and she may thus be appreciated as a poet who did not seek to conceal and denigrate selfhood through renunciation and strict conformity to religious strictures.⁸⁰

Quite by contrast, and in response to critical obsessions with Rossetti's aesthetics of renunciation, I argue that notions of secrecy in her devotional and fallen women poems revise the discourse of woman's selfhood in Victorian England in daring ways.

"hard-bound surface" of scrupulousness to "[hide] the vulnerable self," especially with regard to her acts of writing (25-26). By contrast, Roe argues that Rossetti's devotional prose "presents a strong challenge" to William Michael's view of scrupulousness (2).

⁸⁰ Mason asserts that "Rossetti develops and discloses her own comprehension of reserve through various references to secrecy, shadows, concealment and constraint," though she also "argues that one prominent signifier of the doctrine stands out: that of the colour white and associated images of snow, ice, and purity" (197)

Presenting secrecy in consonance with Reserve and yet also as part of a larger, cultural concern, Rossetti rewrites ideas of secrecy in devotional discourse in order to feature the transformative power of secrets.

4.4 Some Definitions of Secrecy in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862)

We may begin an investigation of Rossetti's notions of secrecy in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1892), a volume in which devotional poetics and fallen women poems figure prominently. Although the most popular text to consider with regard to fallenness in this volume—and in Rossetti's body of work overall—is “Goblin Market,” “Winter: My Secret” suggests a significant theme of secrecy by which we may read the volume's “devotional pieces” and, by extension, see fallen women poems in a different light. In particular, “The Love of Christ Which Passeth Knowledge,” and “A Bruised Reed Shall He Not Break” feature ideas of fallenness in devotional discourse that enrich our understanding of secrecy with respect to Victorian social discourse.

Rossetti's first publicly-printed volume⁸¹ is arranged in two parts: “Devotional Pieces” are grouped together and printed last, after the volume's first segment of poems, and indicated as a separate category under that heading in the table of contents. This practice of categorizing the devotional texts as a separate portion of the volume suggests, at first glance, that Rossetti sought to divide her devotional works from her other texts (she repeats this strategy in her 1866 volume *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*). Yet many of her readers recognize a strong correspondence between both portions of her work. In his preface to the 1904 *Poetical Works of Christina Rossetti*, her brother William Michael suggests as much:

⁸¹ Rossetti's first official volume of poetry, *Verses, Dedicated to her Mother* was printed privately in London by her grandfather Gaetano Polidori in 1847 (Crump III.386, Marsh 74).

It may perhaps be said that the two ideas most prevalent of all [in her poems] are the strenuous and onerous effort to attain to the salvation of the soul in heaven, and the ardent absorbing devotion to the work and the very person of the Saviour Jesus Christ. These ideas are diffused over the whole area of the authoress's Devotional Poems, and are traced in other compositions as well. (ix)

Likewise, as Lionel Johnson writes in an article from "The Academy" (July, 1895), Rossetti's "characteristic greatness lies in her most intimate, more severe, most passionate and sacred poems...And by this it is not meant that her obviously and ostensibly sacred poems are her greatest: many others, poems of meditation or of passion, with no distinct Christian cry in them, stand side by side with the poems divine and devout" (qtd. in Bell 332). In addition, Arseneau suggests that Rossetti's interest in typological interpretation reveals the potential for a strong link—rather than a distinct separation—between the general poems and "Devotional Pieces" in the *Goblin Market* volume:

The pattern of reading an early section in light of a later one is fundamental to Rossetti's method in her devotional prose, for her approach to the Bible is markedly typological; moreover, Rossetti's use of typology demonstrates that she is accustomed to thinking in terms of relationships between 'books', or parts of a Book/book. (108)

While I do not think we should read Rossetti's volumes in a strictly typological way—with, for example, her general poems as antetypes and her devotional poems as types—I work from the assumption that Rossetti's devotional poems provide a useful kind of religious gloss for the ideas set forth in her general verses.

The religious themes of many of her "secular" verses make sharp distinctions between her "devotional pieces" and her general poems difficult to ascertain: as Harrison notes, Rossetti's "lifelong habit of placing the Pre-Raphaelite poems alongside the devotional works...tells us a good deal about her own (and indeed her publisher,

Macmillan's) awareness of a reading public that would see the two kinds of verse as mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive" (69). Moreover, though they are "[o]stensibly nothing like *Goblin Market* [the poem]," Dolores Rosenblum explains, "the devotional poems, in particular, suggest ways in which we might follow out the 'drift' of a poem that appears highly idiosyncratic but hints at communal meaning" (69).⁸² To emphasize a thoroughgoing association between Rossetti's "devotional pieces" and her general poems seems, in many respects, in consonance with Rossetti's own aims as well as the expectations of her audience.

This emphasis, too, has implications for the debate raised by nineteenth century critics, and specifically Barrett Browning in her prefatory remarks (and verses), over whether religious poetry was indeed poetry at all. As Rossetti's early biographer, Mackenzie Bell, reports, Rossetti's "narrowness of range, and her tendency to dwell too much on one set of emotions" was a key point of critique with regard to her work (and a point with which he agrees). With this idea of "narrowness" in mind, he also reports that "It has been said that in giving so much time, thought, and labour to religious poems, and to devotional and other prose work, she impaired her poetic gift. Our opinion as to the importance of this remark must depend mainly on the view we take as to what constitutes poetry, and as to what is its chief value" (334).⁸³ Though Rossetti did not engage

⁸² In the general structure of my argument, I follow Rosenblum's assumption that *Goblin Market* can be seen as a narrative text...in long poetic service, the constant parts of which are the devotional poems" (69). I see Rossetti's devotional poems as "constant parts" of all her texts.

⁸³ Bell continues his defense of Rossetti's religious verse by addressing the issue of didacticism: "She was as conscious of the teaching power in poetry, and believed as strongly in it, as the most unimaginative verse writer. But her natural aptitude for symbolism and her large poetic vocabulary prevented her from ever becoming prosaic...I do not find in her religious verse the influence of authors like Cowper and Newton, though in some degree she was at one with them in having a didactic aim; but to Keble, to Faber, and particularly to Newman, she had, in my judgment, much poetic kinship...And if, unlike most of our sacred poets, she was always poetic, it was in a large measure because she infused into sacred themes the same

systematically with this debate over the “chief value” of poetry, it is significant that Bell, who knew Rossetti personally, connects his discussion of her poetry’s qualities with the larger critical debate about the role of religious verse in Victorian poetry. In this study I assume a strong relationship between Rossetti’s “devotional pieces” and the rest of her poems; and, with Bell’s assertion in mind, I align my discussion with the view that Rossetti’s devotional verse does not demonstrate simple narrowness and pious distraction. Rather, devotional poetry for Rossetti, as for Barrett Browning, demonstrates a conviction that devotional poetics is part of “what constitutes poetry.”

“Up-Hill” marks the threshold between general poems and “devotional pieces” in the *Goblin Market* volume, and sounds a tone of striving that pervades Rossetti’s verses in this volume as well as the ones that follow. In looking for a “resting-place,” one speaker in “Up-hill” questions another about the “road” and the “journey” (1, 3, 5), suggesting the Christian pilgrimage toward heaven. Yet the poem conveys more than simple pious comfort: in the last three lines one speaker is assured that “there [will] be beds for all who come” (16) to the place of rest promised in the text, but also that “Of labour” this traveler “shall find the sum” (14). Read in conjunction with the poems that follow, such “labour” may be interpreted as the difficulty of spiritual formation in the Christian life that arises from humanity’s fallenness—that is, the incapacity to love, find comfort, to “choose or wish to choose” the right path because of sin (“A Bruised Reed” 17). Such incapacity is addressed and remedied in “The Love of Christ Which Passeth Knowledge.” In the poem, Jesus reflects on the hardships he suffered at the hands of humans who rejected his love (and for whose love he still pleads):

passionate intensity, the same beauty both of language and of substance, which these poets used in their most lofty secular verse (335).

I bore with thee long weary days and nights,
Through many pangs of heart, through many tears;
I bore with thee, thy hardness, coldness, slights,
For three and thirty years.

Who else had dared for thee what I have dared?
I plunged the depth most deep from bliss above;
I not My flesh, I not My spirit spared:
Give thou Me love for love. (1-8)

While Rossetti's depictions of God in her poetics are reserved, in keeping with the Tractarian idea that "divine mysteries" (Mason, "Christina Rossetti" 202) and theological truths perceived via the intellect (203) should both alike be veiled in poetic language⁸⁴, "The Love of Christ" presents an emotionally explicit and physically graphic image of Jesus's suffering that implicates the human listener, thus simultaneously emphasizing the material and spiritual qualities of devotional discourse:

Thee did nails grave upon My hands, thy name
Did thorns for frontlets stamp between Mine eyes:
I, Holy One, put on thy guilt and shame;
I, God, Priest, Sacrifice. (17-20)⁸⁵

Yet the poem gathers these images for the purpose of demonstrating the secret place of love wherein those whose "guilt and shame" left him "in misery" on the cross (21-22): "At length," Jesus explains, "in death one smote My heart and cleft / A hiding-place for thee" (23-24). Hence this poem provides the traveler of "Up-Hill" with the context of "guilt and shame" wherein the human spiritual life is laborious; and yet in the midst of

⁸⁴ See Mason's discussion on 198-204.

⁸⁵ While many readings of "Goblin Market" focus on the erotic and spiritual body, the devotional poems in the volume demonstrate that, as Marylu Hill argues, "Rossetti's startlingly physical imagery is the logical and indeed appropriate spiritual conclusion of Eucharistic doctrine... Rossetti is using the body not as a symbol or metaphor but rather as the concrete conduit through which humans understand God" (216). Though Hill is speaking specifically of "Goblin Market," we may see Jesus's "body...as the concrete conduit" in these devotional poems. Informed by a sacramental or Eucharistic (or Tractarian) aesthetic, her devotional texts fuse material and spiritual reality through Christ's body as well as other human bodies (like Laura's in "Goblin Market," for example). This devotional use of Christ's body in the lyric is a key aspect of devotional poetics, stretching as far back in English poetry to the Middle Ages (if not earlier).

human fallenness the Christ of Rossetti's first "devotional piece" in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* asks human listeners to love and to understand the secret space in his heart that belongs to them. Crafted as a "hiding-place," this space may be understood as a retreat from "guilt and shame," even while such effects of fallenness make that space necessary; and thus "The Love of Christ" demonstrates a negotiation of human shame and godly comfort in a "hiding-place" that features the redemptive aspects of secrecy (as God provides it). Taken together, this idea of secrecy and the socially-situated notion of secrecy in "Winter: My Secret" gives us a good sense of how Rossetti negotiates various types of secrecy in order to emphasize social cohesion and self-empowerment rather than "self-abasement or violence."

The spiritual fallenness which renders this secrecy necessary is also depicted in "A Bruised Reed Shall He Not Break," the poem which follows "The Love of Christ" and in which a dialogue between God and the devotional speaker features the "hiding-place" introduced in the previous text. Focusing again on what God does for the human soul, the poem opens with a dilemma: while God lists the various ideals of the human spiritual journey that he will "accept"—such as "thy will to do and be, / Thy hatred and intolerance of sin, / Thy will at least to love, that burns within / And thirsteth after Me" (1-4)—the devotional speaker completes the first stanza with one line: "Alas, I cannot will" (8). In this trope of the soul, the speaker is incapable of hating the sin that caused Christ's anguish in "The Love of Christ," and is incapable "even to love"; and so the soul in this text appears to relinquish all spiritual agency. Yet God responds, "Does not thou will, poor soul?" (9), and instead of harsh admonishment invokes the "hiding-place" we saw in the previous text. Moreover, God reveals a kind of (hidden) agency on the soul's

part: “Yet I receive / The inner unseen longings of the soul, / I guide them turning towards Me” (9-11). Even when the soul seems powerless, a secret place of longing (unknown to the human herself) is a repository for spiritual agency guided by God and useful to the human soul, even if that soul thinks it “cannot will.”

In the second stanza of the poem, the lyric speaker reveals, in response to God’s assertion that she should “but wish indeed to choose My love” (14), that she “cannot wish, alas!” (16), thus again asserting her powerlessness. However, in the last stanza, when God argues, “I still must strive to win thee and constrain: / For thee I hung upon the cross in pain, / How then can I forget?” (18-20), he encourages the speaker to “resign thyself, be still / Till I infuse love” (22-23) in lines that seem to support the speaker’s lack of agency and also a strong quality of renunciation. However, in tension with these ideas, even as the speaker resigns in the last line (“I do not deprecate” [24]), are the “inner unseen longings of the soul” that God is capable of discerning. Indeed, the “hiding-place” in this poem is within the speaker herself, though its presence is hidden from her in a kind of double secret. Layered with the notion of a safe place for the human soul is the secret place of the soul itself, wherein “longings” display a means for God to create love in a space where none is willed or wished. God gives the “bruised reed” a prop, and thus to fall is not to “break,” but to find a secret space of love.

Among the “devotional pieces” of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* we find two key aspects of secrecy that respond to human fallenness: the “hiding-place,” or secret space wherein humans may retreat from their own “hardness” and “coldness,” and the “inner unseen longings of the soul” that, when guided by God, become a secret repository of love for the devotional speaker. Rossetti’s use of devotional poetics to address these

types of secrecy coincides with the imperative from Matthew 6 that devotional activity should be enacted secretly rather than as a public demonstration meant to entice others' approval. In this way, as Julie Melnyk asserts, "prayer facilitates lyrical self-display by denying and concealing it" ("Lyrical" 43); and, as she also points out, "many of Rossetti's lyrics take the form of prayers, which allow her to present not self-in-isolation but self-in-relation, albeit vertical rather than horizontal relation" (43). However, as I see it, a "horizontal relation" emerges alongside a "vertical" one: in addition to aspects of secrecy featured in Rossetti's devotional poems, we find among her general poems an empowering idea of secrecy in "Winter: My Secret" that enables the speaker simultaneously to resist vulnerability in social situations while gesturing toward and not away from community. To be sure, Rossetti's uses of secrecy are informed by the doctrine of Reserve; and an overview of her devotional poetics as they develop from 1862 until her death in 1894 (as well as in her posthumously published works) would reveal the vital nature of Tractarian aesthetics in her texts. However, I argue that in addition to hiddenness crafted by Reserve, the "hiding-place" of the soul in Rossetti's *Goblin Market* poems establishes a link between notions of secrecy and social relationships. It is precisely in the context of such relationships that Rossetti's fallen women poems address the pain of social alienation enforced through a shameful kind of secrecy; and it is also in that context that Rossetti's ideas of secrecy informed by devotional poetics reveal the empowering aspects of a "hiding-place" wherein all humans are "Bruised Reed[s]."⁸⁶

⁸⁶ The focus on Christ's crucifixion, in particular, in the devotional poems implicates all humans in sinful fallenness. While Mason interprets "Winter: My Secret" as the monologue of a God hassled by human questions, thus seeing the text in light of Reserve's enforced secrecy ("Christina Rossetti" 208-9), Rossetti's devotional poems suggest that humans may choose the empowering kind of secrecy portrayed in

4.5 The Power of Secrets in *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (1866)

The perspective of fallen humanity depicted in Rossetti's *Goblin Market* volume is a point of entry into Rossetti's fallen women poems and, especially, into Rossetti's unconventional perspective on the causes and effects of women's fallenness. As D'Amico explains,

Rossetti, unlike many of her contemporaries, saw the fallen woman's story as a complex and layered narrative, one in which the fallen woman was not the only sinner. In these fallen woman ballads, as Rossetti begins to turn the reader's eyes from the fallen woman to others who played a role in her story, even her counterpart the pure bride, is implicated. For Rossetti, the fallen woman is guilty, but her guilt must be shared. (95)

Thus Rossetti's fallen women poems may be understood as daring speech for two reasons: first, because she addresses a controversial topic in such a way that challenges the role of secrecy as a means for social control; and second, because her treatment of that topic implicates all of society in a fallen woman's shame. "The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children" in Rossetti's 1866 volume is a prime example of such daring speech, and one she had to justify to her brother Dante Gabriel, who helped prepare this volume for publication and who disliked this specific poem intensely: in a letter unique for its candor, Rossetti wrote a response to her brother's editorial suggestions that balances deference with genuine gratitude for his insights, that hints at her opinion on women's social reform efforts, and that displays her complex view of this poem

"Winter: My Secret" only when another kind of secrecy—found in devotional discourse—is properly understood. "The Love of Christ" and "A Bruised Reed" pinpoints no individual or group (such as the sinful church-as-institution in Barrett Browning's "Hymn I: A Supplication for Love"). As a result, the text suggests that all humans are responsible for Jesus's "misery" and, likewise, may enjoy the "hiding-place" of his "heart." Moreover, though "A Bruised Reed" uses first-person singular voice for the devotional speaker, the poem, like "The Love of Christ," underscores the theological concept that all humans are fallen, are sinful and thus responsible for Jesus having been "[n]ailed to the racking cross" ("The Love of Christ" 15). For an extended discussion on the invocation of community through "a new, more communal lyric subjectivity" in Rossetti's verses, see Julie Melnyk, "The Lyrical 'We': Self-Representation in Christina Rossetti's 'Later Life.'" *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 11 (2002): 42-61.

(originally titled, *Under the Rose*, from the Latin “*sub rosa* – privately, in secret, in strict confidence” [Flowers 924]) as well as the issue underlying it:

As regards the unpleasant-sided subject [of the poem] I freely admit it: and if you think the performance coarse or what-not pray eject it...though I thought *U.the R* might read its own less, but very likely I misjudge. But do you now, even if we throw <the> *U.the R*. overboard, and whilst I endorse your opinion of the unavoidable and indeed much-to-be desired unreality of women’s work on many social matters, I yet incline to include within female range such an <work> attempt as this: where the certainly possible circumstances are merely indicated as it were in skeleton, where the subordinate characters perform (and no more) their accessory parts, where the field is occupied by a single female figure whose internal portrait is set forth in her own words. Moreover the sketch only gives the girl’s own deductions, feelings, semi resolutions; granted such premises as hers, and right and wrong it seems to me she might easily arrive at such conclusions; and whilst it may truly be urged that unless white could be black and Heaven Hell my experience (thank God) precludes me from hers, I yet don’t see why ‘the Poet mind’ should be less able to construct her from its own inner consciousness than a hundred other unknown quantities. Practical result: if you retain *U.the R.*, I think it would be well placed last in the secular section. (*Letters* 1.234)

It is difficult to discern whether Rossetti’s statements here comprise an apology or an assertion. Is Rossetti, in her “preclusion” from her speaker’s experience, merely using a fallen woman rather than identifying with her—and thus setting up a socially and spiritually insidious form of elitism? Though ambivalent about the work itself, Rossetti in this passage emphasizes the importance of making her speaker’s voice heard; and she defends her topic against Dante Gabriel’s aversion to the “unpleasant-sided subject.” Moreover, Rossetti kept the poem, placing it at the end of the “secular section,” on the very edge of the devotional texts. In this volume, “the Poet mind” negotiates secular, sacred, secret, and public. More importantly, the speaker who struggles with fallenness in “The Iniquity of the Fathers” develops—Rossetti asserts—from “the inner

consciousness” of “the Poet mind” and so is linked with the identity of poet herself. The self “encounter[s] Other.”

Like Barrett-Browning’s texts, Rossetti’s letter and her *Prince’s Progress* volume challenge Victorian social and literary imperatives by departing from the “lyric tones” of a conventionally “feminine” voice (Mermin, *Godiva’s Ride* 71) and by engaging a controversial issue with which Rossetti was associated in a personal way. Though she may have “endorse[d]” Dante Gabriel’s “opinion of the unavoidable and indeed much-to-be desired unreality of women’s work,” we may assume her own work did not fall into this camp: as a volunteer at Highgate Rossetti would have a unique perspective on the subject of fallen women whereby she, as a poet, was able “to construct” the speaker of “The Iniquity of the Fathers” from the “inner consciousness” of “the Poet mind.” Hence her task was different from social busywork, and in constructing her poem she demonstrates the value of her first-hand perspective through her unapologetic approach to the topic.

Additionally, Rossetti demonstrates a lack of anxiety over her audience’s acceptance of the poem (or any of her fallen women texts), even, as Marsh points out, in an age when “penitentiary work was regarded as especially unsuitable – even contaminating – for unmarried women” (226). A “sexual fall,” as Scott Rogers explains “becomes a tincture which has contaminated the woman” (32) and could potentially contaminate the “sister” looking after her. To present fallen women texts in her first two volumes could potentially give Rossetti the taint of fallenness herself—especially if readers were aware of her work at Highgate—and yet Rossetti rejects Dante Gabriel’s suggestions to avoid this “unpleasant-sided subject.” Unlike Barrett Browning, Rossetti

accomplishes this daring speech indirectly; yet she is daring nonetheless. *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, like the volume that precedes it and the ones that follow, maintains a persistent effort to connect theological notions of fallenness featured in devotional texts with social assumptions about women's transgressions. In both types of verse, secrecy creates a liminal space between the public and private, a space where to be "fallen" takes on multiple meanings and challenges taboos of polite society by highlighting the place of the human soul in its "fallen" condition. Specifically, the lessons on secrecy learned in the *Goblin Market* volume find traction in "The Iniquity of the Fathers," especially because this fallen woman poem is narrated by a powerful female speaker who—though she is not a fallen woman herself—experiences a transformation. Regarding the distinction between Rossetti's text and the literature of sensibility, Tomoko Takiguchi observes that "Rossetti cultivates and transforms the motif of secrecy, which in the literature of sensibility usually creates self-destructive holiness in frailty" (183). The narrator of "The Iniquity of the Fathers" is not frail, nor is she self-destructive, though she experiences the painful effects of social alienation and familial dysfunction caused by her mother's sexual fall.

Placed as the last "secular" poem before the "devotional pieces," and thus occupying a liminal space between the general and devotional poems in the volume, "The Iniquity of the Fathers" may be read in conversation with "Despised and Rejected," a devotional text that features social and spiritual isolation as well as human suffering that is alleviated through Christ's suffering and sacrifice. Rossetti's fallen woman poem may also be considered in light of "Memory," a text in the "secular section" of the volume that addresses the idolatry of an unidentified speaker's undisclosed memory and the means by

which the poem's speaker learns not to "bend [her] knee" (32) in honor of the secret remembrance. Though the poem never reveals what this memory is, we learn that the speaker struggles intensely with it:

I nursed it in my bosom while it lived,
I hid it in my heart when it was dead;
In joy I sat alone, even so I grieved
Alone and nothing said.

I shut the door to face the naked truth,
I stood alone—I faced the truth alone,
Stripped bare of self-regard or forms of ruth
Till first and last were shown. (1-8)

The secrecy of this memory is reinforced by the speaker's isolation: "None know the choice I made; / I make it still. / None know the choice I made and broke my heart" (13-14). While such a broken heart may suggest, at first, a failed romance, the speaker asserts that in breaking her heart she also broke her "idol: I have braced my will / Once, chosen for once my part" (15-16). Anything—including a lover—might be an idol; and thus the poem encourages readers to contemplate a general spiritual concern (even while they may guess at a particular circumstance). Yet we see a key difference here from the devotional poems in *Goblin Market*: unlike the speaker in "The Bruised Reed," for example, this speaker can "will" and chose the needful "part" wherein she rejects idolatry; and though we do not see God's assistance at work in this text, the spiritual import of the speaker's conformity to the first of the Ten Commandments⁸⁷ suggests that the treatment of a secret

⁸⁷ "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:2-6). Rossetti suggests an implicit connection of thought between the concept of idolatry and "the iniquity of the fathers" in her own poems by including "Memory" and "The Iniquity of the Fathers Upon the Children" in this volume.

care in a secret place, alienated from others, is a means by which the process of spiritual formation takes shape.

Thus the poem seems to encourage tension between isolation and spiritual progress: “I have a room,” explains the speaker in the second section of the text,

whereinto no one enters
Save I myself alone:
There sits a blessed memory on a throne,
There my life centres; [...]

[...]If any should force entrance he might see there
One buried yet not dead,
Before whose face I no more bow my head
Or bend my knee there [...]. (21-24, 29-32)

Though she anticipates a reunion “in Paradise” with the object of her memory (she “think[s] how it will be in Paradise / When we’re together [35-36]), and so suggests, again, that romance may be the inspiration of the memory/secret, the speaker also suggests a kind of resolution that recalls the Virgin Mary in Barrett Browning’s “The Virgin Mary to the Child Jesus.” Like Mary, this speaker alters her gaze: she knows she must turn her face, though in this case she does not look on Jesus but away from her idol. In this secret space, the speaker reveals the human soul’s struggle with spiritual fallenness by emphasizing that she isolates herself and lives with her secret, even while she resists the spiritually destructive effects of it. We will see this focus again in “The Iniquity of the Fathers”; and what is important for readers to understand is the means by which “Memory,” building on the idea of human fallenness introduced in *Goblin Market*, demonstrates progress away from idolatry that involves having to live secretly with the effects of it (as well as the temptation to return to it—the secret memory is “buried” but “not yet dead” [30]). Moreover, the speaker shows her capacity to move away from

destructive idolatry, thus demonstrating the effects of God's work illustrated in the *Goblin Market* volume's devotional texts. What Rossetti's 1862 volume suggests, *The Prince's Progress* puts into practice.

If we consider Rossetti's general and devotional poems of a piece, then we may regard "Memory" in light of "Despised and Rejected," a devotional text that emphasizes, like "Memory," a speaker's isolation and struggle with fallenness: "My sun has set," laments the speaker,

I dwell
In darkness as a dead man out of sight;
And none remains, not one, that I should tell
To him mine evil plight
This bitter night. (1-5)

Yet unlike "Memory," the speaker in "Despised and Rejected" refuses help from God and others, and thus remains incapable of transforming her own fallenness or having it transformed: "I will make fast my door / That hollow friends may trouble me no more" (6-7). Such "friends" sound like censorious society in "The Iniquity of the Fathers," the "women" who "speak and stare" at the child of a fallen woman (334); and yet the "evil plight" of the speaker in this text suggests that social alienation here is also self-inflicted. "Friend, open to Me," suggests a voice in line 8, which we understand by the end of the poem to be, specifically, Christ's (the capitalization of "Me" indicates the voice of God as well); yet the speaker insists,

I am deaf as are my walls:
Cease crying, for I will not hear
Thy cry of hope or fear.
Others were dear,
Others forsook me: what art thou indeed
That I should heed
Thy lamentable need? (9-15)

Wrapped in her own secret space, this speaker appears to idolize her own darkness and pride; and thus mistaking Jesus for “hollow friends” deafens her own ears to an appeal that, ultimately, could save her from her “bitter” isolation. Marked by society’s scorn and duplicity, this speaker is nevertheless admonished in her resistance by more requests (and a weighty reminder) from Jesus:

‘Friend, My Feet bleed.
Open thy door to Me and comfort Me.’
I will not open, trouble me no more.
Go on thy way footsore,
I will not rise and open unto thee.

‘Then it is nothing to thee? Open, see
Who stands to plead with thee.
Open lest I should pass thee by, and thou
One day entreat My Face
And howl for grace,
And I be deaf as thou art now.
Open to Me.’ (18-29)

This speaker’s refusal to open the door reminds us of “Winter: My Secret,” when the speaker “cannot ope to everyone who taps” (13); and yet, by rejecting both society and Christ the speaker of “Despised and Rejected” conceals herself in utter isolation and “darkness.” Moreover, she demonstrates the spiritual danger of her actions, by risking deafness to God’s entreaties in such a way that threatens damnation—Jesus suggests that offers of grace may cease when they are continually rejected. Yet stubbornly, the speaker cries, “Leave me in peace” (31), suggests that she will “arise and chase thee from [her] door” (35), and remains deaf to Jesus’s requests “all night long” (38), even when he “[pleads] with tears” (42). Like the “hardness, coldness, slights” that Christ in “The Love of Christ” endures “For three and thirty years” (3-4), which ultimately result in his “misery” on the cross (22), the utter lack of compassion on the speaker’s part in

“Despised and Rejected” effectively spurns the suffering one who knocks at her door.

“My Feet bleed,” Jesus says, “see My face, / See My hands bleed to bring thee grace, /

My heart doth bleed for thee” (45-46), but ultimately he leaves:

Then died away
That voice, in silence as of sorrow;
Then footsteps echoing like a sigh
Passed me by (50-53).

In both poems, however, the penultimate moment comes when the speaker reveals that despite human fallenness, resistance, lack of compassion, and “coldness,” God provides a means of spiritual change: in “The Love of Christ” it is a “hiding-place,” and in “Despised and Rejected” it is a reinstatement of community for the speaker via Christ’s effort: “On the morrow,” the speaker reports, “I saw upon the grass / Each footprint marked in blood, and on my door / The mark of blood forever more” (55-59). Thus marked, the speaker’s place of isolation becomes a means to receive grace, even against the speaker’s own will. Like “Memory,” wherein the speaker wrestles with idolatry in isolation, “Despised and Rejected” features the struggle with the sin of pride that separates the human soul from God and others. Though perhaps she is justified in her misery, especially because human society has proved duplicitous, she is unwise to reject Christ’s gracious offer—an offer made at his own expense. Alongside “The Love of Christ” and “The Bruised Reed,” “Winter: My Secret,” and “Memory,” we may see that “Despised and Rejected” depicts the process of spiritual formation in a secret space where the body of Christ connects, in a sacramental way, the material and spiritual in the devotional act. This act foregrounds human fallenness in such a way that offers redemption. It also prevents isolation from God and others; and it offers a model of social interaction wherein Rossetti’s readers—like the imploring Christ in “Despised and

Rejected”—may identify themselves with (and not against) other fallen humans, no matter what the cost. In “The Iniquity of the Fathers” we see the effects of a sexual fall in similar terms—and we see the potential for transformation that emerges from secrecy in the text.

Like Rossetti’s other fallen women poems, such as “Cousin Kate” in *Goblin Market* and “Light Love” in *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems*, “The Iniquity of the Fathers” suggests (as the language of its title implies) that women do not fall alone, and that the sins of *fathers* affect the children of fallen women. As Dinah Roe suggests, “The Iniquity of the Fathers” is one of Rossetti’s few “overtly political poem[s],” and is one “that gives a Christian perspective on the social inequality brought by illegitimate parentage” (113). Though the title is drawn from a biblical reference⁸⁸ that emphasizes the generational effects of sin (“fathers” thus signifying ancestors rather than referring to specific paternity), the poem begins with the speaker, a young woman named Margaret, affirming that while she was born “under the rose” (3), she “do[es] not guess his name / Who wrought my Mother’s shame, / And gave me life forlorn” (4-6). Her father is conspicuously absent, his identity a secret like her mother’s: she was “sent away” from her mother (28), who is a prominent and wealthy member of society, the unnamed “Lady at the Hall” (59). Protecting both the child from shame by association and the Lady from public disgrace, Margaret’s removal created a feeling of isolation in the young girl: as she “waxed to youth” from childhood, she develops no friendships and is cared for by a nurse who “never talked to [her] / Of mother or of father” (115-116). Margaret receives a ring from the nurse (124-43) at the moment of the nurse’s death, after which Margaret withdraws in grief from all human society: “For days day after day / On my weary bed I

⁸⁸ Exodus 20: see note 23 on page 19.

lay / Wishing the time would pass” and hoping to die herself, because “the one friend” she had “[w]as dead, I knew no other” (164-70). Thus the decision to separate an illegitimate child from her family, made in order to safeguard her and her mother’s public reputations, ultimately isolates the young girl, cutting her off from the community altogether. Though Margaret is not, strictly speaking, a fallen woman, she lives the life of a social outcast; and the emotional impact of her isolation is almost as dire: she wishes for her own death (167-68) and becomes speechless (179), “silent as a stone” (185).

A visit from the Lady draws Margaret out from her isolation; and while the poem reveals the Lady as Margaret’s mother, the Lady maintains her mask of anonymity with her daughter when the two women meet. “Instead of finally revealing the truth of their blood relationship” as she addresses Margaret, Takiguchi notes, “my Lady conceals it, and covers her affection for her child with another story, saying that it is because the child’s nurse was her own nurse that she loved the child. Thus there emerges a double structure, in my Lady’s words, in which the apparent meaning hides the true meaning” (187-88). Indeed, the Lady crafts a “hiding-place,” just as she had done by sending her illegitimate child away: known as a benevolent benefactress in society-at-large, the Lady maintains her public persona with her daughter. Even while making a loving gesture, she isolates herself and her child further by preserving secrecy. Moreover, the text suggests that such secrecy develops not only from the Lady’s pride or desire to maintain her reputation, but because the society has made it so: after Margaret accepts the offer to be “my Lady’s maid” and to live with her as “[h]er little friend...Almost her child,” (301-02), Margaret confesses that she “hate[s] when people come” to visit (334). The women either treat her as a spectacle or as a non-entity:

The women speak and stare,
And mean to be so civil.
This one will stroke my hair,
That one pat my cheek
And praise my Lady's kindness,
Expecting me to speak;
I like the proud ones best
Who sit as struck with blindness,
As if I wasn't there. (336-43)

Moreover, as I noted earlier in this discussion, Margaret's terrified mother "makes" Margaret "keep [to her] room" when any "gentleman" visits (343-48). Secrets, silence, and hiddenness enforced by a "prying" public: all of these define Margaret's life. "Of course," Takiguchi explains,

since the truth of their relationship would bring disgrace, the mother cannot reveal it even to her child. But there may be some subtler reason she cannot tell: as a fallen woman she is not allowed to have any words for this particular discourse. This is reminiscent of the custom of the Penitentiaries: in the process of reclamation it was strictly forbidden for inmates to speak about their 'fallen' past or their illegitimate children: they were thus, in a sense, deprived of words. (188)

The Lady is "deprived of words" in her explanation of her child's origins, she is continuously "deprived of words" in her respectable life; and, as the previous passage demonstrates, Margaret is deprived both of words and action when she is forced to remain in her room, away from "gentlemen." Margaret chafes against these restrictions, warning her mother, "Give me a longer tether, / Or I may break from it" (362-63). What is significant here is the extent to which Rossetti's text illustrates the similarity of misery and constriction experienced by mother and daughter alike—the mother's fallenness has been costly her child. Yet, more importantly, the proud visitors who patronize Margaret (or ignore her altogether), who draw lines of social distinction that hint at Margaret's disreputable origins, are revealed by the poem as responsible parties—alongside her

mother and father—to Margaret’s misery. In the text, the “single female figure whose internal portrait is set forth in her own words” (Rossetti *Letters* 1.234) becomes a nexus for ideas of secrecy and fallenness that features the guilt of a whole society.

Like the speaker in “Winter: My Secret,” Margaret chooses to hold society at a distance. Though her mother promises to provide financial support when she marries, Margaret chooses to remain single: “I may not mean to wed,” she says, “[y]et I’ll be civil” (452-53), even while in her dreams she longs for an intact family (454-77). What is “little short of Heaven,” in her view, is family life unconstrained by secrecy:

I’d give my gentle blood
To wash my special shame
And drown my private grudge;
I’d toil and moil much rather
The dingiest cottage drudge
Whose mother need not blush,
Than live here like a lady
And see my Mother flush
And hear her voice unsteady
Sometimes, yet never dare
Ask to share her care. (467-77)

In the lines that follow, Margaret recounts all those who “sneer” at her from all levels of society and make her “almost” desire her own death (478-500). Prominent economic status and a good name cannot save her (or her mother) from shame; and though the church preaches that “All [are] equal before God” (501) the parishioners “nod” as “sundry sleepers” during this lesson (503), comfortable, perhaps, in their distinction from Margaret and all fallen women. They need not reflect on equality, blind as they are to the gross injustice they create.

Thus “The Iniquity of the Fathers” illustrates inequality at all levels of society and in the church itself. What is at stake is Margaret’s identity, for though it is her mother

who perhaps fits the profile of a Highgate penitent, her father “set his snare” and “[l]oad[ed]” Margaret “with shame” belonging to her mother (524, 527). She pays the price for society’s fallenness, implicated as she is in her mother’s guilt and offered relief from no one—not even the church with its platitudes about equality. Transformed by secrets into a fallen woman herself, Margaret illustrates the aspects of secrecy conventionally associated with fallen women in the Victorian age. However, in the end of the poem Margaret shifts her focus away from a desire for death to her determined choice “to accept my lot unmixed,” to embrace her identity as a woman with a complicated role in society:

I’ll not be wooed for pelf;
I’ll not blot out my shame
With any man’s good name;
But nameless as I stand,
My hand is my own hand,
And nameless as I came
I go to the dark land. (535-41)

Margaret is a woman who “do[es] not cease to love” (75) her own identity, even though it is a marked one. “[T]he question, suggests Takiguchi,

of how to live within the limits of secrecy (confinement) remains and is passed on to the illegitimate child born by the fallen woman. The child, who must also live with the secret, criticizes her mother, her father, and above all the ‘old-fashioned’ English society that imposes strict restrictions upon women; she is determined to live on as a single woman, rejecting society’s domestic ideologies (191-92)

Beyond this rejection of “domestic ideologies,” though, the poem suggests a spiritual aspect to Margaret’s choice at the end of the text. Repeating the words of the sermon she recounted earlier in the poem, Margaret completes her story with the devotional language of prayer:

“All equal in the grave”—
I bide my time till then:
“All equal before God”—
Today I feel his rod,
Tomorrow he may save:
Amen. (pages)

What looks like a bleak ending, focused on the role of God’s anger in Margaret’s misery and on her resignation to the shaky assurance that “[t]omorrow he *may* save” (my emphasis), may be read in a different way with Rossetti’s devotional texts in mind. Throughout “The Iniquity of the Fathers” we have seen the complexity as well as the damaging effects of secrecy on Victorian social relationships. Yet in contrast to the secrecy forced upon Margaret due to fallenness and shame, the last few lines of the poem also claim that “All [are] equal before God.” Therefore, while the “rod” she feels may be the misery of her bitter, isolated soul, she may experience equality in the “hiding-place” of Christ’s heart and through the “mark of blood” which offers grace to that soul in the secret space of devotion. In devotional discourse, tropes of God and the human soul demonstrate the process of spiritual formation through the constructive ways that a particular kind of secrecy transforms human fallenness. Rather than lapsing into silence, or a wish for death, the soul that understands the “hiding-place” God offers has the power to maintain—as “Winter: My Secret” suggests—a role in society that challenges conventions of respectability and status without destroying agency or effacing identity.

4.6 Conclusion: “What *God* knows her to be”

As the epigraph to this chapter shows, Rossetti at the end of her life believed she had “dared to speak to others,” which is an interesting way of describing her prolific and popular career as a poet. In her idea of a “dare,” which echoes the speaker in Barrett Browning’s Epilogue to “The Seraphim,” Rossetti reveals the complications of her efforts

to make public in poetic form the links between what she envisions as “poor sinful woman” and also as a woman who “is herself what God knows her to be.” In this statement we see the texture of a devotional self, who negotiates “fallenness” in a secret place—known only to God—and who strives to convey that self (even in “daring” ways) to others. The continuous movement between ideas of self, God, and others is the energy of devotional verse; and Rossetti’s uses of secrecy, which address “fallenness” in a variety of forms, reveal that movement as a vital means of social critique and devotional expression that encourage relational interaction rather than alienation between humans, and between humans and God. In “dar[ing] to speak to others,” Christina Rossetti follows Barrett Browning’s determination to allow her “earthly heart” (as Barrett Browning’s Epilogue speaker called it) to be known, in devotional writing, to a reading public, even while she asserts again and again that a woman “is herself” in ways that are only known fully by God.

In the future, when we consider more fully the role of secrecy in Rossetti’s texts, we must appreciate the various strands of thought that inform her secrets. Is secrecy, as Rosenblum suggests, a “rubric useful for the sanction for her poetic austerity” that she ultimately supercedes with elements of boldness (96)? Is it, as Harrison asserts, a type of “simplicity” through which her poems “[insist] upon [their] own Reserve, imitating God’s Reserve in veiling Himself behind the symbolic surfaces of nature (74)? Is it a means of renunciation, self-erasure? Or is it a demonstration of boldness that, when equipped with the Tractarian tenets of Reserve, incorporates theological issues into a sharp critique of social injustice and a clear assertion of female subjectivity and strength? In the context of Rossetti’s work at Highgate, we understand in new ways the

connections between community, devotional activity, and social hierarchies. In the context of her devotional poems, we see that the process of spiritual formation involves a “hiding-place” of regeneration and empowerment that displaces the secret space of shame assigned to many fallen women, and challenges all humans to identify with rather than against one another. Moreover, Rossetti’s devotional poetics suggest that all humans in their fallenness incur shame; and so no one may judge someone else “poor” and “sinful” without the deep conviction that they, too, deserve such labels. Because it is God who enables a woman to be “what *God* knows her to be,” such a woman may dwell in a “hiding-place” that is both a retreat from the “prying” world and from the soul’s own struggles: it is a place where her secret is maintained in the mystery of God, as the Tractarians would have it, and also in the activity of the world, where it effects change in the lives of those forced to accept their secrets as shame.

Conclusion

Victorian Devotional Poetry: A “Child of Process”

As the conclusion to Chapter 4 suggests, the best way to close a discussion of Victorian devotional poetry—at this point—is with more questions than answers. Although many critics from the Victorian age to our own day suggest important connections between religious aesthetics and nineteenth-century verse, the role of devotional poetry has yet to be fully explored or appreciated as a critical or theoretical concept. In the 2007 MLA Convention in Chicago, one session out of hundreds was devoted to Victorian devotional poetry.⁸⁹ This low level of attention to the topic suggests that research interests in this area are most frequently pursued at smaller scholarly gatherings. While it may be difficult to delineate a particular role for devotional poetry in Victorian studies, I firmly believe that devotional verse is valuable right now, even if it disappoints as poetry, because of its contribution to the overall discussion about what poetry means to literary studies and to contemporary culture.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ The session title was “The Material of Devotion: Books, Bodies, and Victorian Women’s Religious Poetry,” and included Stephanie Johnson (Valparaiso University), Cheri Lin Larsen Hoeckley (Westmont College), and Krista Lysack (University of Western Ontario).

⁹⁰ One example of this discussion is in the January 2008 issue of *PMLA*, which dedicates an entire section to “The New Lyric Studies” and begins with an essay by Virginia Jackson called “Who Reads Poetry”?

Like poetry, religion has an uneasy place in the literature and culture of our historical moment. As my students in an American literature course which focused on spirituality and identity explained to me, religion is difficult to discuss for two reasons: first, it is (like poetry) subjective, and thus open to any number of meanings and interpretations; and second, it makes people uncomfortable, especially when they feel they must avoid offending others. For these two reasons I find it difficult to envision a course structured around the main ideas and texts of my dissertation: how would I teach devotional poetry? As a sidebar to Victorian poetics? As an alternate poetics? As a historical phenomenon?⁹¹ Moreover, how do I address the “religiousness” of the verses without being apologetic or fearful I might offend?

These are pertinent questions, but they are not the best or most exciting. More significant in the areas of research and teaching are, I think, inquiries into the accessibility and possibilities of devotional poetry—especially because the devotional poems of popular (and now canonical) writers like Barrett Browning are relatively unknown. For example, how can we create a digital archive of devotional poems for world-wide access, in order to facilitate further research? How might I attempt a critical history of English devotional poetry? What are the possibilities for better visibility of this type of poetry at conferences and in curricula? More personally, what are some ways in which devotional poetry challenges us in our definitions of poetry and in our ethical relationships with others?

⁹¹ The recently published and beautifully-presented *Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Eds. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, 2006) as well as Gordon Mursell’s two volume study of *English Spirituality* (SPCK, 2001) will be an immense help in understanding that phenomenon historically and contextualizing it for students.

As I have shown, Barrett Browning, Tennyson, and Rossetti suggest several avenues for further definition and research. For each writer, issues of authority, modernity, and social status reveal a spiritual dimension we have, for the most part, neglected until now. I hope that neglect subsides as more studies of Victorian devotional poetry emerge. In the end, though, perhaps it is not—as our poets have demonstrated—the scholarly definitions or arguments, the research “results,” that matter most. As Alice Meynell’s 1896 poem “I am the Way” suggests, it is the process itself that is most spiritually revealing and formative for text, reader, and critic alike:

THOU art the Way.
Hadst Thou been nothing but the goal,
I cannot say
If Thou hadst ever met my soul.

I cannot see—
I, child of process—if there lies
An end for me,
Full of repose, full of replies.

I’ll not reproach
The road that winds, my feet that err.
Access, Approach
Art Thou, Time, Way, and Wayfarer. (518)

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APPENDIX 1

Volumes of Devotional or Sacred Verse Published Between 1800 and 1910 in England and America: A Brief List

This list is not exhaustive, and is meant simply to show the range and types of devotional (often called “sacred”) verse published in the nineteenth century. Moreover, all works that are now available in full text on Google Books (www.books.google.com) are marked with an asterisk (*).

- 1819 Francis Hodgson, *Saeculomastix* (London: J. Porter)
- 1820 Francis Hodgson, *Sacred Leisure* (London: Taylor & Hessey)
- 1824 Henry Devereux Sewell, *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns for Social and Private Worship**
- 1827 John Keble, *The Christian Year** (3rd ed, 1828)
- 1829 Robert Montgomery, *A Universal Prayer; Death; A Vision of Heaven; A Vision of Hell* (London: Printed for Samuel Maunder)*
- 1830 The Rt. Rev. Reginald Heber, D.D., Bishop of Calcutta, *Poems* (Hingham, C and E.B. Gill—NY?)*
- Frederick William Faber, *Hymns**
- Dr. Joshua Leavitt, ed. *Christian Lyre*
- 1833 Mrs. West, *Sacred Poems for Sundays and Holidays**
- 1835 Richard Chenevix Trench, *The Story of Justin Martyr and Other Poems*
- 1836 The Rev. Richard Cattermole, B. D., *Sacred Poetry of the Seventeenth Century: Including the Whole of Giles Fletcher’s Christ’s Victory and Triumph; With Copious Selections from Spenser, Davies, Sandys, P. Fletcher, Wither, Bishop King, Quarles, Herbert, Milton, In Two Vols. Vol 1* (London: Joseph Rickerby)*
- Mary Anne Roscoe Jevons, *The Sacred Offering* (Boston: Joseph Dowe; republication of English work—a gift book? 1838 ed)*
- 1838 Richard Chenevix Trench, *Sabbataion, Honor Neale, and Other Poems*
- Lyra Apostolica* (Multiple writers, including John Henry Newman, John Keble, and Hurrell Froude. American Ed, 1844)*

- 1840 Edward Stephen Hawker, *Ecclesia*
- 1841 Edward Farr, *Gems of Sacred Poetry* (London?)
- 1842 Aubrey De Vere, *A Song of Faith: Devout Exercises and Sonnets* (London, William Pickering)*
- 1844 Rufus Wilmot Griswold, ed. *The Illustrated Book of Christian Ballads and Other Poems* (Philadelphia, Lindsay & Blakiston)
- Samuel Francis Smith, *Lyric Gems: A Collection of Original and Select Sacred Poetry* (Boston, Gould, Kendall and Lincoln)
- 1845 Francis Henry Lyte, *Poems, Chiefly Religious* (2nd ed., London: William Pickering, also 2nd ed in 1841?)*
- John Mason Neale, *A Mirror of Faith: Lays and Legends of the Church of England* (Cambridge, UK: J. T. Walters)
- 1846 George Stokes. *Ancient Devotional Poetry: Devotional Poetry, Now First Published from a Manuscript of the XVIth or XVIIth Century* (London: Religious Tract Soc)*
- John Stanley Tute, *Holy Times and Scenes* (Cambridge: John Thomas Walters; London: James Burns)*
- 1847 Edward Farr, *Select Poetry, Chiefly Sacred, of the Reign of King James the First* (Cambridge, J & J. J. Deighton; London, John W. Parker)*
- 1848 William Cowper, *Poems*
- The Rev. Charles Rogers, Comp? *Lyra Britannica: A Collection of British Hymns Printed from the Genuine Texts with Biographical Sketches of the Hymn Writers* (London: Longmans, Green & Co.)*
- 1849 Edward Caswall, *Lyra Catholica*
- Church Psalmist: Or, Psalms and Hymns Designed for the Public, Social, and Private Use of Evangelical Christians.* 25th Ed.(!) (NY: Mark H. Newman & Co.)
- 1850 Rufus W. Griswold, Editor. *The Sacred Poets of England and America, from the Earliest to the Present Time.* (American)*

- Thomas Hastings, *Devotional Hymns and Religious Poems* (NY: Mark H. Newman & Co.)*
- 1854 *Sacred Poetry, Selected by the Editors of Clerical Journal and Church Chronicle* (London: Ohn Crockford; also pub'd in 1825 [Edinburgh: W. Oliphant])
- A. C. Thompson, *Songs in the Night: Or, Hymns for the Sick and Suffering* (Boston: S. K. Whipple & Co., also 1858 in Boston: J.E. Tilton; and 1872?)*
- 1856 *Sabbath Bells Chimed by the Poets* (NY: D. Appleton & Co)*
- 1857 Elizabeth Harcourt Mitchell, *First Fruits: Poems* (London: Hurst and Blackett)*
- 1858 Adelaide Anne Procter, *Poems* (London: Thomas Y. Crowell)
- 1861 Dora Greenwell, *Poems* (Edinburgh: Alexander Strahan and Co.)*
- 1862 Adelaide Anne Procter, *A Chaplet of Verses*. 2nd ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, & Roberts)*
- Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan)
- The Rev. Robert Aris Wilmott, *English Sacred Poets* (London); also, *Lives of the English Sacred Poets* (1834, London, John W. Parker*)
- 1864 G. Stevenson de M. Rutherford, Comp. and Ed., *Lays of the Sanctuary and Other Poems* (London: Elizabeth Good—to whom the volume, a charity effort, is dedicated)*
- Jane Hamilton Thomas, Comp. *Drifted Snow-flakes: Or, Poetical Gatherings from Many Authors*. (US? “For Sale at the Protestant Episcopal Book Society”)*
- 1865 Cecil Francis Alexander, Arranger, *The Sunday Book of Poetry* (Cambridge, Sevier and Francis)*
- Robert Hall Baynes, *Lyra Anglicana: Hymns and Sacred Songs* (London: Imprinted for Houlston & Wright)
- . *English Lyrics: A Collection of English Poetry to the Present Day*. (London: Houlston & Wright)
- John Henry Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius* (London)
- Anson D. F. Randolf, pub., *The Shadow of the Rock, and Other Religious Poems* (NY)* (1872 reissue; “companion” to *Changed Cross*)

- The Rev. George T. Rider, M.A., *Lyra Anglicana; Or, a Hymnal of Sacred Poetry, Selected from the Best English Writers, and Arranged after the Order of the Apostle's Creed* (NY: D. Appleton)*
- 1866 Horatius Bonar, D.D. *Hymns of Faith and Hope* (NY: Robert Carter and Brothers)*
- Anson D. F. Randolph (pub), *The Changed Cross and Other Religious Poems* (new ed.)*
- Christina Rossetti, *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems* (London: Macmillan)
- 1867 Robert Hall Baynes, *The Illustrated Book of Sacred Poems* (London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin)
- Frederick J. Furnivall, *Hymns to the Virgin and Christ, The Parliament of Devils, and Other Religious Poems, Chiefly from the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth MS. No. 853.* (London: Pub'd for the Early English Text Soc., Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co.)
- 1868 Thomas T. Lynch, *The Rivulet: A Contribution to Sacred Song* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer)*
- John Henry Newman, *Verses on Various Occasions* (London)*
- George MacDonald, *England's Antiphon* (London: Macmillan)
- 1870 Lucy Fletcher Massey, *Christian Lyrics: Chiefly Selected from Modern Authors* (NY: Scribner, Welford; also pub'd in 1866, 1868, 1884)
- 1872 Alfred Austin, *Madonna's Child** (1895 edition, London, Macmillan)
- Christina Rossetti, *Poems* (Boston: Roberts Brothers)
- The Rev. S. J. Stone, M.A. *The Knight of Intercession and Other Poems* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co)*
- 1873 Dora Greenwell, *The Soul's Legend* (London: Strahan & Co.)*
- 1874 Dora Greenwell, *Songs of Salvation* (London: W. Isbister & Co.)*
- [Anonymous?] *Sacred Poems Being a Selection from the Poets Devotional and Moral* (American)*

- 1877 Mary Wilder (Foote) Tileston, *Sursum Corda: Hymns for the Sick and Suffering* (Boston, Roberts Brothers)*
- 1884 *English Sacred Lyrics* (London, Kegan Paul)*
- 1886 The Rev. W. Robertson Nicoll, M.A., *Songs of Rest* (London, Hodder and Stoughton)*
- 1888 Helen H. Strong Thompson, *Songs in the Night-watches: From Voices Old and New* (NY: The Baker and Taylor Co.)*
- 1889? Francis Turner Palgrave, *The Treasury of Sacred Song, Selected from the English Lyrical Poetry of Four Centuries* (Oxford)*
- 1890 Christina Rossetti, *Poems* (London: Macmillan)
- 1896 Cecil Francis Alexander, *Poems* (Macmillan)*
- 1906 FitzRoy Carrington, *The Pilgrim's Staff: Poems Divine and Moral* (NY: Duffield & Co.)*
- 1910? Kate Wright, *Sacred Poems of the XIXth Century*