Secularism, the Oxford Movement, and Religious Aesthetics in John Keble, Christina Rossetti, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Gerard Manley Hopkins

Mary Harmon

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss

Part of the Environmental Education Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/3926

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 2021 Mary Harmon
Acknowledgments

In a 2019 *On Being* interview, the Irish poet Pádraig Ó Tuama used a West Kerry phrase “mo sheasamh ort lá na choise tinne” that translates to something like “You are the place where I stand on the day when my feet are sore.” I have thought about that phrase often when I reflect on the people who have loved me through to this moment. I want to offer my deep gratitude to all those who gave me a place to stand.

First, I would like to thank my committee members – Dr. Micael Clarke, Dr. Frank Fennell, Dr. Jasper Cragwall, and Dr. Mike Murphy. I am grateful for the patience and grace you have offered me during this process. I am especially grateful for the wisdom that Dr. Clarke and Dr. Fennell have offered me on my many drafts, especially as they transitioned into their retirement. Thank you for the gift of your time.

A huge thank you to my mom, Sheila. When I was in high school and you called to register me for undergraduate orientation and inadvertently declared my major to be English, you could not have imagined what would follow. Thank you for introducing me to Victorian literature in the first place. Thank you for sitting with my faculty and friends in Ambrose Hall during my senior undergrad defense ten years ago. Thank you for your calm voice on the phone or notes in the mail that greeted my Chicago apartment. But most importantly, thank you for the infinite, practical, and loving ways you have supported me through this process. Thank you to my dad, David, for your years of hard work supporting us and the value you place on the power
of words. Thank you for giving me an ear to be grumpy from time to time, but know that from this point on you have to call me Dr. Harmon.

Thank you to my siblings Sarah, Anne, Grace, Joseph, Clare, and Thomas. I love you more than words can express. Thank you to my brothers-in-law Bryan and Nino for their abundant kindness. Thank you to my nieces and nephews Bobby, Gianna, Patrick, Ronan, and Clara. You have been a light in dark places and my deepest joy. I love being your aunt and I cannot wait to spend more time with you now that this is over.

Thank you to my grandparents, Joyce Harmon and Bob and Judy Curran. Thank you for the many prayer intentions, Mass intentions, and rosaries. I especially want to thank Grandma and Grandpa Curran for the years of calls, visits, rides, delicious desserts, and affectionate love. You always greet me with joy and have loved me with joy. You are like second parents to me and I miss you terribly when I am not with you.

Jake, thank you for being calm when I was anxious, kind when I was bitter, light-hearted when I was serious, adventurous when I was paralyzed, open when I shut down, and a comfort when I needed you most. Thank you frankly seems insufficient for the deep love you have shown me, but thank you all the same. You were the one to see me through.

Thank you to Charles. You are a wonderful neighbor, friend, and confidant. You have given me some of the best advice of my life. Thank you for the walks, birthday cakes, life chats, and your voice of reason. Thank you especially for being my person during the pandemic.

Alex, thank you for your many letters and cards. Your encouragement never failed to put a smile on my face. Your letters felt like a slice of the home I left in Davenport, and for that I will be forever grateful.
Thank you to Adam. You are brilliant but too humble to admit it. Thank you for letting me crash into your life and join you on adventures, especially at my lowest points. May we meet again.

Thank you to the members of the Loyola University Chicago Victorian Society, especially Brandiann Molby. Your help through comps was invaluable. Thank you for believing in me when I could not believe in myself.

Thank you to my St. Ambrose friends, especially Brea, Lauren, and Kristen. You all deserve honorary doctorates for all of the times you heard me read sections of my dissertation out loud. Thank you for your years of friendship (and an extraordinary amount of cookies). You have a way of returning me to myself, and I hope to return that level of friendship for years to come.

To the staff at Rogers Park Social, thank you for cheering me on. RPS was often the highlight of my day and one of the most inviting places to write. I look forward to the day when I can come in for a chat and a drink and no more.

Finally, I want to end with the words from great uncle Philip Colgan, who passed away in 2018. Phil earned his PhD in psychology and before he died, he wrote this to me:

I must say I am impressed that you are having in there with the damned dissertation thing. I remember (sadly!) having the dissertation be like a roommate who never did the dishes, never paid rent, always was complaining, and left smelly socks about almost as if to taunt me that it was all up to me, no one else. It has always made me think that completing the doctorate was as much about the inward journey of learning to take from life (it’s my degree, g.d. it!) and having that be the end in itself. So, I send you strong encouragement to let anger be your agent of change forward, and let depression and all its
cousins be the distractions they surely are. Of course, you will be glad forever when you have slain this beast, irrespective of what ‘jobs’ are in your future. I send you legions of smoting swords that are merciless in their grab for ‘mine!’

With much love and affection, Philip

There have been many days when I wish I could have asked you for advice, but I found myself coming back again and again to these words. Phil, thank you for giving me a place to stand when my feet were sore, and thank you for the swords to keep going.
To the students of Arrupe College of Loyola University Chicago.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | iii |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER ONE: JOHN KEBLE, *THE CHRISTIAN YEAR*, AND SECULAR RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS | 20 |
| CHAPTER TWO: CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: TRACTARIANISM, SECULARISM, AND VOCATION | 54 |
| CHAPTER THREE: CROWNED, NOT VANQUISHED: ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER | 99 |
| CHAPTER FOUR: GERARD MANELY HOPKINS’ SECULAR RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS | 135 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 177 |
| VITA | 186 |
INTRODUCTION

I. Project Overview

In this dissertation, Secularism, the Oxford Movement, and Religious Aesthetics in John Keble, Christina Rossetti, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, I will examine the work of Oxford Movement poet John Keble, and the poets who inherited the Oxford Movement aesthetics he helped create, through the lens of secularism. While secular and postsecular theory have been used across multiple disciplines, secular theory has played a special role in literary studies since Matthew Arnold’s treatment of religion and culture, and recent scholars have advocated for using secular theory to inform readings of religious literature. As I shall discuss below, scholars such as Charles Taylor have pushed back against the “subtraction theory” of secularism, the popular assumption that people used to be religious but, through a linear process including the developments of science in the nineteenth century, are no longer religious (Taylor 26). Instead, these scholars have successfully argued that secularization is neither linear nor universal and is particularly bound up with Christianity. I want to use their work to define how I use the term secular, as well as to describe how Victorian religious poetry (and Oxford Movement poetry more specifically) was developed amidst (and inseparable from) the secular conditions of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. I use the work of Colin Jager and his studies in Romanticism to inform our studies of the Victorian poets listed above, poets who come from the generation after the one on which Jager focuses. As I shall demonstrate below, Jager provides important insights in the connection between Protestant textuality, 18th
century Anglican theology, secularism and tolerance, and Romantic literature. While G. B. Tennyson and others have noted the Oxford Movement’s indebtedness to Romanticism (William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Sir Walter Scott in particular), I want to apply Jager’s particular insights on the connections between secularism and Romanticism to Oxford Movement literature. This is especially relevant to the study of Keble, as Keble is often classified as a Victorian but published poetry in the 1820s and built upon ideas established by Wordsworth and 18th century theologians, which in turn impacts the development of Oxford Movement poetry as a whole. Therefore, I will argue secular insights should inform our understandings of Keble’s aesthetics, which can be tracked as these aesthetics are adopted and changed by Rossetti, Procter, and Hopkins. Procter and Hopkins eventually convert from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism (a process more likely in secular conditions, as I shall describe below), and how they mold, blend, or reject the aesthetics created by Keble and his contemporaries illustrate the possibilities of interreligious exchange, even if unwittingly done, in secular contexts.

For the rest of this introduction, I will describe and summarize the Oxford Movement itself, connecting the way current scholars theorize secularism with the particular manifestation of religious belief, practice, and poetry of the Oxford Movement. I will then provide a brief description of some of the scholarship of secularism and the key arguments that play a role in my dissertation. Finally, I will describe my body chapters, which each focus on a different poet, starting with Keble.

II. The Oxford Movement

John Henry Newman attributed the start of the Oxford Movement to Keble’s Assize Sermon, given July 14th, 1833. This sermon was given in response to the passing of the Church
Temporalities Act, which Keble thought was a threat to the religious makeup of the nation and the relationship between Church and State. Besides Newman and Keble, Oxford men such as E.B. Pusey (the members were sometimes called “Puseyites”), Isaac Williams, Fredrick Faber, Hurrell Froude, Robert Isaac Wilberforce, among others, contributed to the movement that was born. Today, the Oxford movement is known for its Tory politics and its theological positions that revived pre-Reformation practices and beliefs within the Church of England. These beliefs were defended in *Tracts for the Times*, written by the several members including Newman and Keble, which gave rise to the movement’s other name, the Tractarian Movement, beginning in 1833. One of their arguments was that the Anglican Church was the Anglo-Catholic branch of the Catholic Church (the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church being the other two), but Anglo-Catholicism was the truest branch because it was freer from the corruptions of the other branches, especially the papacy of Roman Catholicism. They could claim this Catholic heritage by placing authority on Apostolic Succession. Along with this revival of pre-Reformation practices included an emphasis on the liturgy, architecture, music, the Book of Common Prayer, poetry, and other forms of literature and art. Newman’s conversion struck a blow to the movement, but Anglo-Catholic membership still continued on at Oxford even after Newman left. Anglo-Catholic or High Church parishes were formed in London and elsewhere and architects such as William Butterfield were tasked with building Neo-Gothic churches. Yet the movement failed to make widespread changes to the beliefs of a vast majority of the English people. Robert Pattison in *The Great Dissent: John Henry Newman and the Liberal Heresy* argues that the Oxford Movement was ineffective at making practical changes to the Church of England or developing an effective political agenda. The religious makeup of whole country drastically changed over the nineteenth century with an influx of Irish immigrants and an
exploding number of religious movements and denominations, while Anglican membership declined throughout the century. While at the beginning of the nineteenth century, most English worshipers belonged to the Church of England, by 1851 it was less than 50%, although scholar Joshua King does point out it was still the largest denomination and still exerted large cultural significance (11).

In *Victorian Devotional Poetry*, G.B. Tennyson describes the unity of the literary and theological concerns of the Oxford Movement. He discusses at length two important principles in Oxford Movement poetry described by Keble in his poetry lectures—Analogy and Reserve. According to Tennyson, “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 to all regardless of the differing capacities of individuals to apprehend such things” (45). Closely linked to Reserve, Analogy “is God’s way of practicing Reserve” (Tennyson 47). Since God can only be shown indirectly, the natural world and Scripture serve as Analogies for God. Sometimes called veiling, Reserve was not a new idea and according to Tennyson can be traced back to Origen and Clement. However, Tennyson credits Bishop Joseph Butler with reviving Reserve in the Church of England in the 18th century (44). An orientation toward Reserve could also be applied to personal behavior. G.B. Tennyson cites the work of Isaac Williams, who makes “a distinct connection between reserve as a social attribute and Reserve as a principle for approaching and teaching sacred matters. The example of the Kebles was certainly very much on his mind” (47). Over-exuberance signified other Protestant denominations like Dissenters and Methodists, who were frowned upon by the Tractarians. Jasper Cragwall points out the significance of denominations alongside class and gender as a marker of identity (3) and Reserve was meant to signify High Churchmanship
and the expected religious and political attitudes associated with it. However, while the concept of Reserve is very specific to the Oxford Movement, a seeming indicator of the fracturing that occurs in secularism, it also meant that controversial theological positions were left out of some of the poetry and therefore the poetry was widely read across denominations. There are exceptions to this, but particularly with *The Christian Year*, Tractarian poetry had to have crossed denominational lines in its readership because of its popularity. In other words, a distinct aesthetic choice from a specific religious movement backfired and made the poetry accessible and desirable to several faith traditions. This also meant that while this poetry was popular, it did not result in widespread conversions or convince the low Church and Broad Church factions of the Anglican Church to all become High Church, despite its inextricable link with the Book of Common Prayer and Anglicanism.

In the next section, I look closer at secular theory and how it informs some of the paradoxes at work in Oxford Movement aesthetics. I define my terms and discussions in the field, as well as its particular relevancy to my project.

**III. Secularism**

In this section, I describe scholarship in secular studies. I mention the work of scholars from a broad range of disciplines from the past few decades, but I end my discussion with the work of Taylor, King, and Jager. These scholars demonstrate connections between 18th and/or 19th century literary texts and secularism, as well as provide a vocabulary for this discussion that I will use throughout the rest of the project.

In 2002, Steve Bruce published *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, in which he presents a well-documented decline in religious worship in the United Kingdom and staunchly defends the conclusions of sociology in the study of secularization and distinguishes the
sociological use of the term secularism from how the humanities use the term. Bruce provides convincing data of the decline in religious practice in Britain during the 20th century. At the same time, this decline did not happen in the same way or at the same rates in other parts of the world. While much more work needs to be done about secularization in non-Western nations, several scholars point out that secularization operates in very different ways in non-Western, non-Christian nations. Yet despite this marked decline, religion hasn’t been eradicated entirely, even in so-called secular societies.

Charles Taylor published *A Secular Age* in 2007 and it remains one of the most canonical sources in the study of secularism in the humanities. Covering Western Europe and Anglo-North America, Taylor creates a narrative about the development of secularism that spans from the European Middle Ages through the early twentieth century. Of course, an academic narrative that covers such a vast scope risks summary to the point of distortion, but his description of some of the religious, political, and philosophical phenomena at work are useful starting points for this project. His definition of secularism is three-pronged. First, “[P]olitical organizations of all pre-modern societies [were] in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, [while] the modern Western state is free from this connection” (1). One does not need to publicly adhere to a faith tradition in order to participate in government and other institutions. Second, religious belief and practice declines (2). Third, there is a “shift…from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others…Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives” (3). In other words, devout religious belief is possible but always one choice among many; it is increasingly difficult for any faith tradition to make absolute claims to truth (although they certainly try).
In Taylor’s narrative, the pre-modern world was “enchanted” in the sense that the divine was the cause of everything; all living or physical processes occurred because they “testified to divine purpose and action” and a lack of belief in God was almost impossible (25-26). Alternatively, secularization is the process of “disenchantment.” While a belief in God is still possible in a disenchanted world, explanations other than divine machinations are possible to describe the workings of the material universe or political systems and enchantment is reframed as superstition.

Another way Taylor frames this is the distinction between the “porous” and “buffered” selves. The enchanted, pre-1500 self was one that was “open and porous and vulnerable to a world of spirits and powers” (27). The “buffered self”, on the other hand, is the result of both disenchantment and the ability “to have confidence in our own powers of moral ordering” (27). The buffered self is able to place authority within the self, whether he or she chooses to or not. In broad strokes, Taylor walks us through the process of disenchantment and the creation of the buffered self to his contemporary moment at publication, including a modern Western world with an “immanent frame” in which human structures resist anything that resembles transcendence.

Notable for my purposes, he spends a few chapters on the 18th and 19th centuries, including a treatment of Providential Deism. Ever fond of three-part definitions, Taylor describes three facets of 18th deism: First, the world is designed by God and “[t]his understanding…goes through an anthropocentric shift in the late seventeenth and eighteenth century” (221). Second, the order of this world is impersonal: “God relates to us primarily by establishing a certain order of things, whose moral shape we can easily grasp, if we are not misled by false and superstitious notions” (221). Third, this means that there is a “natural” religion, un-mysterious, un-
superstitious that existed before other religions (221). While no facet of this definition explicitly
denies the existence of God, Taylor argues that these changes had unintended implications for
Western Christianity, including exchanging the fruits of belief with belief itself: “Because what
was seen as an unfailing mark of Godliness, and thus very much worth pursuing, somehow
comes to infiltrate the very essence of Godliness, becomes gradually indistinguishable from it”
(244). These changes did not make atheism immediately available and widespread, but they did,
according to Taylor, set the stage for the ability to choose belief since humanity and reason
become moral authorities and good in and of themselves. The freedom to choose one’s belief, the
idea that we all have inner access to a true religion outside of specific doctrines, and the debate
about where one should place authority all play a significant role in Oxford Movement thinking.
The members of the Oxford Movement want to return to mystery and placing authority outside
of one’s self and in ecclesiastical structures, while at the same time also using reason and
personal choice to convince people to support their cause.

Finally, even for a devout believer, to live in a secular age means that one is fully aware
that their belief system is one option among many, leading to what Taylor calls “fragilization,”
or the knowledge that since there are so many other belief choices, no one choice can
comfortably claim absolute moral or spiritual truth. Both the Deism of the 18th century and the
creation of new Christian denominations in Britain after the Reformation, as well as their
fragility, will play a significant role in my reading of the poets in this study1.

1 I should note limitations in Taylor’s approach, namely the emphasis on Europe and Anglo-North America
and Taylor also relies on traditionally canonical sources to the exclusion of minority voices. There are also
unavoidable erasures of nuance and detail with a scope this large, and its specific emphasis on Christianity is both a
strength and a weakness, pointing to the specific role that Christianity plays in the secular story while leaving out
detailed engagement with other faith traditions. Taylor himself recognizes these limitations but they are worth
noting here.
In 2008, Gauri Viswanathan describes the relationship between more mainstream faith traditions, secularism, and alternative spiritualties. While she doesn’t use the term fragilization, she does argue that some religions and forms of spirituality are less secure than others within a secular society. In “Secularism in the Framework of Heterodoxy”, she points out that the field often conceptualizes current understandings of secularism with the advent of literary studies since Matthew Arnold’s call for culture: “[S]ecularism is conceived to be the inaugural moment of literature’s formation, a defining aspect of its identity, whose religious traces are no more than a historical reminder of a displaced worldview” (466-467). In other words, the field of literary studies, at least in the 20th century as it reflected upon the 19th, saw itself inextricably linked with Western secularism. However, one of the problems with secularism, according to Viswanathan, is that as it seeks to “demystify” religion, it ends up homogenizing various beliefs and therefore, ironically, allows for mainstream faiths to still exist: “The degree to which religion and secularism coincide in their inability to acknowledge alternative spiritual practices is matched only by the scholarly complicity in homogenizing religious histories to fit a composite profile of religious belief” (475). While religious belief can still exist within secularism, what religious belief is (and more importantly what religious belief is tolerated) becomes lumped together in an acceptable form for secularism. Now, paradoxically, secularism is often defined as the fracturing of the religious landscape. As Taylor describes in his process of fragilization, if people are free to doubt, they are also free to choose their beliefs more deeply based on their individual conscience, allowing for the growth of religious denominations and minorities. Yet at the same time, heterodox religions, occultism, and other spiritualties are either excluded from the public narrative or subsumed into other religions.
In light of the work by Jürgen Habermas, José Casanova, Vincent P. Pecora among others, some scholars have shifted from thinking about the secular to the postsecular, but there is still debate about what the term postsecular actually means. Jager reports that the “’postsecular’ is sometimes taken to mean a primarily theoretical development in the humanities and interpretive social sciences, highlighting the intellectual resources offered by the Christian tradition” (Unquiet Things 22). In this way, this project is part of this postsecular turn. However, there is a continued debate on the development of postsecular studies or its direction in the future. As recently as 2018, Pecora in “The Secular, the Postsecular, and the Literary,” described the postsecular as “…a form of historical revisionism in pursuit of all that might have been misguided or overlooked in earlier accounts of the decay of religion and the process of secularization. Yet there is little agreement on what this revisionism finally means” (5). Jager himself points out the many viewpoints within postsecular studies, but asserts “they all agree that one cannot tell the story of the secular without also telling a story of the transformation of Christianity during the modern age. From this perspective, the assertion that we are living in a postsecular age would entail the claim that we are also living in a post-Christian age” (22), which he goes on to critique because of Christianity’s continued existence in different public spaces. I agree; while church membership has declined for several denominations, one cannot claim that Christianity either as a belief system or set of cultural practices has completely disappeared or had disappeared in the 19th century. Instead of the term postsecular, Jager offers the term “after the secular” because it can include both temporal, active, and descriptive definitions, but he still uses the word secularism throughout his work. For my purposes, I will continue to use the word secularism instead of postsecular or postsecularism. While the term secularism may be a debated term, both postsecular and “after the secularism” rely on a particular relationship with
secularism. I have also found that for these poets, Taylor’s concept of fragilization within secularism to be one of the most useful ways to examine the period.

Joshua King also discusses this tension between both the splintering effect of secularism but also how religions, particularly Christianity in Victorian England, can become homogenized at least in the public space of print culture. In *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain’s Age of Print* (2015), he argues that religion and in particular Protestant Christianity didn’t simply become more private during the 19th century but rather how it became experienced in the public space changed. He pushes back against Charles Taylor’s assertion that the immanent frame of secular modernity is inherently closed off to transcendence:

Rather, it gives rise to ‘multiple modernities,’ various ways of relating to a secular immanent frame to spiritual experience, belief in God, and religious practice…The tendency to distinguish inward ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ experience from a secular immanent frame, for example, can facilitate not only greater tolerance of diverse religious expressions but also…a willingness to sanction the liberal state’s control over the secularized body, as well as state suppression of religious expression that transgresses the tolerated inward boundary. (7-8)

This leads to two different religious realities existing at the same time—the splintering and multiplication of religious groups, yet at the same time the creation of a print culture that sought to appeal to a general, national, Christian identity that included certain Protestant groups but not Catholics and non-Christians (with some notable exceptions), at least for a time. These ‘multiple modernities’ included the increase in Christian denominations and a decrease in Anglican worship (although King asserts its cultural relevancy throughout the 19th century—while its numbers decreased, it was still the largest Christian denomination in the country). According to King, in the midst of this religious diversification, religion was not about just physical churches or fidelity to a denomination. Sunday worship might be becoming split across denominations, but King argues that most Britons still saw themselves as a generally Christian, generally
Protestant nation created through, and expressed publically, in print. Therefore, King provides an explanation for the paradox of simultaneously increasing diversification yet generalization of belief.

If King argues Victorian print culture helped facilitate the creation of a general religious identity, scholars like Cragwall and Jager point to how print culture can be used to channel specific practices and theology into secular literature. Jager provides a vocabulary and a system for this paradox of secularism, as well as providing deeper context for Romantic period theological and literary thought in his two books, *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era* (2007) and *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age* (2015). In *The Book of God*, he argues that the 18th century language of natural theology and particularly Protestant language of textuality play a role in literature, which in turn is part of a secularism defined not by a lack of religion but differentiation (1). In *Unquiet Things*, Jager reiterates that Christianity and our understandings of the secular are inseparable from each other. He breaks his arguments down into discussions about reform, toleration, and minorization, the process of the creation of religious minorities. Toleration is often treated as a neutral term, but Jager argues that state toleration plays a role both in the creation of religious minorities and the subsequent state-sanctioned violence towards those minorities. In his discussion of *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* by James Hogg, Jager writes, “[I]t is not that state power…works to contain an already existing religious fanaticism; rather, the power of the state precedes and creates religious fanaticism” (169). State power was needed to create enough freedom to allow for religious minorities to exist in the first place but the state also has an interest in controlling those minorities to prevent them from challenging the state in any meaningful way. Tolerance in 18th and 19th century Great Britain wasn’t created to build a
religious utopia, but in part to define Protestant Britain from the rest of the world. Religious
fanatics that challenged what it meant to be British were to be kept in check by the state. Even if
an increased number of religious denominations were permitted, there were always groups that
would fall outside of what was acceptable: “[I]t is no real wonder that religious tolerance would
come to rest on a larger intolerance—of Jews, Muslims, Catholics, freethinkers, or atheists. One
or another group will fall outside the bounding line, wherever that line is drawn” (102). Jager
uses the image of the film of flame from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem *Frost At Midnight* to
connect secularism and Romantic literature. Literature is like the film that registers the unseen
but “unquiet” (and at times violent) work of reform. “Secularism was not a neutral governance
structure but had its own interests, authorizing certain kinds of subjects and marginalizing
others” (6).

Jager opens *The Book of God* with the observation that a particular metaphor—that nature
is the Book of God—reflected Protestant reading practices emphasizing the significance of texts
and the role of reason (ix). He continues to look how 18th design arguments—the claims that one
can observe and confirm the existence of God by looking at the order of the natural universe—
informed the production of canonical Romantic texts. Jager claims design is both teleological
and analogical: “They are teleological because they are interested in the seemingly purposive
features of the natural world, in things—such as bird’s wings or eyelids—that appear to have
been designed with a specific function in mind…Design arguments are analogical, meanwhile,
because they reason from known instances of design to unknown ones” (2, emphasis Jager’s). He
goes on later to argue that differentiation of religion, rather than modernity, is a better hallmark
of secularism and that both the teleological and analogical parts of the design argument play a
role in differentiation. This emphasis on design and their simultaneously teleological and
analogical purposes will be vital in my study of Victorian poets for two reasons. First, as Cragwall reports, theologian William Paley and Bishop Joseph Butler were standard Oxford reading in the early 19th century. Paley created the famous example of the watch and the watchmaker to demonstrate the existence of God in his 1802 *Natural Theology*. Briefly, if you were walking on the beach and found a watch on the ground, you would first be able to observe all the different parts that fitted together perfectly in order to make the watch work. According to Paley, you would therefore conclude that in order for the watch to exist so perfectly, there has to be a watchmaker. Likewise, one could observe how perfectly different parts of the natural world (including specific body parts found throughout the natural world) worked to fulfill their purpose, so therefore there had to be a divine creator.

I will argue that all of this—the state’s role in the creation of religious diversity and fissure, the possibility of conversion because of these religious fissures, and the repurposing of theology—play a role in the poetry of Keble, Rossetti, Procter, and Hopkins. I will describe these chapters in more detail below.

**IV. Chapter Breakdown**

In my first chapter, I will look at John Keble’s work, including his popular volume of poetry *The Christian Year*. As mentioned above, Newman attributed Keble’s 1833 Assize Sermon as the start of the Oxford Movement. However, a few years before, in 1827, Keble published *The Christian Year*, which was modelled off the liturgical calendar and The Book of Common Prayer. He was shortly afterwards appointed professor of poetry at Oxford, and his lectures give insights to the connections he makes between political and civic virtue, theology, and poetry. I look at Keble’s changing attitudes towards the relationship between Church and State, especially in the Assize Sermon and the poetry lectures, through the lens of tolerance,
fissure, and Reserve. While Keble wanted the Church and State to remain as one, he unwittingly participated in the process of pushing them apart by placing the Church’s authority above the State’s in matters of Church governance. While he also pushed back against liberalism, the changes that he wanted to make were only possible in a nation that was secular and tolerant enough even though, as Jager demonstrates, tolerance wasn’t a neutral stance, to accommodate his ideas, and Keble still sought to keep certain voices out of state and church affairs. His solution to his fear of national apostasy is Reserve, to maintain one’s devotional and political duties without agitation. I also look at Keble’s poetry, including particular metaphors and forms he uses throughout *The Christian Year*, through Jager and G.B. Tennyson’s understanding of design, natural theology, Analogy and Reserve. While the Oxford Movement is known for reviving the patristics and pre-Reformation practices associated with Roman Catholicism, I will show that much of the language used in *The Christian Year* is indebted to 18th century Anglican theology. This involves the right reading practices (and a Protestant emphasis on texts despite Keble’s frustration with print culture, as King demonstrates) to “read” the natural world for signs for the divine. At the same time, Keble’s use of Reserve in *The Christian Year* meant that some of his more specific, High Church Anglican ideas were lost. While Blair demonstrates that the forms of the poems and the volume as a whole illustrate the kind of spiritual and political action that Keble advocates, *The Christian Year* was too popular to be read only by High Church Anglicans. Therefore, poetry that is seemingly orthodox can actually participate in a secular society that accommodates some amount of religious choice.

My second chapter will focus on Christina Rossetti. I will ground her religious commitments and poetry in the context of the Oxford Movement. Again, I argue that the particular manifestation of High Church Anglicanism was only possible with the secular shifts
happening in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century. As a teenager, Rossetti attended a High Church parish and was a High Church Anglican the rest of her life. Like Keble, she wrote poems that corresponded with the liturgical year and, also like Keble, she too was a popular poet in her lifetime. King also argues that despite her specific theological commitments: “\textit{Verses} deserves fuller recognition as Rossetti’s late-century effort to involve readers in an imagined community of strangers—a widely scattered fellowship of saints whose binding hope in heavenly citizenship estranges them from exclusive identification with any national society, branch of the Church, or existing corner of the English-speaking literary market” (233). Rossetti’s readership during her lifetime does demonstrate her ability to reach beyond High Church audiences. This is the paradox of both Keble and Rossetti—religious difference is both deepened, made more specific, and made more separate by religious tolerance and yet at the same time general national religious identity comes to the fore because of this very tolerance and splintering of English Christianity.

Secularism also impacts how Rossetti presents women’s vocations in her poetry. In particular, the creation of Anglican convents meant that Protestant women had the opportunity for a celibate religious vocation outside of marriage and children. However, this calling did not mean increased freedom from male control, nor did Rossetti frame joining sisterhoods as a purely spiritual calling. She often used the images of nuns and convents to talk about issues surrounding sexuality and anxiety as well as spirituality. Vocational choice is also complicated by salvation anxiety; in a world of increased choices, whether choice in vocation or choice in religious denomination, the existence of other options can threaten the validity of whatever choice a believer makes. Even as her speakers long for the heavenly citizenship that King describes, the stakes for making the wrong choices in earthly life are still high. I examine this
paradox of choice in poems such as *Goblin Market*, “An Old-World Thicket,” and several of her vocation poems.

My third chapter focuses on Adelaide Anne Procter, Rossetti’s contemporary. Like Rossetti, she was well-known during her lifetime and used Tractarian aesthetic principles in her poetry, although like Keble she is hardly read today. She was well-connected in London’s literary scene and often published in Charles Dickens’ literary magazines, at first writing under a pseudonym so Dickens would accept her poetry because of its merits, not because of Dickens’ friendship with her father, Bryan Procter. Unlike Keble and Rossetti, she converted to Roman Catholicism as a young adult. Besides writing poetry, she worked in women’s activism; she helped to found the *English Woman’s Journal* and the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, submitting contributions to the journal in support of women’s employment. Despite her activism work, scholars have noted the contradictory depictions of the working classes in her poetry, but I demonstrate how some of her poetic choices may have been made in part to meet the expectations of the middle-class readership needed to fund the causes that she cared about. Her poetic choices may have been impacted by the editorial preferences of Dickens since she was a frequent contributor to his periodicals. However, the longer she participated in Roman Catholic circles, the more she incorporated Roman Catholic aesthetics into her poetry, again raising money for charitable causes. Secularism provided the conditions that made Procter’s conversion and all of these claims to her attention possible. While both Rossetti and Procter were personally resolute in their faith commitments, Procter’s poetry does not register the same salvation anxiety that Rossetti’s poetry does. Instead, in Procter’s poetry, seemingly competing forces—Tractarianism, Roman Catholicism, progressive activism, and middle-class literary taste—can coexist. If anything, Procter’s passions (faith, activism, and poetry) seem to reinforce
themselves, even as Procter more clearly adopts popular Roman Catholic devotions and poetic conventions.

My fourth chapter examines Gerard Manley Hopkins. Unlike the other poets in this study, Hopkins did not become popular in the 19th century but became prominent after his poems were published posthumously in the 20th century. Margaret Johnson in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Tractarian Poetry* points out that Hopkins built upon Tractarian ideas, including Analogy and Reserve, a generation after the Oxford Movement began. However, Hopkins is better known for his conversion to Roman Catholicism and joining the Jesuit order. As with Procter, secularization is what made it possible for Hopkins to choose to convert at all; even though Hopkins doesn’t create a new religious minority, he joins one marginalized in his own lifetime. Previous scholars have often commented on Hopkins’ Catholicism, and I build upon this scholarship. However, more recent scholars such as Karen Dieleman have noted the diversity in the Victorian Catholic experience which has not always been reflected in scholarship on the period, while Trent Pomplun has pointed out that theological readings of Hopkins’ poetry are sometimes ahistorical. With this in mind, I place Hopkins’ poetry in conversation with his contemporary religious poets and fellow Catholic converts in particular, including Adelaide Anne Procter and Frederick Faber. I complicate Hopkins’ conversion by highlighting the diversity and sometimes contradictions amongst the Catholic communities in Great Britain and Ireland. By focusing on Hopkins’ theological influences, scholars privilege certain clerical or Jesuit tastes and trends of Catholic communities over the lives of lay Catholics, including trends in Catholic poetry. I point out that Hopkins struggled to conform to the aesthetic expectations of his community while at times failing to capture the lay experience of the people he served in his poetry. This does not negate the impact of Catholicism on his poetry but rather highlights the
complexities of secularism on any religious tradition, in this case Roman Catholicism. Hopkins’
poetry indicates the reciprocal relationship between a religious tradition and conversion when
secularism creates the conditions for secularism. Hopkins could be a devout convert and write
poetry as a devout convert while also bringing something distinctive to Catholic poetry and
fundamentally changing Catholic art, and this exchange would only be possible within the
conditions set by secularism.
CHAPTER ONE

JOHN KEBLE, THE CHRISTIAN YEAR, AND SECULAR RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS

But there are storms within
That heave the struggling heart with wilder din,
And there is power and love
The maniac’s rushing frenzy to reprove,
And when he takes his seat,
Clothed in and in calmness, at his Savour’s feet,
Is not the power as strange, the love as blest,
As when He said, “Be still,” and ocean sank to rest?

- John Keble, “Fourth Sunday After Epiphany”

I. Introduction

John Keble was one of the most popular poets of the 19th century, but has since fallen into obscurity outside of academia. His impact on religious poetry from the period has been remarked upon by his contemporaries and later scholars. In this chapter, I will establish John Keble’s aesthetic theory and its influence on the other poets in this study. Keble was a scholar, Anglican clergyman, poet, and tract-writer for the Oxford Movement, as well as the author of The Christian Year and Lyra Innocentium. While Newman is often credited as the Oxford Movement’s most stirring leader until his conversion, Newman credits Keble with beginning the movement in Keble’s 1833 Assize Sermon, “National Apostasy Considered”. I will discuss Keble’s poetry and lectures, while drawing out the connection Keble makes between secularization and his religious aesthetics. I argue that the theory of poetry that Keble and the rest of the Oxford Movement champion is born out of the possibilities of secularization. I will
demonstrate this by examining *The Christian Year* and Keble’s aesthetic theory in relation to the secular forces around him. I argue that Keble’s poetry and theories about the connections between church, state, and poetry participate in the anxieties and possibilities offered by the increased secularization of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Understanding Keble’s project is necessary for better understanding the next generation of Victorian poets, including Christina Rossetti, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

I build my definition of secularization upon the work of Charles Taylor and Colin Jager; neither theorize secularization as the loss of faith, as is often assumed. Taylor’s three-pronged definition of secularization includes a removal of religion from public spaces, a decline in personal belief and practice amongst the people, and the reality that even for the most devout believers, differing belief or no belief at all is not unfathomable. In other words, it is possible to participate in political and social life without ascribing to a particular religion or any religion at all (1-3). However, just because unbelief is a possibility does not mean that belief is impossible. Rather, it is the availability of choices that marks secularism. This definition is useful because Keble himself is concerned with these three points a century before Taylor described them, especially as Victorian England grappled with the Catholic Question, immigration, and the expansion of its empire, as well as increased rights for Dissenters, Jews, and other religious groups. Later in the chapter I will describe Keble’s concerns about the relationship between Church and State as well as individual piety.
Jager on the other hand focuses on secularism and Romanticism\(^1\). In *The Book of God*, he states that secularization and Romanticism are marked by the relationship between 18th-century Protestantism and the shifts in language believers used to discuss the divine. He states:

> [I]f secularization is understood not as a loss of belief but rather as an example of the differentiation that characterizes modernity—a differentiation that necessarily entails neither religious decline nor the privatization of religion as a form of feeling or emotion—then we can start to analyze our own investment in secularization as that which underwrites and legitimates romanticism. (1)

As I will argue throughout this dissertation, the differentiation that results from secularization can actually be fruitful in producing deeply religious verse. When belief is not compulsory, or if the dominant faith tradition is challenged by other choices, the stakes for religious art intensify. Keble’s urgency results from the changing religious, political, and social landscape. Keble also explicitly links personal emotion with public religion, as I shall describe below. Jager later argues in *Unquiet Things* that “[S]ecularization could not be understood as a simple subtraction story, as though the modern self was always there, waiting to be liberated… secularization was not a neutral governance structure but had its own interests…that secularism was complexly intertwined with a particular religion (Christianity)” (6). Keble certainly was not looking to be liberated from Anglicanism, far from it; but as I illustrate, the deep connections he makes between religion and poetry are related to, not in spite of, the secularizing forces that he both observed and unwittingly participated in.

In this chapter, I begin by describing and analyzing *The Christian Year*. I describe the popularity and influence of *The Christian Year*, the theological and aesthetic concepts informing its production, and the secular implications of its widespread readership. I then contextualize

\(^1\) Jager also directly engages with Taylor’s *A Secular Age*. While he applauds Taylor, he is critical of Taylor’s oversimplification of the 17th and 18th centuries because they “were in fact home to a variety of creative struggles—intellectual, aesthetic, and political—within and against the developing modern order” (15).
Keble’s poetic theory as described in his sermons and lectures. I illustrate how his poetry, sermons, and lectures are both a response to and a product of the secularizing forces at work in the period.

II. The Christian Year: Analogy, Reserve, and Secularism

In this section, I introduce Keble himself and The Christian Year. Significantly, the poems of The Christian Year were composed before the formation of the Oxford Movement. However, The Christian Year would come to set a precedent for poetry for members and non-members of the Oxford Movement for decades to come. Here, I provide context for the production and use of The Christian Year, as well as close readings of individual poems. Through these close readings, I demonstrate his indebtedness to earlier Romantic ideas, his anxieties for the Church and individual salvation, and the connections between feelings and morality.

Keble was born in 1792 to a middle-class, clergyman family in Gloucestershire (Blair 3). He attended Oxford University as a student where he succeeded academically. He stayed until 1823, when he went home to be his father’s curate (Blair 3). However, he had begun to compose the poems that would eventually be put into The Christian Year as early as 1819 and would continue to compose poems until The Christian Year was published in 1827. In 1832, he was elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, which meant that he gave regular lectures at Oxford but still lived at home (Blair 3). In 1835, the same year that his father died, he married Charlotte Clarke at age 43 and took a position at Hursley, where he was vicar for 30 years (Butler). However, he remained involved, albeit from a distance, in Oxford affairs. Besides his lectures and his famous Assize sermon, Keble wrote Tracts for the Times (Tracts 4, 13, 40, 52, 54, 57, 60,
78, and 89) along with Newman, Pusey, and other members of the Oxford Movement, and he
was a contributor to the volume of poetry *Lyra Innocentium* (Butler).

*The Christian Year* “was probably the widest selling book of poetry in the nineteenth
century” (Butler). Kirstie Blair reports that eventually every literate Victorian household had a
copy of *The Christian Year*. Perry Butler in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* lists
*The Christian Year*’s impressive print run: “[I]n July 1827… a first edition of 500 was soon
followed by a second edition in November. Six additional poems were added to the third edition
in 1828. By 1837 there had been sixteen editions and by Keble's death there were ninety-five
[editions]. When copyright expired in 1873 there were 158 editions and copyright sales stood at
379,000” (Butler). In the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman stated, “It is not necessary, and
scarcely becoming, to praise a book which has already become one of the classics of the
language” (36). In the introduction to *John Keble in Context*, Blair writes about the popularity of
*The Christian Year* in both the United States and Victorian England: “*The Christian Year*’s
near-legendary status as a publishing and reading phenomenon is attested to by the sheer number of
anecdotes and accounts circulating about it in Victorian culture… It was, moreover, allegedly
read by all classes… the fact remains that huge numbers of Victorian readers did choose to read,
reread, and, crucially, to use Keble’s poems…” (8).

The following two major discussions will focus, first, on Keble’s aesthetic choices in *The
Christina Year* then, secondly, on the relationship between Keble’s thought and writings and the
increasing secularization that characterizes the period and informs those aesthetic choices.

Keble’s poetics are inextricably linked with his religious and moral principles, which in turn are
shaped by his social and political contexts. However, it is useful to separately describe and
define these ideas, especially the specific concepts Keble employs in his poetry.
As I shall describe below, Keble did not originally compose the poems in *The Christian Year* with a particular structure in mind; however, he chose liturgical forms and different Anglican concepts to produce the poems and shape their order to great commercial success and artistic influence.

The fact that his poems were meant to be read devotionally is crucial. Keble modeled the structure of *The Christian Year* on the Anglican Book of Common Prayer and the liturgical calendar. It was intended to be read along with the Book of Common Prayer and the poems follow the church seasons such as Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time, as well as separate poems for feast days, saints’ days, baptism, Holy Communion, and Matrimony, among others. While the poems vary in length and metrical styles, all of them use conventional meter and rhyme schemes. The imagery used for each poem often comes from Scripture, nature scenes, or a combination of both, and each poem includes an epigraph from Scripture, often from the corresponding feast day or season in the liturgical calendar.

G. B. Tennyson in *Victorian Devotional Poetry* points out that *The Christian Year* “is wholly dependent on the Book of Common Prayer…It made possible the use of the volume as a companion to the Book of Common Prayer. Countless Victorian families came to use it in that way…These readings tended to reinforce each other, making *The Christian Year* a kind of extension of the Prayer book and probably in many minds intermingling the two…” (75; 82). Therefore, according to Tennyson, *The Christian Year* is not meant to chart new territory but reinforce older prayer practices and inspire new dedication to prayer. *The Christian Year*’s themes, rhymes, and rhythms are repetitive and familiar. It is therefore intentionally unexperimental. Tennyson argued that by being intentionally unoriginal, Keble “made it new…The idea of a collection of poems organized in exact sequence of the order of worship in
the Prayer Book turns out to be a strikingly original concept in devotional poetry” (80).

Tennyson also points out that the poems in the volume may not have originally been conceived that way since they were written between 1819-1827 when Keble was his father’s curate, let alone the handful of poems that were added after the first edition. Not all of the poems in the volume necessarily make sense with the season, but Tennyson argues that the more that Keble writes, the more that the poems come to be conceived in this form (83-86).

The volume was initially well-received, although often with an acknowledgement that the poems owed a great deal to Wordsworth without being as good as Wordsworth. Keble himself was a vocal admirer of Wordsworth, although Tennyson reports that Wordsworth thought *The Christian Year* “was so good he only wished he could have written it himself to make it better” (Tennyson 73). There are several poems in *The Christian Year* that seem to echo Wordsworth’s rhyme, meter, and imagery (particularly natural imagery). For example, the narrator in Wordsworth’s “Lines written in early spring” is moved to melancholic thoughts after seeing the beauty of the season:

> I heard a thousand blended notes,  
> While in a grove I sate reclined,  
> In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts  
> Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

> To her fair works did nature link  
> The human soul that through me ran;  
> And much it griev’d my heart to think  
> What man has made of man. (1-8)

The poem goes on to describe the beauty of spring in more detail. Here, Wordsworth uses regular iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, as well as regularly alternating rhymes. The natural world enjoys itself, but that very enjoyment is cause for sadness because it reminds the narrator of humanity’s capability for cruelty. Likewise, Keble’s verse uses regular meter, rhymes, and the
natural world as an occasion to ponder the darkness of humanity. In “Fourth Sunday After Trinity,” Keble writes:

In the low chant of wakeful birds,
In the deep weltering flood,
In whispering leaves, these solemn words –
“God made us all for good.”

Man only mars the sweet accord
O’erpowering with “harsh din”
The music of Thy works and word,
Ill matched with grief and sin. (13-16; 25-28)

Keble also uses iambic tetrameter, iambic trimeter, alternating rhymes in 4 line stanzas, and the image of the musical quality of birds and Nature to lament the state of humanity. However, in this particular comparison, Wordsworth argues that Nature is in bliss because it knows how to live in pleasure, while Keble’s poem on the other hand argues that Nature is in bliss because it is correctly ordered. Wordsworth doesn’t specifically name “what man has made of man” or the source of Nature’s goodness, while Keble clearly labels humanity’s sinfulness as the problem. Also unlike “Lines written in early spring,” “Fourth Sunday After Trinity” turns to an Anglican interpretation of the Nature/humanity divide:

Hence all thy groans and travail pains,
Hence, till thy God return,
In Wisdom’s ear thy blithest strains,
Oh Nature, seems to mourn. (89-92)

Nature grieves because sinful humanity has not returned to a Christian god, while God is not explicity mentioned in “Lines written in early spring.” Tennyson goes so far as to claim that “Keble’s nature poetry is rather Wordsworth moralise or Wordsworth plus theology” (101). However, this is an oversimplification of Wordsworth’s earlier theology. While Wordsworth’s turn to more High Church theology as he aged is well-known, to say that his earlier poems like
“Lines written in early spring,” written in 1798, were devoid of theology is misleading. Jasper Cragwall in *Lake Methodism: Polite Literature and Popular Religion in England, 1780-1830*, demonstrates the nuanced ways in which Christian denominations, especially Methodism, impacted literature from the period. In his discussion on Wordsworth, Cragwall describes the roles of field preaching for Methodists and the establishment backlash against Wesley, as well as how this impacted Wordsworth’s depiction of the poet/priest. “Preaching (let alone prophesizing) in the open fields had been an intensively legislated (and intensively stigmatized) practice since the Restoration, evidence (in real courts of law, not just courts of opinion) of very specific theological and political enthusiasms, rather than emancipation from either” (84). Cragwall places Wordsworth in the tradition of Methodism field preaching and prophecy at a time when “the Church of England was deeply suspicious of the sort of ‘prophecy’ told in the fields…The most powerful ideological apparatus in England between 1780s and 1820 relentlessly assaulted—and represented itself as under relentless assault by—[Methodist] enthusiasms” that later in the century “were savored by Pater and Arnold as politically innocent soporifics” (86). Scholars from Joshua King to Owen Chadwick have noted Keble’s disdain for non-Conformist groups, and I will discuss later his anxiety over the Catholic Question and Catholic Emancipation (King 133). Much of Keble’s work centers around supporting and preserving what he believed were the truest aspects of the Church of England. As Keble wrote the poems that would enter *The Christian Year* during this time, it is not too far to say that he avoids the more Methodist, more offensive parts of Wordsworth’s enthusiasm, and retailors it to fit into his vision of Anglicanism, complete with sacraments, the liturgical calendar, and all of the structures associated with the established Church.
Still, the echoes of Wordsworth’s strategies were easily recognized by Keble’s contemporaries. An 1827 American review of *The Christian Year* in the *Church Register* lauded it, comparing the volume to George Herbert, but also compared Keble to Wordsworth: “We scarcely ever remember to have read so exquisite an invocation of religion in poetry. The strain of feeling throughout is imbibed from the best parts of [sic] Woodsworth’s writings; but we cannot say that the purity and accuracy of that great poet’s language, have been so much borne in mind as they deserved to be” (“The Christian year: Thoughts in verse for the Sundays and Holy days throughout the year”). The reviewer makes sure to remind the reader that the *Church Register* is not “blind to [The Christian Year’s] blemishes.” Still, this particular reviewer remarked on the poems’ sweetness and recommended it for families.

A notable absence from this discussion is Coleridge. Tennyson argues that the Tractarians were suspicious of Coleridge, especially of his later criticism, while simultaneously “Coleridgean ideas permeate Tractarian thinking on aesthetic subjects and, except on the question of nature, probably color Tractarian poetics more than those of any other single figure” (17). Yet Tennyson claims that “Keble largely formed his views on poetry well before he could have known much Coleridge criticism…” (22). However, Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, where he made his distinction between Imagination and Fancy, was published in 1817, ten years before *The Christian Year* was published, and his *Lay Sermons* were published even sooner. In other words, it would have been possible for Keble to encounter Coleridge, either directly or through Wordsworth. Later, Keble would describe his system of cataloguing classical poets into primary and secondary categories, similar to the way Coleridge distinguishes between primary and secondary Imagination, and Keble addresses Imagination and Fancy directly in his poetry
lectures, which I shall address later in more detail. Keble also uses the concept of Fancy in a way that recalls Coleridge’s definition of Fancy. In “St. Andrews’s Day,” he writes

When brothers part for manhood’s race,
What gift may most endearing prove
To keep fond memory its her place,
And certify a brother’s love?...

But yet our craving spirits feel,
We shall live on, though Fancy die,
And seek a surer pledge—a seal
Of love to last eternally. (1-4; 13-16)

This use of the word Fancy is consistent with how Coleridge defines it in the Biographia Literaria: “The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Coleridge 272). The narrator in Keble’s poem makes a connection between memory and Fancy, as well as noting Fancy’s ephemerality. The poem goes on to chastise those who would privilege temporary human relationships over an eternal relationship with God:

Who art thou, that wouldst grave thy name
Thus deeply in a brother’s heart?
Look on this saint, and learn to frame
Thy love-charm with true Christian art.

First seek thy Saviour out, and dwell
Beneath this shadow of His roof,
Till thou have scanned His features well
And known Him for the Christ by proof; (17-24)

Again, Keble seems to be using Romantic concepts (in this case Coleridge’s definition of Fancy based upon his discussion of Wordsworth in Biographia Literaria) generated from
Wordsworth’s Methodist-informed work to repurpose it for Anglicanism. Cragwall discusses the balance that Coleridge attempted in his early prose works such as the *Lay Sermons* and *Biographia Literaria* between Methodist radicalism and orthodox piety. If Keble is indeed building upon Coleridge here, he seems to try to resolve this ambiguity by entreating the reader to submit to Christ and rein in any radical or enthusiastic responses.

Keble’s aim to soothe unpleasant or overexuberant emotions or passions has been well-documented. Newman once remarked of *The Christian Year*, “if poems can be to enliven in dejection, and to comfort in anxiety, to cool the over-sanguine and to refresh the weary, to awe the worldly, and to instill resignation into the impatient, and calmness into the fearful and agitated, they are these” (qtd. in Goodwin 475). In *Form and Faith*, Blair argues that for Keble, getting closer to God was a matter of cultivating regular worship habits, not a matter of spontaneous feelings, and *The Christian Year* facilitated those habits. Religious art and worship aids such as Neo-Gothic architecture, hymns, older liturgical practices, clerical vestments, the Book of Common Prayer, and poetry were useful channels for believers to express religious passion without letting such feelings get out of control (aka become too fanatical like other Christian groups). She also argues that the forms these worship aids took were important because they modelled pious behavior. Increased devotion was gained by forming the right habits and incorporating them into daily life, such as attending regular worship services and praying with the prayer book. Blair argues that this was modelled even in the poetry. *The Christian Year* was not meant to excite the passions, which would have been associated with “enthusiasm”. Instead, it was intended to model good behavior by its very aesthetic structure, to purposefully repeat ideas or images, and to calm the reader.
Anxiety is a central theme throughout *The Christian Year*. Throughout the poems, the speaker urges readers to do their work and be calmed by the promise of Christianity. In “Fourth Sunday After Epiphany”, the speaker states:

> But there are storms within  
> That heave the struggling heart with wilder din  
> And there is power and love  
> The maniac’s rushing frenzy to reprove,  
> And when he takes his seat,  
> Clothed and in calmness, at his Sav[i]our’s feet,  
> Is not the power as strange, the love as blest,  
> As when He said, “Be Still,” and ocean sank to rest? (17-24)

This scene alludes to chapter 8 of Matthew’s Gospel when Jesus fell asleep on a boat during a storm but calmed the sea at the disciples’ request, albeit after Jesus rebukes the disciples for their lack of faith. The epigraph for this poem is Matthew 8:34, the last line of the scene in Scripture. However, the poem connects the Biblical storm with an interior one. Christ is described as a calming presence, one that stills oceans, quiets the disciples’ fear, and soothes “the maniac’s rushing frenzy.” Again, as Blair points out, both in the content of the poem (the image of the maniac’s frenzy soothed by a powerful deity in command of the natural world) and the structure of the poem (the conventional rhyme and meter, the building upon Scripture stories, the repetition of ideas) model virtues that Keble wanted his reader to emulate—the recognition of human madness and weakness and the ability to turn to Christ to soothe those anxieties.

This cycle of anxiety and metanoia continues throughout *The Christian Year* but the perils of existence come from both exterior and interior forces. In “Third Sunday After Easter”, the speaker muses that while it makes sense to feel sad in Autumn, the speaker does not understand why he/she feels so weary in the springtime (again, not unlike Wordsworth’s “Lines”). The speaker lists the many beauties of the season but even a bank of violets “seems to
choke my breath” (6) yet the speaker soon chastises himself for being unable to recognize the blessings around him. “Shame on the heart that dreams of blessings gone/…When nature sings of joy and hope alone./Reading her cheerful lesson in her own sweet time” (13,15-16). In “Second Sunday After Trinity”, the speaker seems overwhelmed by the ubiquity of evil:

Wild thoughts within, bad men without,
All evil spirits round about,
Are banded in unblest device,
To spoil Love’s earthly paradise (69-72)

Like “Fourth Sunday After Epiphany,” the interior life is troubling to the speaker, but there seems to be little divide between the darkness within and the darkness without. A common theme throughout the volume is a fear of disturbing thoughts and feelings, which in turn corresponds to outward sinfulness and destruction. The consequence of this coupling is the ruin of the natural world, “Love’s earthly paradise.” The inability to recognize the beauty of the natural world is repeatedly a sign of evil, or at least spiritual lethargy. The solution is always to return to Christ, but one gets the sense that one should be constantly vigilant about the human propensity to stray.

The speaker’s fear of corruption also moves from individuals to anxiety for the Church. In “Fifth Sunday After Easter—Rogation Sunday,” the narrator laments that “faith grows rare” (21) and in “Fifth Sunday After Epiphany” Keble depicts a church that is crying out to the heavens. He leans on imagery from the Hebrew Bible in this example from “Eighteenth Sunday After Trinity”:

In the waste howling wilderness
The Church is wandering still,
Because we would not onward press
When close to Sion’s hill.

Back to the world we faithless turned,
And far along the wild,
With labour lost and sorrow earned,
Our steps have been beguiled (5-12)

The speaker continues to compare the church to the Israelites wandering in the desert for the rest of the poem. The solution to this suffering is to ask for God to remove all “idol thrones.” Again, the speaker warns of evil thoughts within, temptations without, and church failures.

This poem would have been originally published years before the events of 1833 and the Assize Sermon, but this poem illustrates how Keble clearly disapproved of current Church affairs. Repeatedly, however, the answer to these problems is not direct political or administrative action but an individual return to God or love or innocence. There is a repeated appeal to authority—if one went straight to God, one should be able to perceive Anglican authority. Keble’s speaker must keep regulating his/her world when individual or institutional anxieties arise, and the natural landscape, or the inability to recognize the landscape, is an indicator of spiritual strife. Dark thoughts or evil are evident in the poems but must be quickly directed to God to handle, instead of being given a full exploration or engagement with evil.

Good things of the world are an indication of “Love’s earthly paradise” but must be read for divine. Another fear expressed throughout The Christian Year is the inability to recognize and choose what is good. Humanity as depicted in The Christian Year does not naturally want the right things, and in “Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity,” the narrator prays, “help us, Lord, to choose the good,/To pray for nought, to seek to none, but Thee” (67-68). The ability to read for goodness or choose goodness is dependent upon both individuals and the Church as a whole to submit to authority, which in Keble’s case ultimately is the authority of the Church of England.

However, the desire for good can be clouded by anxiety about the speaker’s ability to choose what is good or to live up to the expectations of Christianity, even as anxiety runs counter to the reading of God’s paradise in the natural world. The desire to control anxiety and fear, as
well as their counters exuberance or passion, is linked to one of two important principles in Tractarian poetry—Reserve. Neither depictions of God nor worship nor religious passion should be straightforwardly represented. A good Christian was to use Reserve in the expression of emotions as well as in worship or depictions of God. According to Tennyson, “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 to all regardless of the differing capacities of individuals to apprehend such things” (45). This is not a new idea; Tennyson traces its roots to Clement, Origen, and the 18th century Anglican Bishop Butler (44). Cragwall notes that Butler was standard reading at Oxford by the 19th century and Tennyson points out Keble’s particular dependence on Butler’s *The Analogy of Religion* as well as Wordsworth and Coleridge’s use of Butler to examine the concept of Reserve.

The second principle, Analogy, also played an important role in reading the natural world for the divine. Analogy was a theological as well as a literary term. According to Tennyson, poetry according to Keble is “sacramental” because the material world itself is a signpost for the divine (62). Keble explicitly discusses metaphor, simile, and symbol in his later lectures. Tennyson quotes at length from Keble’s “Lectures on Poetry” in which Keble uses simile not just to describe aesthetic choices but as a way to discover the divine in the world:

For, while Religion seeks out, as I said, on all sides, not merely language but also anything which may perform the office of language and help to express the emotions of the soul; what aid can be imagined more grateful and more timely than the presence of poetry, which leads men to the secret sources of Nature, and supplies a rich wealth of similes whereby a pious mind may supply and remedy, in some sort, its powerlessness of speech…Conversely, should we ask how, pre-eminently, ‘came honour and renown to prophetic bards and their poems’, it is Religion that has most to be thanked for this. For, once let that magic wand, as the phrase goes, touch any region of Nature, forthwith all that before seemed secular and profane is illumined with a new and celestial light: men
come to realize that the various images and similes of things, and all other poetic charms, are not merely the play of a keen and clever mind, nor to be put down as empty fancies: but rather they guide us by gentle hints and no uncertain signs, to the very utterances of Nature, or we may more truly say, of the Author of Nature. (qtd. in Tennyson 63)

Here, Nature and language have the same goals. The “office of language” is to point to the divine, but things outside of language can do that too, particularly Nature, but Nature must be read through a poetic lens. Here, Keble suggests that poetry actually points to Nature first, which itself acts like poetry about God. Nature can reveal God, but only when touched by the magic wand of religion or, to put it another way, earth becomes Nature when looked at through the lens of religious poetry and in turn leads to the authority of God. Understanding poetry is therefore a religious practice. To have a religious world view is to have a poetic worldview; the world is meant to be read like one would read a poem. Good reading practices are necessary even when there are no words because the very same reading strategies one uses to study poetry are the ones by which one reads reality. However, the ultimate goal of these reading strategies is not to understand the text (aka Nature, material reality) but rather to understand the author, God.

Again, Keble is likely drawing on 18th century sources such as William Paley and Bishop Butler, among other sources. However, it is important to note the distinctions between Paley and Butler. Paley represents perhaps one of the most famous iterations of 18th century design arguments in Natural Theology. Not unlike Paley’s famous image of the watch, claiming that if there is a watch (aka the universe) there must therefore be a watchmaker, Keble argues that if one is able to read the similes of the world, the reader could guess at the divine poet who created those similes and analogies. Jager argues that these design arguments are inherently analogical “because they reason from known instances of design to unknown ones; indeed they often depend at least implicitly upon a ratio of the type $a:b::c:d$. Sometimes, in addition, we find a
deductive tendency within design arguments, for the theologian may be inclined to deduce attributes of the deity from what he observes of the world” (2).

On the other hand, Jager writes that “Butler was rather skeptical of natural theology; his book tried to arrest its growing independence by contextualizing it within the confines of revealed religion” and this adherence to revealed religion is probably why it was so popular amongst the Tractarians (30). However, Jager argues that Butler’s views on analogy and design arguments anticipate Romantic era poetics:

…the romantic affection for metaphor and symbol inspires a progressive reading of romantic secularization as that which reorders the relationship of this world to the next world by transforming divine into human content. By contrast, if we restore the design argument to its place in the romantic era, then we can counterpose analogy to symbol and metaphor and thus understand romantic secularization as a form of differentiation, a reordering of categories within this world…(31)

Simultaneously, Jager also points out that design arguments are teleological. “They are literally arguments from design to God, and thus presuppose an individual’s ability to perceive marks of design in the natural world…They are teleological because they are interested in the seemingly purposive features of the natural world, in things—such as bird’s wings or eyelids—that appear to have been designed with a specific function in mind” (2). The nature imagery in The Christian Year often has a teleological purpose. Flowers or woodlands or any other form of natural beauty all function to point the believer to God or divinity. Keble does not dwell on specific species or anatomy like Paley does, but his more general descriptions still offer a kind of teleology. While it is a mistake to ignore the natural world, the natural world is not to be revered for itself but for the divine that is partially revealed and the afterlife that the believer should strive towards.
On the other hand, Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* describes how inseparable Keble’s ideas are from Butler, writing that Keble re-presents Butler’s sacramentality and his principle of probability:

In matters of religion [Keble] seemed to say, it is not merely probability which makes us intellectually certain, but probability as it is put to account by faith and love. It is faith and love which give to probability a force which it has not in itself. Faith and love are directed towards an Object…it is that Object, received in faith and love, which renders it reasonable to take probability as sufficient for internal conviction. Thus the argument from Probability, in the matter of religion, became an argument from Personality, which in fact is one form of the argument from Authority. (38)

In other words, by emphasizing probability, the believer has good reason to believe in God but not enough certainty to prove God’s existence; therefore, the believer must have faith to cross the gap. Newman here argues that all faith arguments go back to authority—either you trust an external authority or you do not, because placing authority on your own intellectual abilities leads you to at best solid probabilities, not certainty. The choice therefore hinges on submitting to the right authority; God is both the object and the authority—the object to receive human love and the authority to expect that love. For Keble, the right relationship with authority is what leads to spiritual peace.

The danger for Keble (and later poets in this study, Rossetti and Procter in particular) is that the reader would become so enamored with the material world, so enamored with poetry itself, that the reader would neglect the divine author. For example, Keble’s poem “Tuesday in Easter Week” is dedicated “to the snowdrop” and the speaker spends the beginning of the poem describing the flower’s beauty:

Thou first-born of the year's delight,  
Pride of the dewy glade,  
In vernal green and virgin white,  
Thy vestal robes, arrayed (1-4)
The snowdrop is lovely and worthy of poetic contemplation—a first and very welcome sign of spring and even a source of pride. However, while the speaker continues to list the physical qualities of the snowdrop, the speaker claims that the flower should not be admired for these attributes. The speaker reminds the reader that the flower’s beauty shouldn’t be dwelled on for itself but because it can remind the reader of the good news of Easter:

’Tis not for these I love thee dear -
Thy shy averted smiles
To Fancy bode a joyous year,
One of Life's fairy isles…

Is there a heart that loves the spring,
Their witness can refuse?
Yet mortals doubt, when angels bring
From Heaven their Easter news: (13-16; 21-24)

The value in the snowdrop lies in divine reality that the flower signifies but is not itself. Again, Fancy is used to denote what is ephemeral and recalls the memory of times past; the beauty of the snowdrop comes and goes with the changing seasons, which is contrasted with the hopes of a more permanent hope in the Christian Resurrection and freedom from guilt. Among the seemingly feminine qualities of the snowdrop, the flower has “shy averted smiles.” In other words, instead of boldly proclaiming the coming of spring, the snowdrop itself in its very form is reserved. Furthermore, the snowdrop and spring more broadly are a “witness” to the resurrection. But even this reminder isn’t enough. If the snowdrop is to signal the coming of Easter, human beings are particularly bad at reading it as such.

This emphasis on having proper ways of reading the natural world has roots in Protestantizing movements within the Church of England even as the Tractarians would come to push back against some Protestant practices and attitudes. In his preface to *John Keble in Context*, Michael Wheeler writes that, “Tractarians regarded themselves, not as ‘Protestants’—a
term reserved for Dissenters, in their view—but as ‘Catholics” (xii). Yet even as Keble uses the early Church Fathers and “Catholic” ideas, his work depends on imagery and ideas that come from 18th century Anglicanism. In the Book of God, Jager argues, “Nature, according to one common Romantic metaphor, is ‘the Book of God’—a series of revelations that parallel and complement the revelations of scripture. Implicitly or explicitly, this sensibility dominated mainstream theology in England from 1675 to 1850… it has never really gone away” (x). While he notes that this metaphor dates far before the Protestant Reformation, Jager claims, “The bookish metaphor may indeed be inescapable for any vaguely religious sensibility, though it describes most acutely a world of proliferating Protestant textuality, wherein the world is a book to be read both intensively and rationally” (ix). Keble explicitly uses the book metaphor, again in “Fourth Sunday After Epiphany”:

He, merciful and mild,
As erst, beholding, loves His wayward child;
When souls of highest birth
Waste their impassioned might on dreams of earth,
He opens Nature’s book,
And on His glorious Gospel bids them look,
Till, by such chords as rule the choirs above,
Their lawless cries are tuned to hymns of perfect love. (49-56)

Note that earth and Nature are not interchangeable here. In this stanza, “dreams of earth” seems to imply human concerns that are not linked to serving God. Nature, on the other hand, possesses the “book” that can evangelize humanity. If one pays enough attention to Nature and Scripture ("His glorious Gospel"), order is restored to humanity. If earth is human chaotic lawlessness, then Nature brings a kind of heavenly tranquility. It’s not just that humanity can lose sight of the divine—humanity opens itself to lawlessness and cacophony when it does so. “Reading” Nature and Scripture provide order again—order in laws and order in art (“hymns of perfect love”).
Right reading skills lead to reserved forms of art, which are the true expressions of “perfect love.”

Of course, the great irony of *The Christian Year* is that Keble’s audience failed to read the text as specifically Anglican. As noted above, Keble is working against both Methodist and Dissenting groups, as well Roman Catholics, but *The Christian Year* is so reserved in presenting specific doctrine outside of its specific structure and form, its readers often fail to register Anglican specificity. Several scholars have commented on this, including King who writes:

> Despite Keble’s stated attempt in his ‘Advertisement’ to bring British readers’ daily thought under greater Anglican discipline, the wide interdenominational circulation of *The Christian Year* enabled religiously and politically opposed British journalists, churchmen, and educators to imagine competing versions of a national, non-sectarian religious collectivity formed by the act of reading devotional poetry. (131)

There are some moments when the text of *The Christian Year* makes a denominational distinction. The poem “Gunpowder Treason” was added later, and in “Morning,” the speaker cautions the reader that “We need not bid, for cloistered cell, Our neighbor and our work farewell” (49-50) to be good Christians, a seeming rejection of celibacy and Roman Catholicism. Of course, Keble’s colleague E.B. Pusey would come to reintroduce convents and celibate religious orders to Anglicanism, erasing the religious difference cloisters denoted in the 1820s. Denomination distinctions would also become more blurred based on how *The Christian Year* was physically published. Tennyson discusses the different physical forms the volume could take, from small simple volumes to more decorative volumes meant as gifts, suggesting its marketability to different classes and denominations. He describes a process he dubs “missalization” that began to occur in the 1870s after Keble’s death in 1866 in which the volumes began to be decorated in a more Gothic and Catholic style, with images of crucifixes and cathedrals, as opposed to volumes published with more pastoral scenes (90). As Tennyson
succinctly puts it, these productions “range from Evangelical to Catholic” (89). Once Keble removed some of the more Methodist hints in Wordsworth’s poetry, replacing the authority of a Methodist field poet/preacher with the assumed authority of the established Church, the attractions of enthusiasm with the call to Reserve, he was left with poetry that was paradoxically specific to Anglicanism and generically Christian enough that almost any denomination could claim it. Here lie the paradoxes of secularism: Keble, perhaps unwittingly, acknowledges the attractions of competing religious traditions while simultaneously fearing them within his own aesthetics. The anxieties of Methodism or other traditions could supposedly be tempered by subsuming them into what Keble believed was an Anglican poetics without recognizing how it was actually Anglican art that would be fundamentally changed. This paradoxically results in poems that are both vague and specific, serving as the catalyst for the Oxford Movement’s specific aesthetic priorities (as demonstrated by the rest of the poets in this study) while also being purchased, read, and used across denominations. If Keble leans on the divine book metaphor, that Nature is a book that believers can read for God, secularism means that you might find whatever you are looking for in that book.

Keble’s desire to bring more readers to Anglicanism through the Assize Sermon and *Tracts for the Times* would also have the unintended sectarian consequences. In the next section, I describe the relationships between the Assize sermon, poetry lectures, and the secular forces shaping them.

### III. Assize Sermon, Poetry Lectures, and Secularism

In this section, I turn to some more examples of Keble’s prose, focusing on his Assize Sermon on National Apostasy and his Lectures on Poetry. I outline the events leading up to Keble’s Assize sermon, including the structural problems in the Anglican Church of Ireland that
led to the Church Temporalities Act which in turn served as the occasion for Keble’s sermon. At the same time, Keble began giving his Lectures on Poetry in which he connects poetry with the responsibilities of citizens while simultaneously arguing for its use to calm fears.

For Keble in the 1830s, religious tolerance is a crisis and poetry is the antidote. Keble was particularly concerned with the Catholic Question and the threat it posed to the authority of Anglicanism. As early as 1829, *The Times* published a short article called “Old and New Tories” that included “a series of questions proposed by Mr. Keble, Fellow of Oriel, on the part of Sir Robert Inglis.” Some of the questions asked:

1. Whether the University of Oxford has not repeatedly expressed a strong opinion; that the settlement of the Catholic Question in the way now proposed involves great and certain danger to the Church Establishment?
2. Whether Mr. Peel has not himself avowed the same opinion since the commencement of the present session of Parliament? And whether he took any other ground in defence of his change in policy, than the excess of immediate danger which would be incurred by further perserverance? (“Old and New Tories”)

These anxieties over the supposed threat to the Anglican Church was brought to a head by Catholic Emancipation and the Church Temporalities Act of 1833. This act restructured and consolidated the Church of Ireland, which had been created after the 1801 Act of Union (Brose 204). Decades of tensions culminated in the reluctant restructuring of the Church of Ireland.

Before the nineteenth century, Ireland briefly had its own Parliament, albeit made up of mostly Anglo-Irish aristocrats. However, after the Irish Rebellion of 1798, the Irish Parliament was dissolved in the Act of Union in 1800, putting Ireland under the direct control of the British Parliament. While an Anglican presence had been in Ireland for centuries, bishops had been members of the Irish government before it was dissolved in the Act of Union; afterwards, they sat in Parliament. This dramatically increased the number of people under control of the English Parliament (Ireland and England had long been connected but government rule was now much
more direct), but most of these people had far fewer political rights. While a number of Catholic Relief Acts were passed in 1778, 1782, and 1793, they still prevented Irish Catholics from holding government positions (*The Oxford Companion to Irish History*). Daniel O’Connell, a Catholic barrister, was elected to Parliament in 1798 anyway (*A Dictionary of World History*). However, his election did not automatically change the tensions surrounding the Church of Ireland. Absenteeism was a chronic problem with both the Anglo-Irish landlords and the clergy.

Chadwick reports:

> The established Church of Ireland was not minded to missionary endeavour. Rich in proportion to its population... Its old-fashioned members frowned on enthusiastic attempts to evangelise the Roman Catholics.... Its power, as the Tory party justly observed, was the chain binding Ireland to England. But its lapses were blatant. Though not so guilty of non-residence as the English, some 30 per cent of the incumbents were non-resident, 18 per cent of the parishes had not even a church, the twenty-two bishops received large stipends, and when non-resident they were spectacularly non-resident. (48-49)

This is to say nothing of the unpopularity of tithes, leading to the Tithe Wars; tithes were required to finance the Church of Ireland, even though a majority of the people were Roman Catholic². According to *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, “By 1833 there were 22 counties in which half or more tithes owed were unpaid.” Skirmishes broke out when attempts were made to seize livestock in place of the tithes (*The Oxford Companion to Irish History*).

Chadwick argues that the need for increased rights for Catholics and the need to reform the Church of Ireland were reluctantly recognized in England³. Parliament passed Catholic Emancipation but they also took measures to suppress the vote. There was also debate about

---

² “The census of 1861 showed that less than one eighth of the population belonged to the established church, and four-fifths were Roman Catholic” (“Church of Ireland”). By 1871, the Church of Ireland was no longer established by law.

³ Thomas Arnold, Keble’s good friend, published *The Christian Duty of conceding the Roman Catholic Claims* in support of increased Catholic rights, which contributed to a schism between the two.
whether Catholic clergy should be paid, or established, by the government like the clergy of the Church of Ireland. By paying them, the British government could assert more control over them but also risked constitutional crisis and a threat to the monarch’s Coronation oath, which vowed to protect the Protestantism of the nation. However, these issues did not address the problems with the Church of Ireland itself.

In February, 1833, the Church Temporalities Act was presented in the House of Commons and was eventually passed. Some hoped that the money saved from the restructuring would be put to schools or to pay Catholic priests (Chadwick 57). However, those measures, placed in clause 147, were removed from the bill, to O’Connell’s chagrin. This legislation also made conservatives nervous that the Church of England would be reformed next:

Tory clergymen could be found to whisper behind locked doors that the Church of England needed reform, radical ideas of reform looked suspiciously like burglary. Their friends had stripped the Irish church act of its most offensive clause. But they hated the precedent. Without consulting church authorities a government which leaned on Catholics and dissenting votes abolished bishoprics and arranged endowments. What might such a government do to the Church of England? (Chadwick 60)

Keble, among other conservatives like Newman, was worried about this very thing. He was critical of having people outside the Anglican communion make financial and restructuring decisions for it, and he was scandalized by the spiritual implications he saw in the downsizing of the church.

Keble’s Assize Sermon was delivered on July 14, 1833 in St. Mary’s chapel, Oxford, born out of this anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiment. In the sermon, he uses the text from 1 Samuel to anxiously respond to the restructuring of the Church of Ireland by equating this act with an abandonment of Anglicanism altogether. He eventually advocates for lay members of the Church of England to not abandon their government posts and other jobs but to conduct
themselves with self-discipline, tell anyone who would listen about their support of the Church of England, and not neglect their religious devotion. Before he concluded his sermon, he warns his listeners that:

they cannot be too careful in reminding themselves, that one chief danger, in times of change and excitement, arises from their tendency to engross the whole mind. Public concerns, ecclesiastical or civil, will prove indeed ruinous to those, who permit them to occupy all their care and thoughts, neglecting or undervaluing ordinary duties, more especially those of a devotional kind. (26)

In his essay, “John Keble, ‘National Apostasy’ and the Myths of 14 July,” Mark D. Chapman claims that “[a]s the senior figure of one of the most unlikely bands of revolutionaries of all time, Keble unwittingly prepared the way for the rise of English political pluralism” (50). Chapman begins his essay by describing how unexciting the Assize Sermon seemed to be when Keble delivered it, only slowly becoming important within the Tractarian movement. He argues that while he believes that Keble wanted the union between Church and State, Chapman also points out that by privileging the Church over the State, Keble was actually reinforcing their separation. Chapman points to an early 20th century essay by Harold Laski that describes this separation. Because the Church existed before manmade institutions and was governed by God, not humanity, Keble creates a separation between them. Laski wrote, “It was a definition of the Church that the Tractarians attempted, and they found almost immediately that to define its ideality was to asserts its exclusiveness. If it was created by God it could not be controlled by man; if it was erected by God, it was not subject to the ordinances of a man-created institution like the state” (qtd. in Chapman 51). Chapman also points to another early 20th century writer, J.N. Figgis, who argued that “The advantage of toleration is that it acts automatically on the purity of religious bodies and the reality of their faith” (qtd. in Chapman 52). There is no doubting the reality of faith and the pursuit of religious purity in Keble’s work, which is
ironically what called for the need for religious pluralism in the first place. Chapman argues that the whole Tractarian movement “thus marked a response to what might be called the legitimating of ‘sectarianism’ within the English Constitution: the removal of religious penalties forced pluralism on the State and a tendency towards disestablishment of the Church” (52).

This matters because of how much religious diversity already existed in Great Britain when Keble gave his sermon. Stephen Prickett in “Keble’s Creweian Oration of 1839: The Idea of a Christian University” claims that what “Keble (along with many of his Oxford contemporaries, it must be said) never recognized [was] the degree to which the England of the 1830s was already a highly pluralistic society, where expectations of religious or philosophic conformity could never be assumed – and, in the wake of the 1832 Reform Bill, were totally unrealistic politically” (30).

But according to S.A. Skinner in “‘The Duty of the State’: Keble, the Tractarians, and the Establishment”, Keble was just as worried about the characterization of the relationship between Church and State as about the existence of that relationship at all. He claims “Tractarian expressions in favour of disestablishment, that is to say, did not imply any quietism on the Church’s part or the feeling that the Church ought ideally to stand alone. On the contrary, they derived from a feeling that the ‘terms’ of union fell far short of the ideal; and that that ideal was better nourished in separatist protest than acquiescence in a debased form” (35).

On one hand, emotions mislead and distract believers away from the true church. On the other hand, the feelings of the “true Churchman” demonstrate that trueness. For example, roughly in the middle of the sermon, Keble claims that “these are not safe topics for the indulgence of mere feeling” but moments before he had described “the feelings with which it seems natural for a true Churchman to regard such a state of things…” (16). In Keble, it can be
difficult to discern whether suitable feelings reveal who the true Churchmen are or whether true Churchmen show their position from the display of suitable feelings. By the end of the sermon, Keble has returned to privileging restraint, even though he has found the events that have unfolded outrageous: “Remonstrance, calm, distinct, and persevering, in public and private, direct and indirect, by word, look, and demeanor, is the unequivocal duty of every Christian, according to his opportunities, when the Church landmarks are being broken down” (23).

Keble also preached extreme reserve in his poetry lectures. He began giving his lecture series as Professor of Poetry in 1833. Given in Latin and dedicated to Wordsworth, these lectures provide his rationale for the connection between religion and poetry. In his first lecture as professor of poetry at Oxford, he speaks of his anxieties concerning Church and State and argues poetry can soothe problems with both:

...the most sacred causes are in extreme peril. For who has not observed, these two years past, with what zealous industry unprincipled men are doing their evil work: with what mischievous eagerness they seek out country seclusions, so that there is no cottage, however sequestered or remote, which they have not filled with scandalous profane pamphlets, to serve as fuel for their seditions. These are the perils against which we are already on the watch: these are the foes against whom we are posting our sentinels and for myself I fear that, as the evil creeps on day by day this watchfulness will be needed much longer yet...But...I would certainly never shrink from my task on the plea that at a time of national peril it ill becomes us to betake ourselves to the study of poetry; nay, I believe that, on the one hand, nothing is more effective than these studies in bracing citizens to all virtues; and, on the other, nothing is more helpful to the studies themselves than the sight of a true patriot quitting himself self-sacrificingly, strenuously and unweariedly in the service of the State in its hour of need. And, no doubt, I shall find some opportunity later of showing how closely intertwined are the functions of noble poetry and good citizenship. (translated by E.K. Francis 13-14)

Keble does not clarify the connection between good poetry and citizenship. However, it is clear that Keble claims that politics is separate from neither religion nor poetry, making poetry a didactic vehicle for religious and political virtues. The virtues that Keble espouses focus on individual conduct; you will know a good (Anglican) Englishman by the way he conducts
himself and manages emotions. He criticizes poetry that is “decadent and deteriorated” but sighs that good judges of taste are next to impossible in a “corrupt state[.] At any rate, it is now the case that the very men whose duty it is to curb extravagance themselves indulge in widest and wildest latitude of theme and style…too much applause is given to wit and smartness, too little to reality and truth” (translated by E.K. Francis 17).

In the same first lecture, Keble addresses Imagination and Fancy directly. He argues that poetry’s purpose is:

…to recall, to renew, and bring vividly before us pictures of absent objects: partly it has to draw out and bring to light things cognate or similar to each object it represents, however slight the connexion may be; partly it has to systematize and explain the connexion between them: in a word, it is the handmaid to Imagination and Fancy… For while we linger over language and rhythm, it occupies our minds and diverts them from cares and troubles: when, further, it gives play to Imagination, summons before us the past, forecasts the future, in brief, paints all things in the hues which the mind itself desires, we feel that it is sparing and merciful to the emotions that seethe within us, and that, for a while, we enjoy at least that solace which Dido once fruitlessly craved…(21-22).

Again, it is difficult to believe that Keble was not at least familiar with Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* by his use of Imagination and Fancy, but in Keble’s formulation, Imagination loses some of the power that Coleridge grants it. Keble’s concept of Imagination is meant for distraction; instead of having generative, divine, power, Keble conceives Imagination as a way to make “all things” more pleasing, a way to escape “cares and troubles” for a while. Keble also indirectly admits that the analogical language has its limits, that sometimes the poet may make connections between objects where the connection is somewhat weak. Jager describes the ability for analogical thinking to allow for a “reordering of categories within this world” (30-31), and Keble seems to acknowledge the possibility of reordering categories, no matter the strength of the connection. The desire to order the world seems more important than demonstrating
meaningful relationships between concepts or objects. This is a surprisingly lackluster hope for poetry, especially since in the same lecture Keble preaches the value of poetry for good citizenship.

Keble also uses these lectures to describe his system of classifying poets. He first separates first tier poets as ones who write with real passion, those who “seek relief for some disturbing emotion” (Keble 466). These primary poets “have the special characteristic of writing from a full heart, of being skilled to relieve the outbursts of emotion by aid of song” (87-88). The second tier of poets are those who “merely imitate those who are really moved by such incitements” (466). Again, this classification system echoes Coleridge’s definition of primary and secondary Imagination. For example, Keble applauds Virgil and considers him a primary poet, while Horace, who seems skilled enough but not quite as sincere as Virgil, is relegated to being a secondary poet. These categories can be broken down even further into poets who focus on the actions and adventures of men or those focused on the natural world. Again, Keble claims that Virgil has a true love of the countryside, while Horace likes the countryside but is still preoccupied with the goings-on of the city.

Throughout his lectures, Keble paradoxically values passion and reserve, inherent gifts and elite education. I am not the first to notice these contradictions but I read these paradoxes actually as indicative of the secular forces as described by Taylor and Jager. The tension (but also paradoxical interconnectedness) in Keble’s theory between authenticity and traditional religious authority is due in part to the secularizing forces. Since, as Jager argues, skepticism is not the opposite of religiosity but inseparable from religiosity, authenticity is also a marker of religiosity. If there is room for skepticism and choice (even if the alternative choices seem to Keble like bad choices), believers can and should act on their authentic feelings. To Keble,
authenticity is what will lead people back to God’s authority. While what Keble thinks is authentic is heavily colored by his nationalism, class, gender, and religious upbringing, the possibility of making more earnest religious choices correlates with the role that authenticity plays in his aesthetic theory. He is incredibly skeptical of poets who appear less than genuine, poets who have mastered technique but aren’t expressing heartfelt earnestness. Again, Homer isn’t a secondary poet for lack of skill but for a perceived lack of devotion to the natural world. With the splintering of England’s religious groups and the eschewing of institutions for enthusiasm, emotion seems to be a force for choosing Tractarian Anglicanism as well.

IV. Conclusion

In Unquiet Things, Jager claims that skepticism and doubt can yield religious fruits. Deeper religious convictions could be the result of questions, doubting, and choosing belief instead of unwaveringly accepting compulsory religion. Therefore, skepticism is not the opposite of belief then but rather its driving force. Jager argues that “To be after the secular, then, is to start one’s thinking from a romantic insight: a cautious, ambivalent recognition that the religious and the secular constitute each other, and that the attempt to pull them apart leads to a level of harm that is (or ought to be) morally intolerable” (23). A secular world that must tolerate religious difference therefore allows religious belief to fracture (at times violently as Jager demonstrates) but deepen.

Keble never left the Church of England like Newman, nor was he an advocate of tolerance, nor did he want a world where English governance was separate from Anglican membership. Anxiety is a constant refrain, and the container provided by poetry was explicitly meant to soothe that anxiety, whether that anxiety was rooted in individual sins, bad thoughts, Church failures, or a changing political landscape and created space for more religious diversity.
However, the same forces that Keble feared would weaken the Church of England are ironically the same forces that drew Keble deeper into Tractarianism, itself a movement that came about from the fracturing of the Church of England. The freedom for the Tractarians to return to revive older Catholic practices, publish Tracts on theological views such as the primacy of apostolic succession and the real presence in the Eucharist, unthinkable a century earlier, stemmed from the same freedom that allowed for the denominational diversification that Keble feared. By granting more authority to the Church than the State, Keble creates a hierarchy and therefore a division between the two institutions, causing Keble himself to eventually change his mind on the union between Church and State; eventually, he would come to support separation. The change that led to Catholic Emancipation and growing dissent was the same religious freedom that allowed Keble and the Tractarians to push for changes within their own denomination and institution. Poetry and art are part of these changes. Keble was able to use ideas from Wordworthian Romanticism and 18th century theology to create an aesthetic that sought to reject secularism while being a product of that very secularism, setting the stage for the increased ritualism in High Church Anglican circles. While Keble is associated with a very particular school of Anglicanism, borrowing from the Lake School poets while removing some of the markers of Methodism or enthusiasm, he fails to indoctrinate a wide swath of his readers. While the presentation of religious anxieties and solutions helped to make *The Christian Year* one of the most popular volumes of poetry in the nation and even served as a prayer tool, it failed to preserve the prominence of the Church of England. Orthodox poetry actually became a vehicle to transmit spiritual and emotional ideas, not specific doctrine. The forms set up in Keble’s poetry meant to prevent spiritual passion from becoming enthusiasm actually draw attention to such passions without allowing those passions to lead to spiritual security. By borrowing from Butler
and Paley, Keble continues to insert (as Jager calls it) the “instrumental” language alongside the “intrinsic” language of the orthodox and therefore participates in a secular project (123). Belief in God is simultaneously internal and must be given external justification and authority. As 18th century theologians grappled with using Enlightenment language to justify orthodox beliefs, those orthodox beliefs became less verifiable through such language. Even as Keble makes the case for a particular kind of orthodoxy, *The Christian Year* was too popular outside of Tractarian circles to be studied on its doctrine alone. Keble’s solution to secularism is itself a secular response—a closer attention to the emotions and individual conscience outside of the institution, even as he seeks to bolster the institution of the Church of England. By using Keble as a model—a poet that used very traditional and institutional forms to convey arguments that actually lean on individual emotions and contradictory presentations of authenticity—we examine how the rest of the poets in this study—Christina Rossetti, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and Adelaide Anne Procter—use this iteration of Romantic secularism as they build upon and transform Tractarian aesthetics.
CHAPTER TWO

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI: TRACTARIANISM, SECULARISM, AND VOCATION

It’s a weary life, it is; she said:–
Doubly blank in a woman’s lot:
I wish and I wish I were a man;
Or, better than any being, were not:

Were nothing at all in all the world,
Not a body and not a soul;
Not so much as a grain of dust
Or drop of water from pole to pole.

-Christina Rossetti, “From the Antique”

I. Introduction

Christina Rossetti uses Tractarian aesthetic principles to engage in questions of secularism and women’s vocations. In my chapter title, I use the word “vocation” not to describe occupation but in the older Christian sense of the word that invokes a divine calling. Several scholars have already thoroughly and convincingly demonstrated the connection between Rossetti and the Tractarians; I instead look at the development of Tractarian concepts in Rossetti’s poetry within a secular framework. Scholars such as Joshua King have established that Rossetti intentionally wrote with a religiously diverse reading public in mind (albeit a limited diversity, since her readership was mostly Christian) (King 233). I argue that Rossetti, while using Analogy, Reserve, and other Tractarian concepts, is writing with a heightened awareness of competing claims to religious truth brought about by secularization.

I read Rossetti’s poetry with this awareness that the stakes for belief were still high for the Victorians, but in a secular world they had fewer satisfying or stable answers. Her poetry
reflects the proliferation of religious, moral, and vocational choices for women in this period, but an increase in choice does not mean more freedom from male control; based on her own readings of Scripture, Rossetti did not imagine a world where women and men were equal or occupied similar roles in this lifetime, despite the creation of Anglican convents and changes to women’s work. This increase in choice also renders making confident decisions more difficult and doubt an ever-increasing factor in religious life. Mischaracterized by some scholars as “morbid”\(^1\), I argue that Rossetti’s work is instead taking seriously the choices available to her and others, facing the dilemmas posed by those choices, and dealing head-on with the emotional and spiritual consequences of the options available for herself and her readers. These dilemmas inform her presentation of desire throughout her work because expression of desire, in all its forms, is closely linked with the moral system within which it operates. Subjects such as sexuality and desire are inseparable from questions of morality, which in turn are heavily influenced by religion and spirituality (though not identical), even when (and perhaps especially) these connections are at their most paradoxical. Indeed, desire and despair are often the two sides of the same coin—what matters are the opportunities (or lack thereof) for fulfillment. While using Tractarian concepts, Rossetti engages with secular ideas, created by both the possibilities and the inability of secularism to provide satisfying choices, particularly for religious Victorian women.

In this chapter, I will first establish Rossetti’s engagement with Tractarian aesthetics within a secular context, and then move on to discuss how she uses these concepts to depict the

---

\(^1\) Jerome McGann claims that the term morbid “tends to occur repeatedly in the critical literature on Rossetti” (143n15) and claims himself that Rossetti is morbid compared to other Christian poets (132, 133).
tensions between vocation and choice. I use close readings of Rossetti’s poems, including *Goblin Market* (1862), her vocation poems that cluster in her earlier work but span her career, and “An Old-World Thicket” (1881), among others, to describe these tensions in Rossetti’s poetry. In my previous chapter, I discussed Colin Jager’s insights, including his discussion of 18th century emphasis on reading the divine in nature and his assertion that Romantic literature registers reform, as well as Taylor’s concept of fragilization. The ability to read the natural world for signs of God is significant for the Tractarians, and Rossetti’s use of this concept informs her presentation of choice throughout her work. Because of the splintering of the religious landscape, the Tractarian movement and its specific theology and poetics could form within the Anglican communion and move outside the walls of Oxford. By juxtaposing these ideas with Rossetti’s use of Tractarianism within her presentation of gender, vocation, and choice, we can better understand the role of secularism in her depictions of desire in her work.

II. Tractarianism, Feminism, and Secularization

In this section, I demonstrate Rossetti’s engagement with Tractarianism, specifically with Keble’s *Christian Year* and E.B. Pusey’s theology preached by Rev. Dodsworth and Rev. Littledale at Christ Church, London, as well as later feminist engagement with these ideas. I argue that in order to understand how secularism impacts her depiction of vocation and choice, we need to understand the Tractarian ideas Rossetti uses and adapts, as well as how Tractarian ideas impacted the choices available to her, particularly the new lay and professed roles available in Tractarian churches. The concepts of Analogy and Reserve are pivotal in Rossetti’s poetry; Reserve in particular informs not just poetic aesthetics but acceptable forms of Christian behavior, especially in regards to women’s behavior.
Rossetti was characterized as an independent, willful child who, through some unknown events, health issues, and bouts of despair, became deeply religious as a teenager. She, along with her mother and sister Maria, began attending the Anglo-Catholic parish Christ Church in London, which had Tractarian preachers such as William Dodsworth and Richard Frederick Littledale (Dictionary of National Biography). Dodsworth was a devotee of E.B. Pusey, who along with Keble and Newman helped establish Tractarianism and, according to Emma Mason, had a much greater impact on Rossetti’s theology than Keble, although as I shall discuss below, Rossetti was a close reader of Keble’s poetry (38). Pusey was one of the founding members of the Oxford Movement alongside Keble and Newman and was so associated with the movement that “Puseyism” was used interchangeably with Tractarianism. He was the first to initial his Tract for the series (the others were previously published anonymously) and became a controversial figure in his own right due to his views on the Eucharist, his use of medieval disciplines including wearing a hair shirt and extreme fasting, and his role in establishing convents within the Anglican church. The Anglican sisterhoods would be particularly controversial but, along with the significance of the Eucharist, would matter a great deal in Rossetti’s prose and poetry.

Lynda Palazzo, Diane D’Amico, and Mary Arseneau have written extensively about the female religious communities—both professed sisters and laywomen—that Rossetti was surrounded by during her lifetime. Scholars have often pointed out that Rossetti was close with her mother, Frances, and for several years her mother’s unmarried sisters lived with them and had their own careers. Charlotte, Margaret, and Eliza Polidori, along with Frances, were the daughters of Lord Byron’s physician Dr. John Polidori. Charlotte, Margaret, and Eliza were trained as governesses; Charlotte was first a governess then a lady’s companion and Margaret
took a role in helping to raise Frances’ children (Arseneau 22). Eliza even became a nurse for Florence Nightingale before Nightingale took her nurses to the Crimean War (Rossetti herself applied to be a nurse but was turned down). All of these women were heavily involved in church activities and social work.

Maria Rossetti, Christina’s sister, also had an impressive, if often overlooked, academic career and work ethic. While it is well known that Maria became a nun with the newly formed Sisterhood of All Saints, she was an “outer sister” for thirteen years before formally entering the novitiate, working in the home to support her family, as well as spending years teaching private students before acting on her calling (Arseneau 19). William Michael Rossetti was the major provider for the family after their father died, and all of the Rossetti women made sure to take care of the home when he was there. “Significantly, it was only upon William Michael’s engagement in 1873 that Maria felt sufficiently free of family duty to act upon her desire to begin her novitiate…” (Arseneau 22). Once she became a sister, Maria, besides her other duties to her sisterhood and community, was the one who “translated from Latin the Day Hours of the Roman Breviary as the new Office Book for the All Saints Sisterhood, a translation that became the standard work of its kind and is still used by religious communities today” (Arseneau 29).

Arseneau also reports that “the Rossetti and Polidori women undertook the social and religious work typical of Anglo-Catholic sisters and laity” spurred on by the preaching and expectations of their church community (30). Several scholars have noted Rossetti’s work with the St. Mary Magdalene Penitentiary in Highgate for “fallen” women that supposedly rehabilitated these women for work, often in domestic service. There was a great concern about prostitution and sexual immorality amongst Victorian society, including among the Tractarians. Rossetti did not live there full-time, but it was likely that she would spend several days there at a
time, sleeping there overnight. While the women who ran the penitentiary were not professed nuns, they did wear uniforms that were nun-like—black dresses, white caps, and necklaces with crosses—and they called each other sister (D’Amico 107). D’Amico notes that the rules at the penitentiary could be quite strict; women with children were not admitted at all, the “fallen” women were not allowed to talk about their former lives, and it was likely that any reading material had to be approved by the warden and explicitly Christian in nature (105; 107; 108). D’Amico also writes that the ministers who helped create the penitentiary wanted female workers to be with the “fallen” women around the clock in order to support them, but one could also see how this was useful in maintaining control over the women and keeping the focus on Christian penance (106).

However, Rossetti was involved in causes other than work at Highgate. She was strongly against vivisection, the act of performing dissections and surgeries on live animals, and was concerned with London’s poverty. Arseneau argues that “Work with the poor was a particularly Anglo-Catholic agenda, engaging the efforts of slum priests, the newly founded sisterhoods, and many lay women” (24). Rossetti’s Tractarianism also helped shape some of the forms her writing would take. Throughout her writing career, she wrote for the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, producing religious prose works along with her poetry, including her commentary on the Apocalypse called The Face of the Deep, which also included poems woven within the prose that would be later added to her volume of poetry, Verses (1893) in which, like Keble, she devotes individual poems to different days on the liturgical calendar.

While William Michael Rossetti claimed that his sister did not care much for Keble, scholars do not dispute that she still read The Christian Year, adapted the liturgical model in Verses, and heard Tractarian ideas preached at the Anglo-Catholic parishes she attended in
London. In his postscript to *Victorian Devotional Poetry*, G.B. Tennyson dubs Rossetti a Tractarian poet because her poetry focuses on prayer, Scripture, liturgy, and worship, but most of all, “Christina Rossetti’s most Tractarian element is her very approach to poetry itself as a way of seeking the Deity. Keble’s bedrock principle that poetry is the expression of intense religious longing finds no more exemplification than in the poetry of Christina Rossetti” (202). While much of this chapter will demonstrate her engagement with Tractarianism throughout her career, among the most striking pieces of evidence for Rossetti’s engagement with Keble are her young, hand-drawn illustrations of her copy of Keble’s *The Christian Year*, published in *Victorian Newsletter* in the 1980s by Diane D’Amico. In the illustrations, Rossetti places young women in the scenes, placing either a female speaker into the poem or directing the poem with a female reader in mind. Yet at the same time, demonic figures sometimes accompany the girls, including one in which a demon with wings and a serpent’s tail hangs on a cross, surrounded by young women in intense worship. In one description of one of the illustrations, D’Amico argues that the imagery suggests a recurring female image pointing to Rossetti’s own developing apocalyptic vision, a vision that would eventually come to focus on the figure of Christ as Bridegroom and soul as his Bride… This repeated use of the feminine image offers further evidence that Rossetti was reading Keble subjectively; in other words, she read, responding to, if not looking for, what in the poetry of *The Christian Year* would serve to mirror her own hopes and fears. (37)

Scriptural depictions of the apocalypse would continue to be a source of Rossetti’s writing, including her long meditation on the Book of Revelation in *The Face of the Deep*. The Bride/Bridegroom imagery to describe the longings of the soul for God would also last into several of her poems throughout her career.
Mary Arseneau argues that Rossetti uses Tractarian concepts to justify her role as a poet and as a woman, particularly Reserve. “For Rossetti as author and narrator shows how the quality of reserve can be adopted as a way of satisfying the competing demands of art, God, and society. In particular, reserve is capable of accommodating poetry to both theology and gender ideology” (Arseneau 69). As several scholars have remarked, religious poetry was an acceptable artform for women to create and a more permissible way to engage in theology and religion. In “Keble, Women’s Poetry and Victorian Cultural Theory,” Emma Francis points to a strain in scholarship that argues “women’s poetry enacts a socially ennobling performance of virtues of the private sphere inside the public sphere” (120). In Rossetti’s early unpublished novella Maude, the protagonist is unable to fulfill both her desire to be an artist and to respond to God’s call, but scholars have pointed out that Rossetti herself is later able to reconcile her artistic and spiritual desires through her devotional poetry.

While bringing forth evidence of Rossetti’s individual engagement with the Tractarian movement is productive, I would like to place Rossetti in a wider discussion about the creation of Tractarian aesthetics as a whole within a secular context. In Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain’s Age of Print, Joshua King argues that Rossetti was aware of, and wrote for, a religiously diverse audience. He claims that Rossetti imagined a spiritual community of all believers, based on eschatological language from Scripture and building upon the liturgical form of Keble and Tennyson’s In Memoriam (232-233). He argues that in Verses (1893), “Rossetti deftly constructs a poetic cycle whose method of arrangement, allusive language, and deployment of popular poetic forms (e.g. sonnets and roundels) would enable it—and its overarching image of transnational and ecumenical Christian community—to be engaged by a wide range of literary and Christian audiences in a diversified late-Victorian print market” (236).
Rossetti’s work is indebted to the specificities of Tractarianism and yet is open enough to be attractive to a variety of Christian readers within a secular nation. Secularization helped spur the creation of the Tractarian movement in the first place, a movement that can be read as a response to “liberalism” and the Church of England loosening its connection with the state, while Tractarianism was ironically only able to flourish because of this increased freedom. By seeking to place more authority in the Church itself and revive the work of the patristics, the Tractarians created enough space to make a case for more Catholic practices and the Oxford Movement’s own theological approaches. This in turn led to the creation of the Anglican sisterhoods and offered more vocational choices for women in Protestant England than ever before, at once rooted in traditions centuries old and yet still radical in the public’s eye. Yet with increased choices come more intense pressure to make the right choice, especially as each denomination became more convinced of its own righteousness. D’Amico asserts, “Christ had said that not all would be saved, and as disturbing and even horrifying as this thought was to her, Rossetti never doubted the reality of damnation” (39). Secularization fails to provide foolproof religious or moral paths to salvation because of this availability—and instability—of choice.

As mentioned above, Rossetti had models for women living meaningful lives in a number of ways—as mothers, religious sisters, and pious laywomen—while also being no stranger to the discourse surrounding “fallen” women. Yet it would be disingenuous to claim that Rossetti could image total equality among genders, particularly within Christianity. In a letter written to Augusta Webster, she writes:

Does it not appear as if the Bible was based upon an understood unalterable distinction between men and women, their position, duties, privileges? Not arrogating to myself but most earnestly desiring to attain to the character of a humble orthodox Xtian, so does it appear to me; not merely under the Old but also under the New Dispensation. The fact of the Priesthood being exclusively man’s, leaves me in no doubt that the highest functions
Cynthia Scheinberg in *Women’s Poetry and Religion in Victorian England: Jewish Identity and Christian Culture* discusses as length Rossetti’s conclusions about Scripture, despite the fact that she (unlike Elizabeth Barrett Browning) is not versed in Hebrew or Greek, “positioning herself as a universal Christian” with access to the Bible to establish authority (Scheinberg 111).

Scheinberg mentions that Rossetti writes about gender hierarchies in this life and alludes to the hope that these hierarchies will not exist in the afterlife, yet it is pretty obvious in the above letter that Rossetti believes gender hierarchies are inseparable from Christianity in this life. Acceptable choices for Christian women do not include priesthood or other positions of power.

In her poetry, Rossetti depicts the pitfalls for women, even when they do make acceptable choices. For the speakers in her poems who make “good” choices, life is often unsatisfying at best and a terror at worst. In “A Triad”, three girls occupy the tropes of the slut, wife, and spinster but each meets an unpleasant fate: “All on the threshold, yet all short of life” (14). The nun in “The Convent Threshold” longs for her former lover even as she repents their “pleasant sin” and waits for the afterlife for them to be reunited; this is not a picture of a woman content in her vocation. Other nuns are restless in their vocations or reeling from their former lives (“An ‘Immurata’ Sister,” “Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde,” “Three Nuns”), but at the same time romantic love is also dangerous, unfulfilling, or duplicitous in many more poems. The best that Laura and Lizzie can hope for in *Goblin Market* is quiet domesticity and to avoid Jeanie’s shame and death. Life is full of suffering no matter what one chooses, but failing to choose the right vocation is to risk one’s salvation, even as secular temptations become ever more present. Now, there are important exceptions to this. “A Birthday” is one of Rossetti’s most canonical poems
and lusciously celebrates romantic love, and in her later poems, the tension between sexual and spiritual desire is somewhat resolved by making Christ himself the object of desire, a strategy that I will later discuss. Yet I argue that there is still a pattern here, that this theme of vocation and choice, informed by both Tractarianism and secularization, still persists throughout her work.

III. *Goblin Market*

*Goblin Market* (1862) is easily Rossetti’s most canonical poem—popular in her lifetime and now one of Rossetti’s best-known poems. The poem is known for the myriad readings it offers, from feminist, sexual, and queer readings, to anti-Semitic\(^2\) readings or explicitly Christian readings, to economic critique. There is ample evidence within *Goblin Market* for all of the readings listed above; I am not here to dispute them. I do want to bring together the interpretations of the poem that focus on sexuality with the interpretations of the poem that focus on Tractarianism. I do this because I think these readings are not mutually exclusive and in fact would be better served if placed together.

Marylu Hill argues that Rossetti taps into a Christian tradition dating back to Augustine and St. John Chrysostom and implemented by Pusey that uses physical, sexual, and homoerotic language to describe union with God through the Eucharist. However, while I do think that Rossetti is working within this tradition, I argue that she uses this language to describe the real perils of the choices available for Lizzie and Laura. Instead of offering more legitimate choices for the sisters in the poem, the erotic and homoerotic language of the poem is subsumed into

\(^2\) Anti-Semitic readings are not as widely discussed as the feminist, Christian, or economic discussions of the poem, but Scheinberg provides ample evidence for the anti-Semitic depictions mapped onto the goblins in the poem in her chapter, “Christina Rossetti and the Hebraic goblins of the Jewish Scriptures”. She points out that “Jews were derogatorily associated with street-hawking” (133) and illustrates how Rossetti alters the language of Isaiah and Jeremiah into the call of goblins.
Tractarian forms of piety that realistically only provide limited and unsatisfactory choices for women. There are more fruits than ever, but Laura is not allowed to want them without suffering.

Published the same year her sister-in-law Lizzie Siddal died, *Goblin Market* was generally well-received when it was first published, but some reviewers did not quite know what to do with its figurative language. In their advertisement for the volume, Macmillan and Co. advised readers to read the other poems in the volume first before reading the title poem. *The Saturday Review* stated, “As it deduces a moral at the close in favor of sisterly affection, it may be presumed to be in some sense or other an allegory. But what the allegory is, or how far it runs upon all-fours with that which it is the shadow, we cannot undertake to say…” The May 8, 1862 issue of *Nonconformist* claimed, “The great fault of her poetry is obscurity. This is perhaps due to some peculiarity of mental constitution. Every one will feel that there is thought and purpose in the poems: but some will ask, what? There are hidden meanings: do we feel sure that we detect them?” In its October 1862 essay, “The Book of the Month”, *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* writes about *Goblin Market* with puzzlement:

How many readers of [Rossetti’s] poetry in general will care to extract her meaning in short stories which are quaint little parables and short lyrics which are, generally, downright riddles? In the first place, a great deal of reflection is necessary in order to find out what the lesson or suggestion of the writer is; and then, when it is secured, it looks like a truism to vulgar eyes. It was not until the third day after reading “Goblin Market” that we were able to imagine a story of real life to fit the parable.

Some of the obscurity and puzzlement may be attributed to Rossetti’s use of Analogy and Reserve. As mentioned before, Reserve is the understanding that divine truth is difficult to understand and too much to give all at once, so the divine is revealed slowly through veiled language. While *Goblin Market*, with its sensual and overflowing imagery, may not seem reserved, *Goblin Market* also avoids some of the more straightforward didacticism or
sentimentality shared by its contemporaries. Its ability to inspire several different interpretations of the poem may demonstrate the strengths of Reserve as an aesthetic move favored by 20th century scholars, while at times undermining its own theology. While a specifically Tractarian tool, since Reserve does not allow the poet to explicitly state the moral or religious lesson (although Rossetti is explicitly didactic in other poems), there is often the possibility that the reader will arrive at a very non-Tractarian conclusion after reading a Tractarian text. Some of this is intentional, as King suggests, since Rossetti is writing for a religiously plural audience, but this has also led scholars and readers alike to puzzle over 

Goblin Market for decades.

A century after publication, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar declared in 

The Madwoman in the Attic, “Obviously the conscious or semi-conscious allegorical intention of this narrative poem is sexual/religious. Wicked men offer Laura forbidden fruits, a garden of sensual delights, in exchange for the golden treasure that, like any young girl, she keeps in her ‘purse,’ or for permission to ‘rape’ a lock of her hair” (566). They also note the Christlike qualities of Lizzie and the echoes of the Eucharist when she returns to Laura covered in the juices of the goblin’s fruits; Laura is saved by eating and drinking of her sister. The sensual language of the poem and its themes of indulgence, temptations, the dangers of men and bodily enjoyment make it impossible to dispute the sexual undertones of the poem. Gilbert and Gubar note that even when the sisters are happily married and have children, their husbands are not present and they do not seem to have sons (567). Sex within marriage is not to be spoken of, sexuality outside of marriage is violent (as Lizzie is assaulted by the goblins) or life-draining (as we learn from not just Lizzie, who sickens and ages prematurely, but also Jeanie, who dies before she can become a bride). If anything, the experience of Laura sucking the juices off Lizzie’s body is the most
loving act in the whole poem, while sex with men is at best unspeakable in the confines of marriage and at worst a violent assault.

Other scholars have focused more on the Christian elements of the poem, in particular the Eucharistic readings of Lizzie’s sacrifice or the affinities between the poem and the fall of Eve in Genesis. These readings grant Lizzie more spiritual and moral agency than Gilbert and Gubar do. According to Margaret Johnson in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Tractarian Poetry*, Lizzie, while not sinning in eating the forbidden fruit (the Eve imagery attributed to Laura), offers her body as a sacrifice to save her sister. Laura’s “own original fault, that of Eve, has been redeemed by the feminine Christ who is her sister…women are not merely Christlike, but there is instead a womanly Christ” (Johnson 116). Noted by Johnson and other scholars, the qualities in Christ that the Tractarians advocated for—meekness, patience, reserve, duty—in some ways reflect the expectations of Victorian women more than of men, which allowed for “the distinction between masculine and feminine identities [to undergo] some revision within the Tractarian Movement” (Johnson 114).

Marylu Hill argues that a better understanding of Eucharistic theology reconciles both erotic and spiritual readings of the poem. In her 2005 essay “‘Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me’: Eucharistic and the Erotic Body in Christina Rossetti’s *Goblin Market*,” she points to the carnal language used by Augustine in *The Confessions* as well as the language used by Tractarians such as Pusey (who did his own translations of *The Confessions* and, as mentioned above, influenced Dodsworth and re-created sisterhoods in the Anglican church that Maria joined) to describe the Eucharist. She writes that Pusey preached on the Real Presence in the Eucharist—the belief that even though the Anglian Church did not teach transubstantiation, Pusey and other Tractarians still taught that the divine was very present in the sacrament. It was not just a symbol or re-
enactment of the Last Supper. This put a greater emphasis on the physical aspects of the
Eucharist. Hill argues that Rossetti was well aware of this Eucharistic theology and this was
informed by her love of Augustine’s *Confessions* as well, including the role that desire played in
*The Confessions*. Augustine describes a great restlessness and an inability to be satisfied until he
recognized his spiritual longings, but Hill points out that that desire manifests itself in physical
ways: “For both Augustine and Rossetti, desire is characterized by physical stirrings of arousal—
Laura’s ‘tingling cheeks and finger tips’ (l. 39)—which in turn demand attention and, as Rossetti
affirms in *The Face of the Deep*, will also receive their full due if we seek their fulfillment
rightly” (459).

According to Hill, Laura needs redemption in the poem not because she has desire, but
because she looks to fulfill her desires in the wrong places. Hill also places the homoerotic
readings of the poem within the tradition used in Christianity to use homoerotic language to
describe Eucharistic union with God. Hill points out that Pusey himself quotes St. John
Chrysostom in *Doctrine of the Real Presence* (1855), speaking of kissing and even biting the
ones we love and being “filled with [Christ’s] Flesh, drawing us on to greater love” (qtd. in Hill
467). In a different sermon, Hill points again to the erotic/marital language Pusey uses: “He
mingles His Body in our body, and blends His Spirit with ours…He feeds us with His own
Blood, and by every means entwines us with Himself…Whensoever we approach to His Body
and Blood, and take It in our hands, so we embrace His Body, and made (it is written) of His
Flesh and of His Bones” (qtd. in Hill 467). Other of Rossetti’s contemporaries used erotic
language to describe the Eucharist. In *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture*, Frederick
S. Roden notes the passionate language Newman uses to describe approaching the Eucharist in his *Meditations and Devotions*:

> I shall perish without it; yet shall I not perish with it and by it? How can I raise myself to such an act as to feed upon God? O my God, I am in a straight – shall I go forward, or shall I go back? I will go forward: I will go to meet Thee. I will open my mouth, and receive Thy gift...Who can raise my body from the grave but Thou?...Thou art the living Flame, and ever burnest with the love of man. Enter in me and set me on fire after Thy pattern and likeness. (Newman, qtd. in Roden 18-19)

Roden claims that “This moment seems to be realization on Newman’s part that his Catholic desire is queer: not simply culturally, but erotically as well” (19). While Rossetti takes on the language of passionate desire and Bride/Bridegroom in her own devotional poetry and makes it her own, it is perhaps unsurprising, according to Hill, that Rossetti picked up this kind of language from her Anglo-Catholic parish, nor is it surprising that Rossetti leans on homoerotic language to describe the Eucharist, albeit a homoeroticism between two women instead of between two men. Hill concludes that “Rossetti reclaims the erotic from the strictly physical and places it at the service of a desire that is both physical and spiritual in its longing to experience a complete intermingling with the divine” (468).

While I am convinced that Rossetti reworks the Eucharistic and homoerotic language available to her in this poem, and that she is able to depict spiritual longing through the body, I am not totally convinced that Laura’s longings begin as purely spiritual that are misdirected at the goblins. The poem ends with quiet domestic bliss, with no men or sexual pleasure in sight but with children and chores. Laura does not indicate that she wants these things in the beginning of the poem but is attracted to the goblins and their fruit. Lizzie seems to understand that something

---

3 *Meditations and Devotions* was not published until after Newman’s death; the meditations were written throughout his life after his conversion in 1845.
is wrong with the goblins, but even she must avert her eyes to avoid their temptations, and is able to continue to avoid their temptations after she sees the devastating effects of their fruit on her sister. The quiet peace at the end of the poem is brought about through understanding how painful giving in to erotic desire can be, and learning to want the quiet domesticity. It is not so much that Laura wanted the “right” thing all along but got sidetracked; she learned through suffering, fear, and Lizzie’s sacrifice to want to want the “right” choice.

In her article “Incarnation and Interpretation: Christina Rossetti, the Oxford Movement, and ‘Goblin Market’,” Arseneau argues that Tractarianism is present in the poem because so much of it depends on the sisters’ failure or success at deciphering the symbols of the natural world. In her chapter “Harmonizing Goblin Market and Other Poems,” Arseneau succinctly summarizes Rossetti’s engagement with Tractarianism: “Prepared to apprehend the physical world as representing a transcendental reality, Rossetti was receptive to the Tractarian understanding of natural objects as tokens of God’s love and as visible manifestations of a divine order in creation” (104). Laura fails because she fails to read the goblins and their fruits. She takes both the goblins and their fruits at face-value; they are colorful, strange, exciting and delicious. She does not ask herself what forces must be at work to create such temptations. Laura is curious as Lizzie, even as she looks away, seems to have to work at avoiding the temptation: she must close her eyes to shut out the goblins. In order to escape the goblin’s song, Lizzie “thrust a dimpled finger/In each ear, shut eyes and ran” (lines 67-68). The detail that her finger was dimpled and the fact that the solution to the problem is to stick her fingers in her ears and run away indicates just how childlike and inexperienced she really is.

Yet Arseneau notes that Lizzie is more successful because she correctly reads the goblins and their fruits as dangerous, while Laura is unable to read the dangers of the material world,
again akin to Keble’s caution that the material world should not be loved for its own sake so that one forgets it is symbolizing divinity, not divinity itself. Beauty, nature, and pleasure can be dangerous because they distract someone from deeper reading; they are good if they act as signifier of divinity but should not be treated as the signified, the thing itself, God, goodness, morality, peace, etc. Therefore, Lizzie is a successful reader, Laura is not. These reading practices demonstrate the different paths to adulthood the sisters take. Laura comes of age through sexual exploration, failure, and redemption, while Lizzie becomes an adult through self-sacrifice. Yet at the same time, this detail also demonstrates that Lizzie herself is not immune to temptation. While her solution is to childishly shut out the temptation, the fact that she needs to shut out the temptation at all suggests that she is not impervious to the goblins or their fruit.

While Arseneau and others have convincingly described the Tractarian elements of the poem, and Hill has demonstrated the Augustinian and homoerotic language within the Christian tradition that Rossetti taps into, I want to complicate their arguments with my discussion of secularism. While within secularism believers had more sources for moral guidance and more religious choice than ever before, they also had more opportunities for moral error. I read the didacticism of the period, and in particular in Rossetti’s work, as a response to moral anxiety of an increasingly fragilized society. The piling on of fruit after fruit creates the sense of abundance and sensuality, but it also is a huge menu of options to purchase. Already in its opening lines, the poem begins with an overwhelming number of choices yet none are safe to eat. Rossetti’s Tractarianism can neither promise her female protagonists total satisfaction nor legitimate any of their alternative moral or sexual decisions. I believe that Rossetti’s homoerotic Eucharistic language as described by Hill is a genuine expression of both erotic and spiritual desire, and I agree with Hill that there are “postmodern tendencies to reduce the poem to the merely physical”
that exclude the erotic from the spiritual (466). Yet Hill argues that in Rossetti’s poem, physical desire is changed to an equally if not more satisfying spiritual desire: “Thus, only through the fire can the soul find its satisfaction as a body capable of being filled with Jesus” (469). In other words, through strife, sexual desire can be satisfied if turned into spiritual desire. It is worth asking whether this actually happens in *Goblin Market* (which arguably it does with its peaceful, if constrictingly domestic, ending) or in Rossetti’s other poems (which in vocation poems, as I shall discuss in the next section, arguably do not). This is not to downplay the importance of spiritual satisfaction; Rossetti legitimates spiritual desire throughout her work, but it comes at the cost of sexual satisfaction or even curiosity. Even with Laura’s homoerotic consumption of Lizzie, it is presented as a single act of self-sacrifice and salvation, not a new consummation of their relationship. In other words, *Goblin Market* demonstrates the fragility of the choices available to Lizzie and Laura. There are more choices than ever, but in the end, only one choice is still really available to Lizzie and Laura.

**IV. Vocation Poems**

In this section, I discuss the different ways that Rossetti depicts women’s vocations in her poetry, including calls to celibacy in convents newly embraced by Tractarianism, calls to single life, and calls to marriage. I discuss several poems from throughout her career, including “Three Nuns,” a poem composed 1949-1850 from her unpublished novella, *Maude*, to poems included in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), *The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems* (1866), *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881), and some other unpublished poems written as a teenager. According to Elizabeth Ludlow in *Christina Rossetti and the Bible: Waiting with the Saints*, Rossetti did not view vocation as a recipe for happiness in life but as a sacrifice to prepare for the afterlife. Ludlow claims, “For the apostles, virgin martyrs, and beloved friends that Rossetti
considers throughout her devotional prose, vocation is enabled by obedience and associated with affliction” (176). An emphasis on sacrifice is not new to Christianity, but sacrifice in this life does have a particular role in Tractarianism.

While for centuries monks and nuns lived apart from ordinary life, the Anglican sisterhoods formed under Pusey’s direction were freshly controversial as fears of Roman Catholicism grew with Irish immigration, Newman’s conversion, and the reinstatement of the Catholic hierarchy in England in 1851. Rossetti’s interactions with those sisterhoods and Victorian attitudes toward sexuality and convents should shape our understandings of the depictions of nuns in her work. Dodsworth, Rossetti’s priest, was a follower of Pusey, and Pusey’s strain of Tractarianism puts particular emphasis on rejecting earthly comforts, sometimes dangerously so. Palazzo claims that Pusey’s wife and children were literally starving because of his insistence on “excessive fasting” (7) and states that his “calls for the mortification of the flesh, especially in his sisterhoods, had serious consequences for many of the young women under his spiritual guidance. A few women even died” (7). Palazzo also points out the misogynist strain in his devotion, quoting at length from Pusey’s sermon, “The World, an Ever-living Enemy” in which he blames Eve for all the world’s problems: “all which is in the world ministers to those three cupisquences, through which we fell in Eve, and wherein we conquered in our Head…the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and vainglory” (Pusey qtd. in Palazzo 8). Rossetti echoes this theme in her poem “The Three Enemies” in which the three enemies are the flesh, the world, and the devil, who promises glory, knowledge, and might.

At the same time, while some of Pusey’s attitudes towards restoring the sisterhoods at times seem to be bound up in fear or loathing of women, or at least women’s sexuality, the sisterhoods did offer women a viable (if controversial) alternative for women to marriage and a
life in the home. D’Amico notes how controversial the “convent question” was but argues that while these questions were often couched in “general suspicion of Roman Catholicism,” she claims that “one finds that it is not so much Roman Catholicism that is feared but the vow of celibacy…most Victorians considered marriage a woman’s highest goal and noblest vocation, and thus a vow of celibacy was seen as a direct attack on the Victorian celebration of marriage, motherhood, and family” (46, 47). For some, convents only made sense for women who had never been able to find a husband.

Several of Rossetti’s poems over her long career from all of her volumes of poetry feature multiple women’s voices serving as mouthpieces for different vocations and/or sexual choices, from nuns, wives, mothers, maidens, spinsters, or “fallen” women. Rossetti herself claimed that she had not seriously considered becoming a nun, although she “went thro’ a sort of romantic impression on the subject like many young people” (Rossetti qtd. in Roden 41) In some poems, the speaker’s choice is fulfilling, but for several speakers their choice is fraught and painful, no matter what their choice is, particularly in Rossetti’s earlier poetry. In “A Triad” from Goblin Market and Other Poems (1862), we are introduced to three women who are really versions of the stereotypical slut, wife, and lonely spinster. All are criticized. While the woman who married would seem above reproach, she is also criticized and even mocked by the speaker; she “…temperately/Grew gross in soulless love, a sluggish wife” (9-10) and “droned in sweetness like a fattened bee” (13). While all three women sing of love in the opening lines, marital love is soulless and makes the married woman boring. The other two women meet darker fates but the narrator concludes that all three of these women are “short of life” (14).

Women who reject romantic love for religious life often do not fare better. In some of her unpublished poems from her teenage years, her speakers clearly do not think that spiritual and
sexual love are compatible. The speaker of the poem “Isidora,” written in 1847 when Rossetti was 16 and shortly after her switch to an Anglo-Catholic parish, is the character of the same name from *Melmouth the Wanderer* (1820). Isidora declares:

> I must choose ‘twixt God and man,
> And I dare not hesitate:
> Oh how little is life’s span,
> And Eternity how great!
> Go out from me; for I fear
> Mine own strength while thou art here. (7-12)

In another poem called “The Novice,” written about a month after “Isidora,” the novice speaks of her own lover but then lists all of the pitfalls of romantic love, particularly the likelihood that romantic love will change over time. She decides to live in “solitude” (notably not in community with other women in prayer or performing charitable works) but alone in Nature, “Where love may neither come nor go” (22) but where water, trees, bushes, bees, birds, and roots live in peace and abundance and where she can live until she dies (23-30). In fact, in several of her nun poems, the speaker joins the convent not out of a positive love of God and a desire to live in community with other sisters, but rather out of guilt or shame from their previous life or a desire to opt out of the world’s trials entirely, more specifically the trials of sexual or romantic love. “The Convent Threshold” (1862) is perhaps the most famous example of this. The speaker addresses a former lover, not God, and still longs for them to be reunited in love in the afterlife. Despite the speaker’s best efforts, she cannot help but be drawn back to her former partner:

> For all night long I dreamed of you:
> I woke and prayed against my will,
> Then slept to dream of you again.
> At length I rose and knelt and prayed:
> I cannot write the words I said,
> My words were slow, my tears were few;
> But thro’ the dark my silence spoke
> Like thunder. When this morning broke,
My face was pinched, my hair was grey,
And frozen blood was on the sill
Where stifling in my struggle I lay. (126-136)

Prayer is a chore that the speaker must actively choose to do, which still does not prevent her from dreaming about her former lover, even as she awakes multiple times to pray. The frozen blood the next day serves as a physical reminder of the struggles of the night before. Lynda Palazzo remarks on her aged appearance and parallels this change with the change that Laura undergoes after eating the fruit in *Goblin Market*, pointing to Grace Jantzen’s argument that, “For a woman to develop in her spirituality, she must put off womanliness, work against the grain of her gender rather than with it” (qtd. in Palazzo 7). The speaker in “The Convent Threshold” not only covers up her physical beauty by her choice to enter the convent, her struggle means sacrificing it entirely, again not for a warm longing for God and a desire to be closer to God, but for some other longing: to end the attachment to the lover, whether it be guilt over sexual sin or the violence alluded to at the beginning of the poem, the blood of a father and brother mentioned in the first two lines. This nun also does not use the language of being the bride of Christ, language that Rossetti does use in her later poems.

Still other poems allude to even darker reasons for Rossetti’s speakers to join convents. In the poem, “Three Nuns,” composed from 1849-1850, we again have three different women’s voices, this time describing their reasons for joining the convent. The poem appears in Rossetti’s early novella, *Maude*, which centers on all-female characters: the protagonist Maude who writes poetry, her cousins Mary and Agnes, and their friend Magdalen. Maude is good but awkward; she wants to share her poetry but is plagued by some deep disturbance that seems associated with her desire to write. The titular character has (oddly) written the poem for Mary’s marriage.
The poem is divided into three parts, one for each nun, and each is crowned with an Italian epigraph. It seems as if the second and third nuns in the poem are loosely modelled on Mary ("had she mistaken her vocation") and Magdalen, a friend of the girls who did actually become a nun. She claims that "The first Nun no one can suspect of being myself," yet the fact that she even suspects that people might think that suggests otherwise. Perhaps the first nun is more closely related to her other cousin Agnes, but Maude does not suggest this either. The nun is described with beautiful blond hair, more like Agnes than Maude, yet this may be a useful way of concealing the elements of Maude that do make their way into the first nun’s story. At any rate, at this point in the novella, we know that Maude is both known for her poetry but also is plagued by a deep sense of shame. In one scene, Maude has admitted to Agnes that she will not receive communion at Christmas the following day because of her sense of unworthiness. She claims that she is "not trying" to correct her faults and seems to put some of the blame on her vanity about her poetry: "No one will say that I cannot avoid putting myself forward and displaying my verses" (25). While Agnes urges Maude to reconsider, we learn that she refuses communion until she confesses and receives during the Easter season.

The poem itself, besides the subject matter being strange for a wedding, illustrates the nuns’ vocations in a dark light. The speaker in the first poem longs for safety, beginning her account with a desire for shelter:

Shadow, shadow on the wall
Spread thy shelter over me;
Wrap me with a heavy pall,
With the dark that none may see.
Fold thyself around me; come:
Shut out all the troublesome
Noise of life; I would be dumb. (1-8)
The speaker goes on to say that she was once beautiful and men admired her, but she was “weary
in the world/Full of vanity and care” (24-25). She wants a distraction from her “Present sorrow
and past sin” (37) but does not say what the sin was. Then her narration shifts to when she was a
child, and the tone shifts from lamenting her sinfulfulness to dreaming about the forest she used to
visit as a child. The forest seems like a paradise, with flowers and large trees. It is beautiful and
safe, but her story takes a dark turn:

Sing, that in thy song I may
Dream myself once more a child
In the green woods far away
Plucking clematis and wild
Hyacinths, till pleasure grew
Tired, yet so was the pleasure too,
Resting with no work to do...(43-49)

There, while yet a child, I thought
I could live as in a dream,
Secret, neither found nor sought:
Till the lilies on the stream,
Would seem scarce too pure for me:--
Ah, but that can never be. (57-63)

Clematis has associations with deception and the tale of Hyacinth from Greek mythology alludes
to a game cut short by jealousy and death (Seaton, The Language of Flowers: A History, 174). It
is unclear whether the reference to clematis and hyacinth signal that the first nun herself has been
duplicious, or that she has been the victim of other’s artifice. The longing for safety, to hide, to
get away and live “Secret, neither found nor sought,” set her apart from the next nun in the
poem, who like the speaker in “The Convent Threshold” had fallen in love and still longs for her
beloved. This nun, however, seeks relief from some shame, whatever happened to her that made
her no longer pure enough for the beauty of the forest.
Scholars such as Jan Marsh have speculated that Rossetti was the victim of sexual abuse from readings of poems such as “Winter: My Secret.” While we may never be able to definitely prove that this happened to Rossetti herself without textual evidence, this section of “Three Nuns” does provide evidence for readings that engage sexual violence, shame and its aftermath, or perhaps the shame of an affair, whether there is a biographical precedent for it or not. We know that other poems also provide enough textual evidence for engagement with sexual violence, most notably *Goblin Market*. Yet this reading is even more baffling in the context of *Maude*, since it is possible that the first nun represents Maude, Agnes, or neither, although Maude is the only girl in the story who is plagued by a deep sense of guilt and shame. There is little evidence that Magdalen joined the convent out of a need to escape, and Agnes acts perfectly content with herself. It is worth noting that like *Goblin Market*, men are almost totally absent from the text altogether, and neither Maude nor Agnes seems to have any interaction with male suitors or villains. Only Maude seems at war with herself and unworthy of communion. The first nun’s reticence may be read as Maude’s trepidation over her art, and Gilbert and Gubar read Maude’s character as an artist suffocated by the religious and societal expectations placed on her: “…the moral of this story is that the Maude in Christina Rossetti—the ambitious, competitive, self-absorbed and self-assertive poet—must die, and be replaced by either the wife, the nun, or, most likely, the kindly useful spinster” (552). The only way the first nun could truly be at ease with herself was when she was totally alone in the woods, and Maude’s social struggles perhaps support this. In either case, in the world of the poem, the first nun seems confined both by the men who “saw and called me fair” (23) but also by the long wait for Paradise (32), longing for her heart to “sing thy song/Blithe bird that canst do no wrong” (34-35).
This nun seems to long for freedom, safety, and peace, none of which seem accessible while she waits for the Paradise of death.

The second nun in the poem does not wrestle with the same shame as the first nun. She seems to have fallen in love with a man but never let him know her feelings. It is unclear whether the nun fell in love before or after she entered the convent, but she never breaks her vows, except to pray fervently for this man. Yet while she works hard to be true to her vows, she ends up longing to die in order to escape her pain. While she does hope to “wake again/After His Likeness” (120-121), alluding to some genuine spiritual desire, she seems to have given up on any sort of satisfaction in her life on earth in her vocation. She only looks forward to a beautiful death, not a beautiful life.

The third nun’s section begins with the epigraph, translated from the Italian by William Rossetti, “Answer me, my heart, wherefore sighest thou? It answers: I want God – I sigh for Jesus.” Despite this spiritually sincere epigraph, this nun too struggles with her vocation. In several respects, she is the most Tractarian of the three. She most directly calls the things of earthly life foolish, rejecting “gems and gold…delights and precious things” (153-154) as well as her beautiful hair and face “[f]or vigils, fasts and prayer; I gave all for this Cross I bear” (183-186). Yet she admits that all of these sacrifices had been real challenges—the vows “must be kept” while still longing for a life “Of daughter, sister, wife;/The outside world still looked so fair” (195-196). While she has learned to “love what once/Had been so burdensome,” (201-202) she still is not happy in this life and has become accustomed to a “Hope deferred [that] seems to numb/My heart” (204-205).

The line about “Hope deferred” seems particularly significant to Rossetti throughout her work, as Betty S. Flowers has noted:
The Proverbs verse ‘Hope deferred maketh the heart sick’ (13:12) is echoed in at least sixteen of Rossetti’s poems. On its face, the phrase ‘hope deferred’ alludes to disappointment and, perhaps, depression. But this phrase is shadowed by the second half of the verse, which Rossetti seldom quotes directly. The entire verse reads: ‘Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life.’ The importance of this second half of the verse is emphasized by Rossetti’s comment in *Time Flies* that ‘[w]e feel or fancy ourselves quite at home in the first clause of this proverb,’ but that, left to herself, she might never have caught the meaning of the second until someone pointed out that the tree of life was the cross ‘which satisfied the world’s heartsick hope’ (pp. 80-81). The ‘someone’ who pointed this out, of course, was her mother. (xli)

One could read the third nun’s section as that waiting for death is waiting for Jesus, the supposed tree of life (likely referring to the wood of the cross during the Crucifixion). Yet unlike Flowers, I think the fact that Rossetti so often does not explicitly allude to the second half of the proverb matters, the inability to love “worldly” things and love Jesus at the same time and the fact that none of these nuns seems to have a satisfying, loving relationship with Jesus in this lifetime is significant. This is not necessarily the case throughout Rossetti’s work; the speakers in several of the poems in *Verses*, for example, have a much warmer relationship with Christ. Yet speakers in *Verses* are not just engaging in questions of celibate vocation and convent life, and often can be read through the lens of general Christian devotion.

In other words, if the poem is supposedly Maude’s imagination about consecrated life, she seems to fail to imagine the possibilities for happiness in this life; the nun that supposedly represents Magdalen perhaps fares the best, and yet she is bound by duty and hoping for happiness in death and not much in this life. This seems to contradict what Maude says she thinks of Magdalen in the prose of the story. When Mary, Agnes, and Maude are all discussing Magdalen’s choice to join the convent, Mary is dismayed, while Maude defends Magdalen, claiming that she seems very happy. Later in the novella, Maude seems somewhat attracted to the sisterhood and even asks her mother if she would ever let Maude join a sisterhood, to which
her prompt reply is no. Yet the text of the prose and the text of the poem seem at odds with one another. It is also difficult to discern how much of Maude’s apparent curiosity with the sisterhoods is due to pressure to do something good in her Tractarian community, or at least atone for her sin of vanity about her poetry, and how much of it is earnest desire. What does seem apparent that Maude is driven by a deep internal struggle with what she should be and what she wants to be. Maude’s Christmas Eve exchange with Agnes seems to suggest that she views herself at odds with herself. Even though she eventually repents and receives communion, she also dies unnecessarily young, resigned to her (unexplained) fate.

It is worth noting what questions about women’s vocations these poems are asking, especially with the opening of Anglican sisterhoods and the changing religious and political landscape of women in Victorian England, when at times, for such an imaginative writer, Rossetti seems to fail to imagine genuine satisfaction and dignity for consecrated or marital vocations. Speakers such as the first nun in “Three Nuns” perhaps say less about spiritually discerning a vocation and more about an escape from patriarchal violence. Questions of violence, shame, desire, and safety seem to be important considerations in choosing a vocation. None of the choices listed above seem satisfactory to any of the women; in the prose text of the novella Mary seems happily married but she is also portrayed as the dumbest and least moral of the girls (while Maude calls Agnes, “good”, the most she can say about Mary is that she is “harmless”). Perhaps the third nun of the poem, who doesn’t seem to have a violent past and has accepted her lot, has chosen a life most able to set her up for salvation, but it comes at a cost.

This emphasis on salvation puts an emphasis on preparing for death. D’Amico claims, “Rossetti’s convent poems indicate that while many of her contemporaries saw nuns as choosing a life-in-death existence, she saw them as wise virgins choosing life” (48). I frankly do not find
enough textual evidence for this statement. In “An ‘Immurata Sister’” (1881) the speaker is preoccupied with death:

    Men work and think, but women feel;
    And so I should be glad to die
    And cease from impotence of zeal,
    And cease from hope, and cease from dread,
    And cease from yearnings without gain,
    And cease from all this world of pain,
    And be at peace among the dead. (5-12)

The entire poem is about death. There is little to look forward to in this life, only a relief from pain and the opportunity to sacrifice oneself. The speaker in the 1881 poem “Soeur Louise de la Miséricorde (1674),” is supposed to be the former mistress of Louis XIV, who later entered a Carmelite convent (Flowers 961). She laments desire (and perhaps rightfully so), but keeps repeating the refrain, “Oh vanity of vanities, desire!” –a scriptural passage that, according to Palazzo, was a favorite of Pusey. This poem, like several of the others described above, does not describe the joys of the convent but the sorrows of her life up to that point. If anything, Rossetti’s convent poems seem to miss an opportunity to celebrate the joys of religious life and instead place themselves within conversations about sexuality, sacrifice, and death. I do not think that the material of these poems meant that Rossetti felt that joining a sisterhood was not a legitimate, spiritual vocation (she clearly loved her sister and did not dissuade her from joining a convent), but she does not depict them in peaceful, satisfying ways. More often than not, she uses convents like her Victorian contemporaries, as spaces to describe something else other than the vocation itself. The opening of sisterhoods gave women another option, an option that Rossetti’s sister Maria took for herself. But Rossetti rarely uses the convent in her poetry as an expression of spiritual love but rather as a vehicle to discuss other issues (unlike Adelaide Anne Procter, who depicts convents in more positive light, which I will discuss in the next chapter).
It must be said that these alternatives, convent life, marriage and motherhood, or spinsterhood, require at least some form of obedience or control by men, whether by male clerics or husbands, and all vocations, in different poems at different points of Rossetti’s career, are criticized. But living without a vowed vocation (the slut or the spinster of “A Triad”) is also a recipe for regret or dissatisfaction. In this way, Rossetti has positioned herself more like George Eliot’s heroines in *Middlemarch* or *Adam Bede* or Charlotte Brontë’s Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. In both *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede*, the heroine who is also the spiritual/moral compass of the novel at one point decides not to marry, then marries for love anyway, but is silenced by her marriage. Dorothea never accomplishes any of her social projects and serves the public only by being an MP’s wife. Dinah has had a career as a Methodist preacher and spiritual leader—she is the moral center and source of healing right before the painful conclusion—that she gives up to marry Adam. Once famous for her sermons, she speaks no more in the final pages of the novel. The reader is left with a sense of loss that preaching and marriage are incompatible for Dinah, even though that is not the choice forced upon male Methodist clergy and her great gifts for preaching and healing and comforting the afflicted are now lost to the community. Lucy is haunted by the specter of the nun at the school where she works, and she even believes that if she had given herself over to the care of the priest, she would have ended up in a convent herself. She ultimately rejects this, but after her fiancé Msr. Paul dies in a shipwreck, she lives a lonely, celibate life running her own school. While Eliot engages with a more distinctly Protestant landscape and Brontë engages with continental Roman Catholicism, Eliot, Brontë and the Anglo-Catholic Rossetti all created literature that at one point or another could not reconcile women’s spiritual and sexual vocations. There are notable exceptions—*Jane Eyre* concludes without Jane compromising her soul (although forgiving Rochester’s abhorrent behavior towards Bertha
comes with its own set of problems), and not all of Rossetti’s devotional poetry is so wrapped up in restraint and death, but there is still something here, something about the attractions and repulsions of celibacy, the longing for both spiritual and romantic fulfillment that seems out of grasp, and the inability of any Christian denomination to provide satisfactory answers to these longings. All choices have pitfalls; none of them are completely happy. Pusey’s warnings about the temptations of the flesh are not enough to snuff them out, nor does marital life guarantee spiritual fulfillment.

V. “An Old-World Thicket”

Many of the works discussed above, especially *Goblin Market, Maude*, and several of the nun poems, were written earlier in Rossetti’s career, and some readers would (rightly) point out that it is difficult and unfair to make one sweeping claim about Rossetti’s decades-long career based on her earlier works, especially work from her teenage years. Her later work in some ways somewhat eases (if not totally removes) tensions about vocation as she shifts from away from questions of vocation to more straightforwardly devotional poetry, still Tractarian in its use of Analogy and Reserve, such as the poems of *Verses* (1893). Using her poetry in service of her faith and in support of societies such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge were useful ways of using her poetic gifts.

Yet it would also be unfair to say that Rossetti no longer engages in the questions she wrote about earlier in her career. One theme that arose out of *Maude* and the nun poems is a longing for death to resolve the suffering of this life. In the later poems, Rossetti employs her well-known Bride/Bridegroom imagery to describe the time of death when the soul is finally reunited with Christ, and all the waiting and suffering is finally resolved. While it is not true to say that the Tractarians were so focused on the afterlife that they did nothing to try and improve
their earthly communities, there is no question that preparing the soul for the afterlife is important to Tractarian theology. The very concept of Analogy is the notion that the material world points to the divine world, but it is imperative for the believer to not get too caught up in the material world itself. For some of Rossetti’s female protagonists, only in death will life’s contradictions and suffering be solved. Yet as I shall demonstrate below, while Rossetti continues to use Tractarian tools in her poetry, Tractarianism at times still fails to provide comfort in the face of death. Using the poem, “An Old-World Thicket,” I demonstrate that deeply Christian and Tractarian poetry feels pressure when confronted with questions about belief and mortality.

Published in her 1881 volume *A Pageant and Other Poems* a few years after the death of her sister Maria and shortly before the death of Dante Gabriel, “An-Old World Thicket” begins with an epigraph from Dante and contains an extended meditation on death couched in nature imagery. While the poem employs Tractarian tools and Scriptural imagery, it also makes space for the role of doubt and the inability for even the most Tractarian of speakers to access satisfying answers to some of religion’s most important questions. While the poem provides a resolution to these questions, the resolution does not seem available to the speaker. “An Old-World Thicket” demonstrates how a theologically-motivated aesthetic could still engage with questions posed by secularism and the fragilization of faith. This is important to my earlier discussion of vocation and choice, because Rossetti seems to frame vocation as a choice in how one chooses to suffer, or to escape one form of suffering for another, only to be relieved by death. Yet secularization problematizes a clear path to the relief of an afterlife or union with God. Rossetti’s nature poems are interesting because while clearly leaning on knowledge of Scripture and her Anglo-Catholicism, the turn towards the natural world in “An Old-World
"Thicket” may indicate an increasing inadequacy of human-made structures to provide satisfactory paths to heaven.

In this section, I read “An Old-World Thicket” as an example of Rossetti using Tractarian reading practices, while recognizing the secular context in which she wrote and troubling the security of death. I start with engagement with Emma Mason’s work because she has studied this poem in her essay, “The Trouble with Comfort: Christina Rossetti, John Ruskin, and Leafy Emotion,” and her monograph, Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith. In her essay, Mason argues that Rossetti’s narrators often long to shut out human emotions, even human hope because it “leads to acute disappointment and regret” (172). Mason claims that Rossetti uses the image of the fallen leaf in her poetry to “[remind] her of the quick passing of time and of that abundance and fertility of the natural world (life) which so disturbs her passage to heaven (death)” (171). She points out that in poems such as “The Trees’ Counselling” and “An Old-World Thicket,” the narrator notes the beauty and peace of the natural world, yet cannot participate in this peace and is even disturbed by it. Mason writes, “It is significant, I think, that she does not look around her, but looks up to God, turning to nature only to allegorize it into a series of biblical images, noting not the detail of her environment but only its religious content” (174). She argues that the poem is “disturbing” because of its narrator’s “desperately pessimistic misreadings of the world” (174). What Mason does not acknowledge in this essay is the Tractarian use of Analogy, although she does devote a whole chapter to the Tractarians and their influence in Christina Rossetti: Poetry, Ecology, Faith. In his poetry lectures, Keble argued that religious language, applied to the natural world, provided analogies and similes:

For, once let that magic wand, as the phrase goes, touch any region of Nature, forthwith all that before seemed secular and profane is illumined with a new and celestial light: men come to realize that the various images and similes of things, and all other poetic
charms, are not merely the play of a keen and clever mind, nor to be put down as empty fancies: but rather they guide us by gentle hints and no uncertain signs, to the very utterances of Nature, or we may more truly say, of the Author of Nature. (qtd. in Tennyson 63)

Approaching the world with a religious viewpoint means reading encounters with the natural world for their divine meaning, and having the right reading practices was necessary to “illumine with a new and celestial light.” One could argue that the narrator’s “misreadings” in “An Old-World Thicket” are really the logical ends to applying Tractarian reading practices. As mentioned above, Arseneau argues that Tractarian reading practices, and the ability to read or misread the material world, play an important role in *Goblin Market*: “An Old-World Thicket” is another poem about reading or misreading the natural world. Instead of reading the peaceful forest scene as a sign of things to come and the paradise in the afterlife, the speaker is too overcome by her worldly cares to properly read the eschatological signs of the forest.

The narrator goes to the woods and makes her observations, but she is really reading nature. At the beginning of “Old-World Thicket”, after the nod to Dante, the narrator admits she does not know whether she was awake or dreaming when the events of the poem occurred. As in *Goblin Market*, the narrator describes the scene by listing vegetation that signals abundance and beauty. Unlike in *Goblin Market*, however, this listing does not suggest excess, sensuousness, or consumption. In fact, this natural world seems to carry all of the characteristics of Tractarian good, including Reserve. The narrator begins with the trees with anthropomorphized characteristics: the “silvery aspen” trembles, the elm “dies in secret from the core,” the ivy is not very strong but it is still free (6-9). Next come the birds, who are physically beautiful and sing beautiful songs, but are not greedy: “Their meat was nought but flowers like butterflies…Their drink was only dew” (21, 23). In this paradise, no creature takes more than it needs. The sounds
of the water are soothing, neither rising nor sinking (31), and the waters nourish “the whole earth” (34).

What interrupts the peace, or at least the description of the peace, is the narrator herself. The narrator brings her own despair into the forest because she is someone over whom “Death hangs, or damage, or the dearth of bread” (line 40). Surrounded by a natural world that is not only alive but thriving, living in holy beauty, human death is thrown into sharp focus. As the speaker despairs, the forest seems to respond. Mason has called the forest apocalyptic, drawing from Rossetti’s commentary on the Apocalypse, _The Face of the Deep_, and Rossetti even repeats similar language, crying “Agony to agony, deep called to deep,/Out of the deep I called of my desire” (86-87). Yet the forest does not become nearly as violent as the symbolic imagery of the Book of Revelation. Instead, it seems to respond to the anger and despair of the speaker. If the speaker failed to read the forest at the beginning of the poem, the forest is now reading and responding to the speaker herself.

For all of the Tractarians’ emphasis on the afterlife and eschatological ways of thinking, none of this brings comfort to the speaker:

> Why should I breathe, whose breath was but a sigh?  
> Why should I live, who drew such painful breath?  
> Oh weary work, the unanswerable why!—  
> Yet I, why should I die,  
> Who had no hope in life, no hope in death? (101-105)

In a poem that illustrates a realized eschatology that is soothing and paradisaical and consistent with Tractarian ideals, we have a narrator that has no hope in the afterlife. Why the speaker has no hope is unclear: is she hopeless because she is afraid of damnation? Or does she doubt the existence of the afterlife in the first place? In other words, it is unclear whether the speaker is asking an existential question or a question about salvation. Despite the evident impact of
Tractarianism in the poem, the speaker admits that religious conviction does not provide assured answers to “the unanswerable why!” By betraying doubt, the narrator of Rossetti’s poem is more like Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s narrator in *In Memoriam* than the voice of a committed Anglo-Catholic, coming to a conclusion in religious faith without resolving all of the questions posed within the poem itself. Does guilt or doubt plague the speaker? Unlike other Rossetti poems, the speaker makes no mention of a specific sin nor alludes to some secret or mystery. While many of the speakers in Rossetti’s other poems refer to some indiscretion, such as sexual or romantic encounters outside of marriage, this speaker provides no specific history of sin nor mentions the fear of judgement.

It is worth noting here Rossetti’s engagement with the concept of Soul Sleep. This belief claims that after one dies, the soul does not go to heaven or hell (or purgatory in Roman Catholicism) but instead enters a sleeping state only to be awakened at the Second Coming (McGann 135). Dodsworth, one of Rossetti’s pastors, was a premillenarian who believed in Soul Sleep, and McGann convincingly applies Soul Sleep readings to a few of Rossetti’s poems, but his emphasis on this principle in her poetry is misleading. For example, in “An Old-World Thicket,” one could read the narrator’s despair in the afterlife as a fear of lack of experience in Soul Sleep, but even in Soul Sleep there is hope for the Second Coming. As McGann himself writes, several of Rossetti’s poems argue that suffering is inevitable and the speaker often longs for the rest after death. But the speaker in “An Old-World Thicket” does not even seem to have hope in a peaceful rest after death.

I argue that the speaker fears death, not because of fear of judgement or dread of an inactive Soul Sleep, but because of a distrust in the existence of an afterlife in the first place. In *Christina Rossetti: Faith, Gender, and Time*, D’Amico argues that “It is a commonplace of
nineteenth-century scholarship that the Victorian Age was one of religious doubt” but “Rossetti resisted this shift entirely. Indeed, during this time, her vocational life and spiritual life blended completely, and she became predominantly a religious writer” (147). I do not argue that “An Old-World Thicket” makes a case for atheism or agnosticism, nor does it use the exact language that Tennyson or Matthew Arnold use to describe waning faith, but I think D’Amico’s argument is also too simple, because it ignores the active role that doubt plays within a religious life, particularly a religious life within a secular, religiously plural nation. Rossetti certainly engaged with her personal faith, using Tractarian tools, while at the same time creating poetry that would be general enough for a broadly Christian audience. Yet balancing these concerns did not solve the problem of death and its unknowability. While Rossetti may have found her vocation as a religious writer, that does not disqualify her from writing about doubt. In fact, doubt may be one of the most pressing issues for a religious writer to write about within a secular context.

The presence of doubt has huge implications for her arguments about vocation and suffering. Elizabeth Ludlow claims, based on readings of The Face of the Deep (the commentary on the apocalypse that Mason also uses) that Rossetti believed, “Christians should respond to God’s call and ‘fulfil’ the vocation that they have been called to perform while they wait for the opportunity to migrate to their true home and join their voices with the Church Triumphant in its praise of God’s glory” (196). This does not work, though, if one doubts the existence of that true home after death. The speaker in “An Old-World Thicket” does not seem to have confidence in the afterlife, even though evidence of Tractarian emphasis on teleology can be found throughout the poem. “An Old-World Thicket,” like the Romantic poetry that Jager uses, registers secularism even as it relies on Tractarian aesthetic concepts. The images that Rossetti uses in this poem again demonstrate Tractarian influence (the nature imagery, the Reserve of the forest, the
nourishing water that echoes the waters of baptism, the later reference to a “patriarchal ram” that
chooses Christ leading his flock), yet demonstrate also the inability of Tractarianism to
satisfactorily answer the questions heightened by secularism: why is there suffering, why is there
death, is salvation possible, and if so, how? While the Tractarians could develop their religious
poetics with the freedom that secularism provided, secularism also meant that they could not
claim to answer “the unanswerable why.” Rossetti’s narrator continues a few stanzas later:

Surely the ripe fruits tremble on their bough,
They cling and linger trembling till they drop:
I, trembling, cling to dying life; for how
Face the perpetual Now?
Birthless and deathless, void of start or stop,

Void of repentance, void of hope and fear,
Of possibility, alternative,
Of all that ever made us bear to live
From night to morning here,
Of promise even which has no gift to give. (121-130)

The afterlife is frightening not just because it is unknown, but because there are no more choices,
no more potential, no more chances to make things better or change. If secularization is
characterized by choices in this life—the ability to choose one’s beliefs, whether one believes in
God or not, and the particulars of those beliefs—Rossetti’s narrator fears a lack of choice, a lack
of possibilities or alternatives. While her vocation poems illustrate the limits of choice and point
to the afterlife to resolve these limitations, this speaker fears the erasure of choice. In this poem,
the afterlife is depicted as a constant present, with no past, no future, and nothing resembling this
life. In this way, the narrator actually has failed to read nature correctly, according to the
Tractarians. Instead of using nature to contemplate the joys of God and the afterlife, the narrator
is stricken by leaving it, by an afterlife that looks nothing like the quiet paradise of the trees,
birds, flowers, and water, where one still has the ability to make their own choices and live their own life.

Then, creation actually responds to her suffering:
The wood, and every creature of the wood,
Seemed mourning with me in an undertone;
Soft scattering chirpings and a windy moan,
Trees rustling where they stood
And shivered, showed compassion for my mood. (131-135)

This is not the first time that nature has mourned in response to humanity’s pain in Rossetti’s work. In the poem “Eve” from The Prince’s Progress and Other Poems, Eve from Genesis sits beside the grave of Abel, weeping for her sins, the loss of her son, and for “all who must die mother” (line 34). She looks on the now-overgrown Garden of Eden, filled with guilt and regret that she gave Adam the fruit and introduced sin into the world. The poem goes to no length to remove blame on Eve, nor indicts Adam or Cain for their actions, but the reader is led to sympathize with Eve. As she cries, all of the animals—mice, bees, camels, and birds, to name a few—stop what they are doing, “[a]nswering grief with grief” (66). Only the snake relishes in her suffering. Although the source of the speaker’s sorrow in “An Old-World Thicket” is less specific, it is possible that instead of the speaker misreading Paradise through the speaker’s grieving lens (as Mason suggests), Paradise is mourning with the speaker. Like the creatures in “Eve,” who mourn Eve’s lot as a grieving mother and the scapegoat for sin, exile, and death, this paradise grieves with humanity instead of serving as a passive text for religious reading.

“An Old-World Thicket” ends with a beautiful sunset. The sun itself symbolizes Christ, punning on the word sun/son. During sunset, “The sun had stooped to earth though once so high” (148), a metaphor of the divine Christ becoming human in the Incarnation. The coming of the sun/son can be read as an act of grace allowing the speaker to “see” to what is going on
outside of herself. The last two stanzas describe a “patriarchal ram” that leads his happy flock “toward the sunset and their rest” (171, 180). Again, one could read the ram as a Christ figure, both as the Shepherd who guides his flock, and as the sacrificial lamb, whose sacrifice enables atonement for sinful humanity. Instead of the world responding to the speaker, she now is asked to pay attention to this new act in the world. We have returned to Tractarian reading practices, combining Biblical imagery with Romantic nature imagery to create a vehicle for Christian ideas. The speaker of the poem can read the ram and his flock with the hope that the believer does not have to figure out the big questions on their own, that trusting in Christ to lead the way removes some of the salvation anxiety.

Yet this trust and peace seems available to the natural world in a way that is not available through the speaker’s humanity. Peace returns to the natural world when the speaker stops interjecting her thoughts and feelings and instead observes the world around her. The whole poem is framed by two descriptions of the natural world that are characterized by beauty and peace, while the middle section is characterized by the speaker’s inner turmoil. If nature is to be read for signs of divine gifts such as love, peace, and the salvation provided by the herd of sheep helping each other follow the ram into the sunset, such love, peace, and salvation still seems outside, and maybe inaccessible, to the speaker by the end of the poem. At the beginning of the poem, it is not that the speaker did not recognize the beauty of the forest—she notes the “sweetness of beauty” (46) around her—but is saddened that “all that was but showed what all was not,/ But gave clear proof of what might never be” (51-52). If anything, the speaker fears that nature may not be a signifier at all. The forest may have heavenly beauty, but that doesn’t actually mean that it proves heaven’s existence. The forest may be just be itself, nothing more. The speaker observes the ram leading his flock to paradise, perhaps meant to be the proof of
what could be, but she does not follow, no longer discussing her inner thoughts, slipping from “I” statements to describing the action she sees. While the descriptions of the flock are still marked by the speaker’s assessment that the sheep are “mild,” “patient,” and “journeying well,” the speaker is now out of the scene, reporting the action instead of actively engaging it.

It is up to the reader now to read the divine significance of the sheep with Biblical knowledge, not the speaker. Mason remarks that Rossetti assumes that the reader is familiar enough with Scripture to understand the Biblical significance of the scene, but it is unknown whether the speaker has moved from hopelessness to hope by this encounter, or whether the speaker believes that hope is available to her at all. Rossetti’s language is beautiful, but there is still a gulf between the speaker’s inner life and the natural world around her. There are moments when this poem feels like two different poems—one poem dependent on Tractarian analogy and typology, and another poem that is a dramatic monologue with forest as audience, all too real, direct, and raw for the Tractarian language that bookends the poem. But perhaps that is precisely the point. Rossetti (like all poets) can only use symbolic or figurative language to describe the afterlife, but does not need it to declare feelings of doubt, fear, and despair. While literary devices can and often are used to describe the “dark night of the soul,” itself a metaphor, Rossetti juxtaposes this elaborate language with simple “why?” questions. In this way, she seems to be borrowing more from the Old Testament, particularly Genesis and moving to the Book of Job and the Psalms, in which the speakers appeal directly to God with their suffering.

In this reading then, the coming of the sunset and the ram may not only represent Christ but the New Testament’s response to the Old Testament, positing a Christian-centric understanding of Scripture. In previous poems, Rossetti marks Christianity apart by the Christian’s supposed ability to witness God that is inaccessible to other faith traditions. In her
anti-Semitic poem, “Christian and Jew: A Dialogue” from *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, the Jewish speaker cannot see or hear the glory of God like the Christian can. Again, in Rossetti’s Tractarian theology, Christianity is a matter of reading or seeing God in the world, which is apparently inaccessible to faith traditions outside of Christianity. The Jewish speaker claims, “I have not eyes for this fair sight:” (4), “I cannot see so far,/Here shadows are” (9-10), “Mine eyes are dim:/ I look in vain above,/And miss [the cherubim’s] hymn” (14-16) etc., while the Christian can supposedly see the joys of heaven. I turn to Scheinberg for a further clarification of Rossetti’s anti-Semitic rhetoric. She emphasizes the significance that this poem was written in 1858, “the very same year Jews won the right to sit in Parliament” (125) and notes how the Jewish speaker in “Christian and Jew: A Dialogue” is depicted as both ‘incomplete’ and as a feminized, weaker speaker, while the Christian speaker is depicted as stronger and more masculine. “It is this mistake of claiming one’s limited, partial identity as somehow ‘complete’ that likewise threatens women, who seek ‘equality’ or ‘completion’ on earth; they, like Jews, are missing the larger Christian picture that Rossetti suggests is visible to the ‘humble orthodox Xtian [sic]” (Scheinberg 117). In other words, Scheinberg concludes that Rossetti has accepted the supposed inferiority of women in the Christian hierarchy in this world (with the hope that it will be different in the afterlife) as integral to Christian tradition and extends that same logic to Jewish believers who haven’t converted to Christianity: “Understanding the distinctions in Rossetti’s quite particular interpretations of Jewish difference reveals, ultimately, an acute anti-Judaism as a central aspect of her poetics; in addition, it becomes clear that there were very specific connections between her theories of Jewish and female difference” (108).

Yet despite this clear privileging of Christianity throughout her work to the detriment of Judaism and heavy reliance on Christian symbolism at the end of “An Old-World Thicket,” the
speaker sees what might be the glories of heaven but does not join these glories herself. If the afterlife is the only way to escape the entrenched gendered and religious hierarchies insisted upon by Rossetti’s understanding of Scripture, doubt in the afterlife poses not just the timeless existential fear of death, but fear that a female self will never be fulfilled. We know through her speech before that she herself might even be doubting whether what she is witnessing is even divine at all or just “showed what all was not,/But gave clear proof of what might never be” (51-52).

VI. Conclusion

Rossetti resolved questions of vocation and desire by leaning on the Bride/Bridegroom language in her poetry, expressing explicit passion and love for Christ, especially in the poems of *Verses*, the collection of poetry that most explicitly demonstrates the influence of Keble’s liturgical structure. In the opening lines of the first poem of *Verses*, the speaker begins, “Alone Lord God, in Whom our trust and peace,/ Our love and our desire, glow bright with hope” (“Out of the Deep Have I Called Unto Thee, O Lord” 1-2), moving on to declare the impermanence of earthly life and the need to focus on God. In “As the sparks fly upwards,” she repeats the themes of passionate love for Christ and aspiring to the heavenly instead of the earthly, speaking “Of hope and passionate craving of desire” (2). Again, sexual desire and spiritual desire are conflated, difficult to tease apart, merged into a passion that defies easy separation. Consistent with Tractarian emphasis on teleology, fulfillment of desire happens when one is united with God after death. In questions of women’s vocations, responding to a calling did not mean satisfying desire in this life but making sacrifices to secure satisfaction in the next (a very different notion of vocation than the more positive one presented by Adelaide Anne Procter, which I shall discuss in the next chapter). This is a particular problem for Protestant women;
Anglican male priests were not asked to separate a sacerdotal vocation and marriage, but Rossetti did not imagine the same possibilities for women. Women could have more choices, but they couldn’t have more power, nor could they choose both sexuality and a religious vocation. A calling was to choose one’s suffering in this life and hope for relief in the next.

Yet secularism troubled the notion of calling, creating more choices but less security in those choices, especially when all vocations depended on belief in the afterlife. With secularism, devotion can increase because one can choose one’s beliefs and is not subject to compulsory practice. On the other hand, it simultaneously makes every religious system more vulnerable to criticism, skepticism, and doubt, even Rossetti’s seemingly unshakeable Christianity. Rossetti’s Anglo-Catholic devotion has been well-documented before, but this devotion has been described as unquestioningly faithful or a plague to her work, when neither description aptly describes how Rossetti brings a serious religious understanding to questions with high stakes and no answers. Not enough scholars have grappled with how secularism brought about more rights for Jewish citizens while Rossetti used anti-Semitic tropes or language that marked Christian superiority, even as Christianity did not provide unassailable answers for Rossetti. While I argue that Rossetti is undoubtedly a Tractarian poet and demonstrates the influence of Keble, Pusey, and other Tractarians, her Tractarian toolkit of Analogy, Reserve, and Biblical Typology were not enough to erase the possibility of doubt. Hope was indeed deferred.
CHAPTER THREE

CROWNED, NOT VANQUISHED: ADELAIDE ANNE PROCTER

*I will not let you say a Woman’s part
Must be to give exclusive love alone;
Dearest, although I love you so, my heart
Answers a thousand claims besides your own.*

-Adelaide Anne Procter, “A Woman’s Answer”

*We lost it in this daily jar and fret,
And now live idle in a vague regret.
But still our place is kept, and it will wait,
Ready for us to fill it, soon or late….*

-Adelaide Anne Procter, “A Legend of Provence”

I. Introduction

Adelaide Anne Procter was a popular Victorian poet in the same literary circles as
Christina Rossetti, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Charlotte Brontë. She
was even admired by Queen Victoria. She was a contributor to the *English Woman’s Journal* and
worked to increase women’s opportunities for employment and property rights. Besides her
poetry and prose, she was a Catholic convert and social activist, dying at age 38 from
tuberculosis likely contracted during her charitable work. Yet outside of Victorian scholarship
Procter is hardly read today; her poetry is at times didactic and at first glance seems to be a
straightforward vehicle for middle-class Victorian values. Hoxie Neale Fairchild in *Religious
Trends in English Poetry* (1957) goes so far as to scoff, “Adelaide Procter lugs in an angel
whenever she wants to pluck at our heartstrings. Also, like many otherwise well-instructed
Christians, she appears to think that departed human spirits, especially those of little girls with
ringlets, are transformed into angels. Newman knows better, of course” (265). Snobbery aside, Kirstie Blair in *Form & Faith in Victorian Poetry and Religion* also claims Catholic poetry from the period could be dull because of Catholicism’s “deliberate eschewal of excitement and individuality. The relative blandness of many Roman Catholic poems by minor poets of the Victorian period, their tendency towards repetitiveness and their lack of lyrical fervor, is a conscious aesthetic choice” (203). While it is worth considering why 20th and 21st century scholars have favored exciting poems that depend on individuality rather than didactic or communal poetry, we are still left with the question: why devote a chapter to a poet that twentieth century critics did not like and that most twenty-first century readers have never heard of?

I argue that Procter’s work—her poetry, her support of women’s causes, her conversion to Catholicism, her position as a middle-class English woman writing about class and poverty—illustrates to us how intimately religion, class, activism, and gender impact aesthetics. While Charles Taylor argues that a feature of secularization is the privatization of religion away from public life, with individuals such as Procter, these boundaries are much more permeable and flexible according to audience and occasion. Her role in all of these areas uniquely positions her at the intersection of multiple discourses brought about by secularism, highlighting the desire to increase women’s vocational choices, as well as skilled work available to single women. Like Rossetti in my previous chapter, Procter uses Tractarian aesthetic principles to engage in questions of secularism and women’s vocations in her poetry, but to much different ends. Procter’s own choices—to convert, to write professionally, to advocate for an increase in women’s freedoms—may at times seem at odds with each other, on the one hand boldly progressive while at other times a return to older and seemingly un-English traditions. Several of
her poems encapsulate the contradictory attitudes of Victorian Catholicism towards women and sexuality—on one hand unflinchingly invested in hierarchy, sexual purity, patriarchal leadership and domesticity, on the other hand providing spaces for unmarried women to be not only respected but exalted, to live in women-led communities, and to privilege the role of the Virgin Mary in redemption and salvation. Within the context of secularism, Procter is able to bring together her experience in activist circles, as well as her conversion, to use poetry to achieve social progress for women. While the content of her poetry offers more social critique than Fairchild would suggest, her subject matters (including angels and children) needed to appeal to enough readers (and frankly her editors) to be profitable to support the causes that Procter cared about. Yet Procter’s poetry often challenges the choices of her readership, particularly her middle-class female readership, to pay attention to the social and gender inequities around them.

In this chapter, I introduce Procter’s life and establish her connection with Tractarianism. I will also explore her social activism, including her role in the Langham Place Group, and some of her contributions to *The English Woman’s Journal* and the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW). I also discuss how her work with Charles Dickens would come to shape the legacy of her activism. While in the previous chapter I used the word *vocation* to denote a spiritual calling, often to religious or clerical life, in this chapter I include discussions of women’s paid work, as well as Procter’s role in expanding those choices. I pair this alongside Procter’s conversion to Catholicism and the central role that devotions to Mary played in her poetry. These desires may arise from multiple religious and philosophical approaches to serving single women and the poor. I then provide close readings of her poems, putting them in dialogue with Catholic and Tractarian discourses, as well as discussing some of their implications. I
ultimately conclude that Procter is a poet worth knowing and respecting for the reforms she desires, given the choices available to her.

II. Biography, Activism, and Legacy

In this section, I provide some of the necessary context for Procter’s poetry, including her family history, activism, and her work with Charles Dickens. Procter grew up surrounded by London’s most famous authors; Thackeray and Dickens in particular would come to have an outsized impact on the publication of Procter’s poetry. However, Procter’s efforts in women’s rights activism would come to be her life’s work.

Adelaide Anne Procter was born in 1825. Her father, Bryan Procter, was a lawyer and Spasmodic poet who wrote under the pseudonym Barry Cornwall. He was also a friend of Dickens and Thackeray, and their home was frequently a hub for the London literary scene. Thackeray even dedicated *Vanity Fair* to Bryan Procter, while Thomas Hardy dedicated one of his own books, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, to Procter’s mother, Anne Skepper (Gregory 41). In *The Life and Work of Adelaide Procter: Poetry, Feminism and Fathers*, Gill Gregory notes that Procter showed an aptitude for poetry since she was a child. She seemed to have formed a special attachment to Thackeray when she was young and her attachment seems to have lasted to adulthood. Later, Charlotte Brontë even thought her publisher, George Smith, was smitten with Procter, although no relationship seems to have actually formed between them. When Procter began submitting her work to Dickens’ journal *Household Words*, she used the pseudonym Mary Berwick, afraid that if she used her own name, Dickens would just accept the poetry because of his friendship with her father. Eventually, when Dickens remarked on the merits of Ms. Berwick’s poetry to Procter, she let him know that she herself was Berwick. She published poems in several periodicals as well her own volumes of poetry, including *Legends and Lyrics*,
in two separate volumes, and later *A Chaplet of Verses*. By several accounts, Procter was one of the most popular poets of her day. Gregory reports, “Coventry Patmore…stated that demand for her poetry was greater than for any other English writer bar Tennyson” (1). Queen Victoria recommended Procter’s poem “The Angel of Death” to Empress Augusta, dubbing it a “most beautiful poem,” and Margaret Maison dubbed Procter “Queen Victoria’s favourite poet” (qtd. in Gregory 1n).

While Procter today is remembered as a poet, she herself did not romanticize this role. Gregory notes that Procter’s obituary claimed that she thought that poetry should not “unfit” the poet for “the practical business of life” (Boucherett qtd. in Gregory 30). The “practical business of life” for Procter included working towards various causes. Gregory notes that Procter used to attend lectures at Queen’s College, London, an institution dedicated to women’s education founded by Christian Socialists including F.D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, one of Newman’s greatest critics who spurred Newman to write his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. At the core of Procter’s “practical business of life” was her involvement with both SPEW and the *English Woman’s Journal*. SPEW stands for the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women, a society that Procter helped to found in 1859 with Jessie Boucherett and Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon1. The *English Woman’s Journal* supported SPEW’s mission, while also publishing poetry, book reviews, profiles of famous women, and some news. The *English Woman’s Journal* was founded in 1858 but was established in 1859 at Langham Place in London; the circle of women who

---

1 Scholars have commented on the organization’s unusual acronym. Cheri Larsen Hoeckley has claimed that the acronym likely came about because of “Procter’s jovial humor” ("The Catholic Church and Unruly Women Writers" 128), while others have simply called the acronym “unfortunate” (Tusan, Mary Elizabeth 222). I think it is possible that it was meant humorously, although I do not have definitive evidence at this time. Fans of the *Harry Potter* series might enjoy the acronym since it is also the acronym of an organization that character Hermione Granger creates in the books.
started the journal and supported other activism work were subsequently called the Langham
Place group. Jane Rendall, in her profile of the group, states that the organization began with the
“close friendship” between Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Bessie Raynor Parkes. Other
members, contributors, and shareholders included Isa Craig, Samuel Courtauld, Peter Alfred
Taylor, Matilda Hays, Emily Faithfull, Maria Rye, Emily Davies, Sarah Lewin, Helena,
Comtesse de Noailles, and Theodosia Monson, Lady Monson (Rendall).

We know that Procter was close with several of these women. Jessie Boucherett was the
one who wrote her obituary, and many of Procter’s letters to Bessie Raynor Parkes and other
members still survive. We also know that Procter deeply admired and may have had a romantic
relationship with Matilda Hays, who was called Max or Matthew in close company. In her
biography of Hays, Lisa Merrill describes her sexual relationships with other women:

Offstage Hays, who, Elizabeth Barrett Browning noted, 'dressed like a man down to the
waist' in a fitted jacket, waistcoat, and tie (Browning to H. Barrett, 30 Dec 1853;
Browning, 196), lived with [actress Charlotte] Cushman as romantic partners in what
Browning called a 'female marriage' (Browning to A. Moulton-Barrett, 22 Oct 1852, Berg
Collection). [After Cushman was unfaithful] Hays threatened to sue Cushman for
damages, alleging she had sacrificed her literary career and health to live with Cushman.
Cushman agreed to pay her more than $1000 (Anne Brewster diary, 5 June 1876).

Merrill goes on to report that Hays formed “an intense attachment” to Procter, and Procter seems
to have returned this intensity. Procter published her poem “In Retrospect” in admiration of Hays
in *Legends and Lyrics*, originally dedicating it “To M.M.H.” (Gregory 25). Merill states that

---

2 She also knew Dante Gabriel Rossetti. In the description of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon’s portrait, the National
Portrait Gallery notes that Rossetti once wrote to Christina Rossetti and wished that she was more like Barbara:
“Ah! if you were only like Miss Barbara Smith, a young lady I meet at the Howitts’, blessed with large rations of tin
[money], fat, enthusiasm, & golden hair, who thinks nothing of climbing up a mountain in breeches or wading
through a stream in none, in the sacred name of pigment” (Rossetti qtd. in “Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon [1827-
1891]).
even though Hays outlived Procter by over 30 years, she was devoted to Procter the rest of her life. Hays’ own obituary stated that she was “the dear friend of Adelaide Procter, gone before.”

Beyond the personal relationships, the women of the group sought systemic changes. The purpose of SPEW was to provide job training for women and girls. This included apprenticing girls to learn how to be printers at the all-female run Victoria Press, as well as providing training in bookkeeping, medical dispensing, and other trades. Founded by Emily Faithfull, the Victoria Press started its own publication in 1860 titled *Victoria Regia* and its contributors included a slew of famous Victorian writers, such as Tennyson, Trollope, Harriet Martineau, Matthew Arnold, Thackeray, Patmore, and F.D. Maurice (Gregory 28).

In the September 1, 1859, issue of *The English Woman’s Journal*, the goals of SPEW are straightforwardly laid out in the article “The Association for Promoting the Employment of Women”:

> Yet, what is it we working women ask?...It is work we ask, room to work, encouragement to work, and open field with a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work; it is injustice we feel, the injustice of men, who arrogate to themselves all profitable employments and professions, however unsuited to the vigorous manhood they boast, and thus, usurping women’s work, drive women to the lowest depths of penury and suffering. We are sick to our hearts of being told “women cannot do this; women must not do that, they are not strong enough for this and that, and the other”: while we know and see every hour of lives that these arguments are but shams; that some of the hardest and coarsest work done in this weary world is done by women, while in consequence of usurped and underpaid labor, they are habitually consigned to an amount of physical endurance and privation from which the hardiest man would shrink appalled. (55)

It is worth noting that that “working women” is somewhat ambiguous; most of the women involved with the journal came from comfortable middle-class families. However, the need for women’s employment seemed more necessary after the 1851 census reported the existence of 2 million unmarried women, a shocking number to the country. SPEW insisted, “It is of no use to tell these persons that domestic life is the best position for them...for they have no husbands
belonging to them, and though any individual of the number may marry, yet the proportion of
two million must remain for ever…” (56). The author claims that the impediment to women
receiving “a fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work” is too much competition for too few
professions available to women. Ellen Jordan in *The Women’s Movement and Women’s
Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* notes the group’s use of Adam Smith’s idea “that
unfettered competition was the basis of social prosperity and happiness…[women’s] situation
would be improved if they could compete for some of the work at that date restricted to men
(sic)” (170). Instead of advocating for higher wages for governesses, seamstresses, or domestic
work, SPEW advocated job training in new fields, widening the opportunities for women. Math
was especially important for women to work in shops or to work as bookkeepers.

SPEW did stress that they were more interested in long-term change than serving the
immediate needs of poor women. While both the journal and SPEW had the ultimate goal of
alleviating poverty and suffering for all women, they sought instead systemic change in women’s
employment, which meant not necessarily training girls in their desired field according to their
individual gifts and talents, but rather responding to what positions could be made available to
them on the job market (Jordan 171). Jordan argues that they had mixed success in this endeavor.
For example, while Victoria Press did well, Jordan concludes, “[The press] did not initiate the
feminization of typesetting as an occupation. There was little attempt made by printing firms
beyond the influence of the Employment Society to take female apprentices” (175). However,
she reports that the society had better luck placing women in the fields of hospital dispensing and
clerical work.

In some of the prose work that Procter contributed to the journal, we can see how she
wove the goals of these organizations into her writing. For example, in the January 1861 issue of
The English Woman’s Journal, Procter wrote a biographical piece about French socialite Madame Recamier. In the piece, Procter took care to include a description of one of Recamier’s friends, the “eccentric” Duchess de Luynes. In her description of the Duchess, Procter writes:

Her voice was harsh, her features large and irregular; she never wore a bonnet, even when she appeared in feminine costume, which was not always the case…But she is celebrated principally as a remarkable printer. She had set up a printing-press at her home, and she practiced the art so successfully that the works and collections printed by her are much sought after.

It is not difficult to see how including such a minor character in Madame Recamier’s life would be used to support and advertise the work of Victoria Press (while also subtly celebrating a woman who eschewed traditional femininity and in some ways resembles Hays). Throughout the piece, Procter also makes a point to praise the Sisters of Charity, which she supported in her own life and which was the order that her own sister would eventually join. She also asks the reader to consider Madame Recamier’s life on her own merits and talents, rather than focusing on the famous people around her.

Yet the English Woman’s Journal, while advocating for the improved lives for women, may have missed its target demographic. Miranda Marraccini in “‘Fresh Fields’ and ‘Humble Doors’: The Politics of Poetry in the English Woman’s Journal” argues that this was a problem because the women wealthy and comfortable enough to afford the journal were not the ones in most need of job training, nor were they always natural allies in the movement:

The English Woman’s Journal was both run and read by wealthy women who often did not ascribe to the “gospel of work.”… Its editors did not work for pay, although they were often active in social reform campaigns and charity… They recruited subscribers through personal networks, resulting in a subscriber base of mostly middle- and upper-class female readers. In a letter dated January 1863, editor Emily Davies writes about founding editor Bessie Parkes: “She thinks [subscribers] took the Journal in out of friendship, and have at last got tired of paying for a thing which they never read . . . the circulation has been to a great extent artificial.” (681)
Marraccini goes on to note the relatively low numbers of circulation and the journal’s end in 1864. Some scholars have noted this disconnect exists at times in Procter’s own poetry. While she often advocated for the needs of the homeless or impoverished in her poetry, Karen Dieleman and Gregory note that homeless or impoverished characters often do not have a voice of their own in the poems. The often middle-class narrator can be patronizing, especially towards Irish, poor, or homeless subjects. Other scholars have noted the domestic or sentimental nature of Procter’s poems (including Hoxie Neal Fairchild grumbling about angels). Yet it is worth noting that other Victorian works often depicted idyllic children in dire poverty; Dickens’ own novels and stories are filled with angel-like, blond-haired, blue-eyed girls. Many of Procter’s poems do have elements that echo Dickens, which I will turn to in more detail.

Procter may have made some of these choices in order to highlight the plight of the poor without turning off her audience. Marraccini argues that part of this disconnect may be because of the disconnect between the goals of the journal with its wealthy readership: “the poems stand out as a unique appeal to middle- and upper-class subscribers who may not have engaged with the journal’s broader advocacy of women’s participation in paid employment. Read as a corpus, Procter’s poems develop a rhetoric of domestic comfort that stands in opposition to the journal’s emphasis on public activism” (684). In other words, in writing for a middle and upper-class audience, Procter’s choices in her poetry alone do not reveal her work as an activist.

This applied to not just the English Woman’s Journal but the other publications that produced Procter’s work. Procter’s work with Dickens in particular would come to shape her reputation for years to come. She submitted poetry to Household Words and All the Year Round, weekly periodicals edited by Dickens, as well as the Cornhill Magazine, a monthly periodical edited by Thackeray. Both Dickens and Thackeray exerted great influence over their respective
publications. Caley Ehnes in *Victorian Poetry and the Poetics of the Literary Periodical* argues that Thackeray’s taste shaped what pieces were accepted for publication and catered to (while reinforcing) middle-class English expectations and avoiding controversial subjects (75). This in turn led to publishing authors that also reflected middle-class values: “The close ties between the editors and the contributors of many shilling monthlies means that the periodicals often function as closed systems, circulating and promoting work by those of a particular class and social circle” (Ehnes 100). Adelaide Procter and her family were certainly part of Thackeray’s social circle alongside other middle-class London literary figures. Ehnes also points out that authors were aware that they needed to a certain degree to cater to the expectations of the periodicals they were publishing in. Ehnes leans on the example of Christina Rossetti, who in a letter admitted that she wrote “pot-boilers”\(^3\) for *Macmillans* (68). While Ehnes does not provide the same textual evidence that Procter thought the same way, it is not too much of a leap to say that Procter wanted her poetry to be published and therefore needed to appeal to editor and audience alike.

Dickens seems to have exerted even more control over the stories and articles published in his periodicals. Anne Lohrli in her introduction to *Household Words*, states that Dickens wanted his authors to use his own exaggerated style that Elizabeth Gaskell pejoratively called “Dickensy” (Lohrli 10). Lohrli asserts that Dickens also made sure to publish things that aligned with his tastes and values, often changed the language in accepted stories, made non-fiction pieces more fanciful and imaginative, and even changed the endings of stories to make them “less unpleasant” (10-15). In the cases of *Household Words, All the Year Round*, and the

\(^3\) Pot-boilers were “creative work[s] produced solely to make the originator a living by catering to popular taste without regard to merit or quality” (*The Oxford English Dictionary* qtd. in Ehnes 68).
Cornhill, it is difficult to separate the individual tastes of Dickens and Thackeray, as well as middle-class expectations of literature, from the poetry that Procter produced. If scholars such as Hoxie Neal Fairchild want to discredit Procter’s poetry for its sentimentality and domestic emphasis, it is worth asking how much Procter was writing to please herself and how much to please her editors and the periodical market, whether she was writing for the *English Woman’s Journal, Household Words, All the Year Round*, or the *Cornhill*. It is also fair to ask whether Fairchild would accuse Dickens of the same sentimentality as Procter.

Despite Dickens’s praise of Procter’s poetry, her work was also subject to Dickens’s strict editorial control. For example, “A Legend of Provence,” one of Procter’s more famous poems, was published as part of the 1859 Christmas issue in *All the Year Round* and then reprinted in one of the *Legends and Lyrics* volumes. In the Christmas issue, Dickens wrote the frame narrative for the story called “The Haunted House,” in which a young man and his sister decide to rent a house plagued by supernatural encounters. They hire three rounds of servants who all leave after one too many spooky things happen to them. Instead of leaving, the siblings invite all of their friends to stay with them and help run the house over Christmas and, if anyone is haunted during their stay, ask them to recount their hauntings on Twelfth Night. Each of the character’s stories in turn is written by another contributing author. One of the friends in the story is a character named Belinda Bates and her ghost story is “The Ghost in the Picture Room,” written by Procter and renamed “A Legend of Provence” when it is later published in *Legends and Lyrics*. The young man and main character of Dickens’ frame narrative admires her even as Gregory notes he condescendingly mocks the idea of woman’s emancipation:

Belinda Bates, bosom friend of my sister, and a most intellectual, amiable, and delightful girl, got the Picture Room. She has a fine genius for poetry, combined with real business earnestness, and “goes in” — to use an expression of Alfred's — for Woman's mission,
Woman's rights, Woman's wrongs, and everything that is Woman's with a capital W, or is not and ought to be, or is and ought not to be. “Most praise-worthy, my dear, and Heaven prosper you!” I whispered to her on the first night of my taking leave of her at the Picture Room door, “but don't overdo it. And in respect of the great necessity there is, my darling, far more employments being within the reach of Woman than our civilisation has as yet assigned to her, don't fly at the unfortunate men, even those men who are at first sight in your way, as if they were the natural oppressors of your sex; for, trust me, Belinda, they do sometimes spend their wages among wives and daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers; and the play is, really, not all Wolf and Red Riding-Hood, but has other parts in it.” However, I digress. (Dickens qtd. in Gregory 29)

This passage is egregious for a number of reasons, not just for Dickens's well-known misogyny. This Christmas piece was published in 1859, a year after Dickens’s famously public separation and subsequent mistreatment of his wife and the mother of his 10 children after falling in love with then-18 year-old Nelly Ternan, who was close in age with Dickens’ own children⁴. If at this point in Dickens’s life there were other parts of his life that weren’t wolfish, he does little to show it.

To add insult to injury, Gregory argues that Dickens is parodying Procter here, despite being a friend and co-author. Again, 1859 was the same year that Procter helped start SPEW with Jessie Boucherett and shortly after the start of the English Woman’s Journal. If the protagonist is Dickens’ mouthpiece (and Dickens is famous for using his literature to present his views of the world), the lack of empathy for working women is startling, let alone that much of the work of SPEW was for unmarried women, women who did not have men to “spend their wages” on them. Gregory claims, “This condescending caricature would no doubt have greatly irritated, even if it amused Procter” (Gregory 29). While Dickens mocks Belinda/Procter’s work, Belinda provides a tale called “The Ghost in the Picture Room” (the same as “A Legend of

---

⁴ Catherine, Dickens’ wife, was removed from Dickens’s home and for the rest of his life Dickens barely spoke to her, even after one of their sons died. Michael Slater states that Dickens’ daughter supposedly said, “My father was like a madman when my mother left home. … He did not care a damn what happened to any of us” (Storey, qtd. in Slater).
Provence” that stands alone in *Legends and Lyrics*) that aligns with Belinda’s commitment to women’s missions. She tells a story about a young nun’s fall and redemption. Belinda’s tale begins with a portrait of a nun, not unlike the portrait of M. Paul’s lover in *Villette*. The nun’s story begins when she is a young orphan named Angela, raised in a convent in Southern France. She is devoted to the Virgin Mary but is seduced by a young knight, only to be abandoned and scorned. She is eventually rescued and redeemed by Mary, who has miraculously kept her place at the convent the whole time she was gone, so is allowed to return without shame or punishment where she lives out the rest of her days.

Gregory points out that in “The Haunted House,” Belinda herself is not allowed to remain single. After being teased by the protagonist for her work with women’s issues, Belinda’s tale about Angela is still invested in “Woman's mission, Woman's rights, Woman's wrongs, and everything that is Woman's with a capital W...” By the end of the frame narrative, we find out that Belinda and a young man named Alfred become engaged and the protagonist approves: “I regard it as an excellent thing for both, and a kind of union very wholesome for the times in which we live. He wants a little poetry, and she wants a little prose, and the marriage of the two things is the happiest marriage I know for all mankind” (Dickens 620). It is less clear if the protagonist of the frame narrative approves of Belinda’s story since the next ghost story begins immediately after its completion. Even though in the universe of “The Haunted House,” Belinda is technically relaying the message from the ghost in the Picture Room and not composing a new narrative herself, the fact that Belinda still speaks on behalf of a nun, her all-female community at the convent, and the Virgin Mary is a cause for reflection, which Dickens’ frame narrative cannot account for. When Dickens takes control of the narrative again, Belinda must marry. While Dickens depicts Belinda as happy with this, Gregory points out that there is little evidence
in the frame narrative to suggest that she really liked Alfred in the first place. It feels a little like
the ending of *Measure for Measure*; the Duke announces his marriage to the novice Isabella
without caring for Isabella’s wishes. Dickens seems to want things for the character of Belinda
that we had no evidence of her wanting beforehand, and if Dickens is indeed creating a
caricature of Procter in this character, it is hard to ignore the disapproval of Procter’s own life
choices.

Other scholars have pointed out that Dickens has had an outsized influence on Procter’s
legacy because of the biography he wrote of her following her death. He described her fondly as:

> exceedingly humorous…Cheerfulness was habitual with her, she was very ready as a
> sally or a reply, and in her laugh (as I remember well) there was an unusual vivacity,
> enjoyment, and sense of drollery…She was a friend who inspired the strongest
> attachments; she was a finely sympathetic woman, with a great accordant heart and a
> sterling noble nature. (xix)

This biography has been used as the introduction to her volumes of poetry. Yet in his
characterization of her life, Dickens focuses on her humility and general goodness, rather than
calling attention to the potentially more controversial parts of her life. Cheri Larsen Hoeckley
points out that rather than providing a comprehensive view of Procter’s life, including her work
in women’s activism, he instead focuses on a few particular episodes in Procter’s life. Larsen
Hoeckley argues this was a significant choice on Dickens’ part:

> his biography of Procter remained influential through the twentieth century….Rather than
drawing on Procter’s various experiences in women’s rights, philanthropy, and
professional writing, he relies on his skills as a novelist and represents her as one more in
his catalogue of self-sacrificing, dutiful, female heroines… When Dickens wrote the
biographical introduction to *Legends and Lyrics*, he omitted *EWJ* from the list of
publications where Procter’s poetry had appeared…The omission speaks loudly for
Dickens’s desire to represent Procter as a submissive woman who was also an adept
professional poet—the ideal contributor to his periodicals. (125-126)
While Dickens calls Procter a “friend who inspired the strongest attachments,” he does little to call attention to the friends that she loved so well or the work she did with the Langham Place group and SPEW. Dickens also downplays Procter’s Catholicism. In his biography, he mentions her conversion but frames it by her time in Europe and focuses more on her “deep sense of her Christian duty to her neighbor,” (xx). Even as Dickens praises Procter, he seeks to contain the most central aspects of her life. Besides her humor and her agreeableness, her poetry would reflect her commitment to women and her faith. In my next section, I further explore her poetry and these commitments.

III. Poetry

I turn now to Procter’s poetry in more depth. Procter’s poetry reveals a lifelong commitment to religion, social and gender problems, and an aesthetic that is influenced by Tractarianism and Catholicism. Of course, there is significant overlap to those categories. The fact that Procter did not need to completely compartmentalize these features of herself and her work is important. Procter’s religious priorities and her social and aesthetic priorities all inform each other. Yet it is worth noting how her poetry alters according to her audience, which I will describe later in more detail. I begin this section with some of her earlier poetry focused on poverty, including her strengths as well as her weaknesses in depicting working class and homeless subjects, and then move to a discussion of her Tractarian and then more explicitly Catholic poems. Themes of duty, devotion, and love thread throughout her work, which provide the forms and imagery for the poetry.
Procter first published “The Angel’s Story” in the 1853 issue of *Household Words*. Gregory claims that Dickens himself “may even have specifically briefed Procter” and that the poem “expresses many of Dickens’s own concerns” for the poor, and Dickens’ influence can be seen in its sentimentality and its response to poverty (205). In “The Angel’s Story,” two children, one wealthy, one poor, meet their deaths. The wealthy child is surrounded by comfort and his family:

> Silken curtains fell around him,  
> Velvet carpets hushed the tread,  
> Many costly toys were lying,  
> All unheeded, by his bed;  
> And his tangled golden ringlets  
> Were on downy pillows spread. (32-37)

Upon the boy’s death, an angel carries him to heaven. As the angel carries the child, the angel reveals that he had once been “a little sickly orphan” that never experienced “Gentle aid, or pity sweet,/Never in life’s rugged pathway/Guided his poor tottering feet” (89-92). The unfairness of the poor child’s suffering is compounded by the adults who clearly do not care to help the child. Then the angel states that the wealthy boy had once given the homeless and starving orphan a rose from his garden, which had “dazzled” him (154):

> Poor no more, but rich and bright,  
> For the holy dreams of childhood—  
> Love, and Rest, and Hope, and Light—  
> Floated round the orphan’s pillow  
> Through the starry summer night. (161-165)

Here is where some of Procter’s outcry at the treatment of the poor falls flat. The orphan boy’s gratitude at the gift seems to suggest the power of love and kindness, but the gift is frankly

---

5 “The Angel’s Story” was also included in one of the volumes of *Legends and Lyrics*. In the *Legend and Lyrics* version, the poem has an extra stanza that shows the class differences between the boys’ graves.
useless. The orphan soon dies from exposure and becomes the angel that carried the wealthy boy to heaven when he dies. The poem seems to indicate the orphan boy would have lived if he had a home and food. The wealthy boy’s benevolent gesture not only fails to prevent the orphan boy’s death, it fails in any meaningful way to disrupt the class apathy that could have saved the poor child, which seems like an odd choice since Procter herself was so keen on improving the material lives of the people she served. Absent from the poem is the justified rage of William Blake’s indictment of London’s failure to care for its poor children, and the celebration of the gift of the rose adds insult to injury, even as the orphan boy seems to cherish it. Gregory offers a more sinister reading of the poem, claiming that the orphan-turned-angel taking the wealthy boy to heaven “is a gesture which borders on a vindictiveness which is veiled by his angelic status” (206). Ushering the rich boy to his death can seem dark to a 21st century reader, even as it is difficult to oversell the hope the poem illustrates in the afterlife. Still, whether the orphan-turned-angel is acting out of vengeance or true gratitude, the poem leaves little room for critique of the rich grown-ups or social services that could have saved the orphan boy in the first place.

Other poems that have lower or working class speakers also fail to place any responsibility on an uncaring middle or upper class. In several poems, an untimely death is depicted as a respite from suffering, not the result of injustice. In “The Cradle Song of the Poor,” a starving mother laments the suffering of her child, crying out that “God is good, but life is dreary” (10). She blames no one but herself for this suffering and looks forward to the death of her child:

Better thou shouldst perish early,
Starve so soon, my darling one,
Than in helpless sin and sorrow
Vainly live, as I have done.
Better that thy angel spirit
With my joy, my peace, were flown,
Than thy heart grew cold and careless,
Reckless, hopeless, like my own. (21-28)

Procter repeats this notion that death is a better alternative to the suffering of this life in poems such as “The Angel of Death” and “Life and Death.” The disconnect between Procter’s activism, which sought to provide practical, economic solutions to homelessness and poverty, and the speakers in her poems that just accept the injustices of life feels very strange, if not unsettling. Procter was not the first to depict characters that find relief in death, but the speaker’s narrative of her suffering is dire. In “The Cradle Song of the Poor,” while the mother laments the physical suffering of her baby, she seems more concerned that her child does not become sinful than her child grow up without food. While the pain of starvation is evident, the speaker is preoccupied with personal moral failings, showing no bitterness towards the conditions that created her poverty in the first place or the rich that could save her and her child if they wanted. There is no cry for justice that the prose writers of *The English Woman’s Journal* cry out for, no ruffling of the feathers of the upper and middle classes.

Procter’s relationship to class is complicated by her conversion and Catholic worship. While Belinda’s ghost story (called “A Legend of Provence” in her second volume of *Legends and Lyrics*) is indebted to Catholic themes, several of her poems published in the periodicals were general enough to appeal to a broadly Christian audience. Still, scholars have remarked on her nod to Tractarianism, including her use of Analogy and Reserve and common Tractarian subjects while also remarking on how she shifted these Tractarian themes as she deepened her Catholic faith.

We know very little about Procter’s personal reasons for converting. According to Bessie Parkes, Procter converted around 1849 at age 24, although Gregory states that Dickens puts it
around 1851. Why she did is not totally clear, but we do know her aunt had married a European nobleman and had converted to Catholicism, then Procter herself converted, and then her sisters joined too. It appears that Procter’s conversions did weigh heavily on her father, but once she converted, she seems to have been devoted to her faith until her early death. Gregory speculates that part of Catholicism’s appeal was its un-Englishness and its opportunities for women besides marriage: “Several of her narrative poems are set in foreign locations, and in ‘A Tomb of Ghent’ and ‘A Legend of Provence’ the single woman’s place within and in relation to the foreign church are central motifs…” (9)

Gregory also makes connections between Procter’s work with the Tractarians. Keble is particularly notable because “in Bessie Parkes’s words, [he was] ‘absorbed into our national thought’” (71). Like Keble, several of Procter’s poems emphasize prioritizing life after death, heavenly things over earthly things, and the comforting effects of the divine. In the poem “Life and Death,” the afterlife is described in calming words, much like Keble looks to Christ as a soothing presence. In the poem, a father tells his son that the afterlife provides rest from the “battle” of life: “The angel of God [is] calm and mild” and there is “eternal peace” (13; 18).

Unfortunately, the father sells the afterlife too well to his child; his son cries that he would rather die than face the perils of life. His father responds by claiming that, “The crown must be won for Heaven” by facing the battles of life (21). Like Rossetti’s “hope deferred,” several of Procter’s poems refuse to place satisfaction in this life; believers must wait to be reunited with God after death to experience any lasting peace.

In “A Tomb in Ghent,” Gregory argues that Procter demonstrates the use of Reserve, while also noting the setting of the poem in a European cathedral and its emphasis on music. One of Procter’s poems, “The Lost Chord,” is better known today as a hymn and also focuses on
music. Again, like Keble’s longing for peace, the narrator of the poem found a chord that “quieted pain and sorrow/Like love overcoming strife;/It seemed the harmonious echo/From our discordant life” (13-16). Also, like in “Life and Death,” peace does not last in this life. The narrator loses the chord and cannot find it again; the narrator must now wait for the promises of Heaven to retrieve its peacefulness.

Karen Dieleman writes at length about the churches that Procter attended, the Spanish Place and the London Oratory. The Spanish Place had originally been the place of worship for the Spanish ambassador and while not serving a formal function by the time Procter attended, the church mostly adhered to the worship practices of continental Catholicism. The London Oratory was a home for English Revivalism, those who wanted to hold to some of the distinctions of English Catholicism and thought converting all of England to be an achievable endeavor. Dieleman argues that two priests in particular—Frederick Faber and Henry Edward Manning—played a role in shaping Procter’s piety. Both had converted to Catholicism after being a part of the Oxford Movement after Newman’s conversion.

Gregory also speculates that the image of the Virgin Mary could have been an important contributing factor to Procter’s conversion, and much of her later poetry is heavy with Marian imagery. Mary was incredibly important to Faber and Manning, but Mary’s popularity reached new surges during this period. John R. Skinners, Jr. in “Mary and the People: The Cult of Mary and Popular Belief” claims

…the failure of the republican ideals of the Revolution and the conservative reaction which ensued, romanticism’s rejection of the enlightenment program, and the Catholic revival under the heavy hand of the long-lived Pius IV signaled the rebirth of the Marian cult…The nineteenth century marked the beginning of the “Age of Mary,” as some Catholic writers have called it. (166)
While for centuries the Roman Catholic church had celebrated Mary, it wasn’t until 1854 that the Immaculate Conception was codified into dogma, furthering devotions to her. Faber was known for having an unusually strong attachment to Mary, even for a Catholic. Dieleman writes that Faber referred to Mary as “Mama” (198). Procter seems to share this intense devotion to Mary; she liked Faber’s preaching and went to Mass as often as she could.

By her last volume of poetry, *A Chaplet of Verses*, Procter had relaxed some of her reserve, particularly in her depiction of Mary, but this too is in keeping with developments in Tractarianism via Faber and other Tractarian converts. *A Chaplet of Verses* is Procter’s most unabashedly Catholic volume. In the poem “The Names of Our Lady,” Procter excessively praises Mary, listing 12 different titles before declaring, “Mary: the dearest name of all,/The holiest and the best” (47-48). Gregory argues that the more that Procter explores Catholicism and writes for Catholic audiences, the more she sheds reserve as a general principle and instead channels intense emotion to Mary in particular. Kirstie Blair describes channeling as an aesthetic choice by Faber and other Tractarians. While too much passion was frowned upon, “[C]hannels’ also suggest that rather than simply blocking the current of thoughts and feelings, forms allow them to be contained in a manageable and orderly way. Religious feeling is still intense, but this channelling suggests calm waters rather than turbulence, a steady, even flow rather than bursts or gushes of feeling” (34). “The Names of Our Lady” demonstrates the use of a form that allows for passionate language that, while Keble himself may not have approved, had roots in Tractarianism that Faber expressed once he converted. Instead of inventing new ways to praise Mary, Procter uses already-existing and already-accepted titles for Mary to adore her, but she can passionately express her devotion by piling on these titles.
Procter also connects women-centered religious communities with devotions to Mary in her poetry. In my previous chapter, I wrote about how the newly formed Anglican convents were controversial, but at times were supported by people who thought that they would provide a place for “superfluous” husbandless women, particularly in light of the census. While Pusey had theological reasons for establishing the sisterhoods (and no doubt many of the women who joined them felt they had a spiritual calling), they also served a practical social need and were tolerated when the social circumstances gave them room to exist.

Procter clearly thought highly of women’s religious orders. She wrote *A Chaplet of Verses*, her last volume of poetry before her death, to raise funds for the Night Refuge of the Homeless Poor, a homeless shelter for women and children run by the Catholic Sisters of Mercy. In her introduction to *A Chaplet*, she offers an idealized depiction of the sisters, stating, “….they had long been aiding their pastors in the schools of the parish, and when this new opening for their charity was suggested to them, they unhesitatingly accepted a task, worthy indeed of the holy name they bear” (Procter 304). Clearly this praise, her fundraising for the Sisters of Mercy, and her own sister joining the order make it apparent that she thought women’s religious communities were important.

Even though Procter esteems the Sisters of Mercy, surprisingly few of her poems focus on convent life, and the ones that do do not always focus on an individual’s calling or the life of the community. In her poem “The Angel’s Bidding” Procter begins the action of the poem at a convent. The nuns sing Vespers and go to bed, only to have an angel wake one of them up to pray for the soul of a lost man. Yet the nun is never named, never identified in any sort of way. We do not even know how she responded to hearing an angel, nor do we know if she actually arose and prayed for this lost man. It does not seem to matter which nun was called by the
angel—we have no information that marks her as different from any other nun. She has no voice. None of the nuns (no pun intended) have a voice. The opening at the convent seems to just serve as the set up for the angel’s speech about the man, lost and alone on the moors, whose life is in peril, but then the angel admits that if she did not offer her prayers for this man, there is another man who needs her prayers more because his soul is in danger, not his mortal life:

The Tempter is close beside him,
And his danger is all forgot,
And the far-off voices of childhood
Call aloud, but he hears them not;
He sayeth no prayer, and his mother—
He thinks not of her today,
And he will not look up to heaven,
And his Angel is turning away. (42-49)

However, we get no conclusion to the narrative. We do not know if the nun got up and prayed for either man, we do not know what happened to the man lost on the snowy moors or the man who does not talk to his mother. By not resolving the character’s conflicts, the poem ends and emphasizes the plight of the man whose soul is in peril. Moral failings are a greater danger than mortality, and the angel elevates the power of prayer (which is not a consistent theme in Procter’s work, which I shall later discuss), but there is no real consideration of vocation or the nuns’ lives. However, this poem does suggest how much agency both the nun and the reader have in impacting other people’s lives. The poem argues that prayer can make active changes, but the angel’s visit and message also make clear that the nun and by extension the reader, have a responsibility to care for strangers and the community at large.

Poems such as “Give Me Thy Heart” may be read as discernment poems, perhaps to a religious order or to a more general conversion. The poem isn’t exactly specific to one faith, although the imagery at the beginning of the poem with the “organ’s pealing voice” (3) and the
“vesper hymn” (4) suggest a High Church or Roman Catholic setting. In “Give Me Thy Heart,” a woman sits in an empty chapel, crying and admitting that “the shades of death/Upon my soul are cast!” (11-12) It is unclear if she is physically dying, or if she feels some spiritual dread, a dark night of the soul sort of experience. She rattles off all of her Christian deeds, but she is still uneasy with an almost Augustinian restlessness. Meanwhile, God keeps asking for her heart, claiming that he loves more than anyone on earth can. Finally, she concedes:

In awe she listened, and the shade
Passed from her soul away;
In low and trembling voice she cried,--
“Lord, help me to obey!
Break Thou the chains of earth, O Lord,
That bind and hold my heart;
Let it be Thine, and Thine alone,
Let none with Thee have part. (Procter 57-64)

She eventually leaves the chapel happy and at peace. However, it is unclear what she will do next. She leaves without any promises about her next steps, no vow to join a convent or devote herself to some other vocation, but the struggle and final surrender do suggest a complete commitment to God with little room for anyone or anything else. The language of struggle and surrender, common in hagiographies and Augustine’s *Confessions*, can indicate a freedom from unnecessary pain, a comfort that it is not one’s achievements or perfection that God wants but one’s love and sincerity, but it can also connote domination, possessiveness, or exploitation, especially when a male-gendered God asks for submission from a woman who has already given almost everything up. She claims that she has avoided sin, avoided delights, given away her wealth, served the poor, fasted and performed penance, and still she fears it is not enough. When she further surrenders, the last stanza announces that her soul is purified, but if we are to believe her supplications (and God’s voice does not contradict them in the poem), it is unclear what her
soul needs purification from, other than the fact that she loves things or people besides God. The scene recalls the Ignatian idea of detachment from what is ephemeral in order to better focus and worship God but again, it is unclear what attachments the woman had in the first place. While there is some comfort that worship has not been reduced to a checklist, that morality and piety is not simply a performance before the divine, it is worth noting that in Procter’s poetry, God asks for so much.

Procter’s letters seem to suggest that Procter thought of religion as an all-or-nothing commitment. In a letter to Bessie Parkes, she bluntly states, “I do not think there is any neutral ground in belief” (qtd. in Gregory 14). Such single-minded commitment is at work in this poem. The language echoes the story of the young rich man in the Gospels who asks Jesus how to attain everlasting life (Mark 10:17-22) However, in Scripture, the young man claims that he has followed all the rules, and Jesus asks him to sell his things and give to the poor, and follow him. The young man leaves sad because he has many possessions and cannot let them go. The woman in Procter’s poem, however, has already given away her possessions, served others, and has fasted and performed penance along with following the rules. Yet God still asks everything. God does not ask what the woman desires, does not ask about her hopes or dreams, nor allows her satisfaction for her hard work and devotion, but, like a jealous lover, tells her that no one can love her like he can, listing all the ways he has worked to gain her love. It is all or nothing. Her obedience is rewarded with enviable peace, one certainly in line with Catholic thinking, but it comes at the annihilation of the self and, if pushed to its logical conclusion, the annihilation of the woman’s ties to anyone and anything except God.

The drama of “Give Me Thy Heart” is heightened by the paradox of secularism. While Procter is tapping into older traditions, the all-or-nothing attitude of faith presented in the poem
illustrates the depth of devotion possible with choice, a similar all-or-nothing attitude that Newman and other Tractarians came to realize. The woman in the poem seemingly has no moral failings. However, “Give Me Thy Heart” is not about morality alone but an emotional and authentic commitment, or at least an authenticity defined by a powerful, demanding God. In this way, the poem is indicative of how Tractarianism repurposed Romanticism⁶. Like Keble, Procter represents earthly life in the end as just distraction from a divine power that transcends the confusions of daily life, life that comes with real social and economic changes. Colin Jager has noted, “religious participation in England rose between 1800 and 1850 (the period of most intense modernization and industrialization) and then held steady or rose gradually until 1900” (27). With this intense period of change came a return to older forms and in some of the religious art and poetry from the period, a longing for tradition and consistency. Again, this is nothing new, but Procter’s poem seems to suggest that nothing but a decision of total surrender can withstand the inconsistencies of earthly life, even as Procter herself worked to take advantage of the opportunities that this new industrial economy could provide for working women. It is not enough to be merely a decent person or even a believing person; one must align their heart with their behavior and place their love of the divine above all else. At least that is what this Tractarian God demands in this particular poem.

In her treatment of an all-or-nothing attitude, Procter’s depiction of devotion is not all that different from Rossetti’s conception, but this sense of total surrender is less of a struggle for Procter’s speakers than it is for Rossetti. According to Rossetti, choosing a vocation is the act of renunciation, rejecting the world, and choosing one’s suffering. Unlike Rossetti’s narrators—

---

who, while clearly devoted to religion, struggle with this renunciation and end up with a lifetime of “hope deferred”—Procter’s speaker accepts renunciation and is immediately rewarded. As I discussed in my previous chapter, Rossetti’s nun poems are rarely a true consideration of the vocation on its own terms; Rossetti’s poems are really more about sex and its consequences rather than a longing for living in community with other women or embracing the peace of God. Procter’s narrators are rarely so divided. Even as the speaker in “Give Me Thy Heart” wrestles with the apparent incompatibility of loving the divine and loving the world, she does not speak of a lover or running away from some sexual shame. Procter leaves the protagonist’s wrestling more general and open-ended.

Yet in the same collection of poetry, Procter included, “A Retrospect,” the loving poem dedicated to Matilda/Matthew Hays. Procter’s poem to Hays is unabashedly romantic, rejoicing in the fact that while a previous relationship failed, it led the speaker to her current lover:

Thus I can read thy name throughout,
And, now her task is done,
Can see that even that faded Past
Was thine, beloved one,
And so rejoice my Life may be all consecrated, dear, to thee. (36-40)

Procter also dedicated the first series of *Legends and Lyrics* to her, paraphrasing from Emerson: “Our tokens of love are for the most part barbarous. Cold and lifeless, because they do not represent our life. The only gift is a portion of thyself. Therefore let the farmer give his corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; and the poet, his poem.” Yet Gregory also points out that even as Procter quotes Emerson, she makes his words less demanding and more compassionate. The original quotation states that “Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral & shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own
sewing.” Gregory argues that the harsher parts of the Emerson passage, “are edited out by Procter who chooses not to include the more disturbing aspects of Emerson’s text” (139). In omitting the darker elements of Emerson’s piece, Procter depicts an image of love that is authentic and generous but not rooted in sacrificing oneself, nor dependent upon women’s domesticity. In this way, Procter’s dedication reflects not only her love for Hays but the mission of the *English Woman’s Journal* and SPEW, as well as her depictions of women’s communities. Work and relationships are meant to provide meaning and love without abuse or self-erasure, and these ideas exist in the same volume as the all-or-nothing, “Give Me Thy Heart.” In both “A Retrospect” and the adapted Emerson passage, earthly love is not depicted as competition for divine love, as it was so often depicted in Rossetti’s poetry.

Even when Procter does write about convents and sexual shame, the emphasis in the poem is less on the opposing spiritual and sexual desires so prevalent in Rossetti’s work and more on the power of the Virgin Mary and redemption. “A Legend of Provence” (Belinda’s ghost story within the frame narrative of Dicken’s “The Haunted House”) echoes a medieval story about a nun who abandoned her convent for 17 years only to have her place kept by Mary (Shinners 177). Procter’s version takes place in France. Scholars such as Gilbert and Isobel Armstrong have noted the significance of spaces outside of England for Victorian women poets. Often, this comes at the expense of imperialist, exoticized, and racist language. Here, Procter goes closer to home, but still uses an un-English, un-Protestant setting. Convents are complicated spaces in 19th century British literature; sometimes a space of “unnaturalness” and corruption, sometimes a site of Gothic horror, other times an idealized, Romantic space. Procter idealizes. Angela becomes a novice and “no heart was half so light”—she was happy and had a special devotion to Mary, placing flower garlands at the Mary shrine and “…then kneeling down in
prayer./As their faint perfume rose before the shrine./So rose her thoughts, as pure and as divine”

However, this peace is interrupted by war, and the convent becomes a makeshift hospital. Angela helps tend to a wounded young knight and is awed by his stories of the outside world. Angela elopes with the knight, only to find his love fleeting and she is left alone, a shamed outcast.

Years later, scorned by everyone, maybe becoming a prostitute or committing crime—“she grew reckless more and more” (204)—she wanders back to the convent gates, dying. As she waits to be let in, she sees a vision of herself as if she had never left, a much healthier person and peaceful nun. Then Mary appears to her, telling her that she has remembered her earlier devotion, has kept her place in the convent in her stead, and that she will erase the years that she has been gone. No one will remember that she had ever left:

Didst thou not know, poor child, *thy place was kept*? (emphasis Procter’s)
Kind hearts are here; yet would the tenderest one
Have limits to its mercy: God has none.
And man’s forgiveness may be true and sweet,
But yet he stoops to give it. More complete
Is Love that lays forgiveness at thy feet,
And pleads with thee to raise it. Only Heaven
Means crowned, not vanquished, when it says, “Forgiven!” (Procter 271-278)

When the other nun returns, she finds the beggar gone and Angela standing there as a nun with hawthorn branches to adorn the Mary shrine, leaving the other nun worried and confused about the beggar woman that had been there moments before. Angela only reveals the miracle to the other nuns on her deathbed. Procter concludes the poem by turning to the reader:

Have we not all, amid life’s petty strife,
Some pure ideal of a noble life
That once seemed possible? …
We lost it in this daily jar and fret,
And now live idle in a vague regret.
But still our place is kept, and it will wait,
Ready for us to fill it, soon or late:
No star is ever lost once we have seen,
We always may be what we might have been. (320-330)
In some ways, this poem is a straightforward cautionary tale. There is no questioning of harmful purity codes, the knight never suffers any consequences for his actions, the community outside the convent never suffers any consequences for its treatment of Angela, sexuality and religious vocation are never reconciled, a woman acting on sexual desires leads to ruin, leaving home leads to ruin, etc. In other words, no one, not even Mary, seems interested in justice for Angela, who has been betrayed, abandoned, and scorned. While Angela is healed, the conditions that led to her suffering have not changed.

But there are two curious things I would like to bring up about this poem. First is that the miracle seems granted entirely by Mary. There is a precedent for visions of the Virgin Mary appearing around the globe before this poem was written. Shinner also notes a precedent, especially in medieval Europe, in which “Mary becomes the mother of mercy par excellence…She unhesitatingly intervenes to ensure the salvation of even the most depraved members of society, so long as they show some small devotion to her” (170). Procter is not reinventing the wheel by writing about Mary interceding for someone or using medieval source material for her work. Still, Procter chooses a story where Mary is at the center, notably not Jesus or other members of the Trinity. Mary in this poem does seem to speak for God, claiming God has no limits to mercy, but Mary is the only one there, and it is clear that Angela’s devotion to Mary her entire life, and not necessarily Jesus or God the Father or the Holy Spirit, not practices such as adoration of the Eucharist, mattered in Mary’s appearance to her. It is Mary who not only forgives Angela but removes any marks of shame that would continue to separate her from community, especially a community of nuns. In this regard, this story is like a female version of the prodigal son story from Scripture. Instead of a father rushing out to meet his wayward son,
clothing him in fine garments and throwing a feast for him, Mary goes even further and erases the memory of Angela’s shame from the convent altogether. Instead of a loving father, we have a mother who has the power to change time and space. There are also perhaps obvious parallels to the fall of Eve; Angela was happy until she longed for knowledge of the outside world and sexuality. Instead of being banished from the garden forever, though, Mary brings her back in. In either case, neither God the Father nor Jesus nor the Holy Spirit seem to have a say.

The second is what forgiveness looks like. Again, like the prodigal son, Angela does not have to perform any acts of penance beyond the suffering and shame she has already endured. Forgiveness and relief from suffering are also immediate. For example, Dieleman notes that in several poems by Christina Rossetti, the speaker is long-suffering, waiting for love and fulfillment after death. She attributes this to Anglican Eucharistic theology, which she argues is more teleological, and compares it to the immediacy of Roman Catholic Eucharistic theology:

…because in Mass, Christ is again present on earth, the sacrament conjures no future heavenly banquet but instead stirs one to adoration in the present, to living in the consciousness of this sacrifice. In short, [Catholic] Tridentine Mass does not cultivate the power of the Word/word or the communion of saints or the sense of a heavenly future but instead reinforces the propriety of quiet, penitent waiting for the mysterious arrival of the Christ who will work again to redeem the sinner. (187)

This does not mean that consideration of the afterlife is not important for Procter. “A Legend of Provence” does not end with the miracle but years later with Angela’s peaceful death and a call to the readers to be more holy. But the vision of Mary also indicates that Angela did not have to wait until after death for relief from suffering, nor does anyone else have to suffer on her behalf. In Rossetti’s Goblin Market, scholars including Gilbert and Gubar have noted the Christlike qualities of Lizzie and the echoes of the Eucharist when she returns to Laura covered in the juices of the goblin’s fruits; Laura is saved by homoerotic consumption of Lizzie. While the
Virgin Mary literally took on Angela’s form while she was away, and Procter’s depiction of Angela reveals a deep attraction to Mary, the attraction is less about consuming two women into one and more about restoring separate wholeness. In other words, Angela’s redemption does not come from an experience of consumption like Laura’s (although it does restore her body), but neither does it require the annihilation of the women around her. Lizzie must endure violence for Laura in *Goblin Market*, but no such violence is needed in “A Legend of Provence.”

In fact, in her speech, Mary notes the problem with humanity’s (specifically men’s) form of forgiveness, that it requires an unequal power dynamic between the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven: “And man’s forgiveness may be true and sweet,/ But yet he stoops to give it” while divine forgiveness is one that empowers the forgiven, albeit a forgiveness that enables one to live within a particular morality. The call to the reader at the end also offers a form of forgiveness and an open opportunity to change; it is never too late. Again, this call can be narrow, putting an emphasis on perfection that denigrates an ordinary life, adding a nagging fear to the reader that there is something better that she could be doing, but it also removes the urgency of being perfect today. Unlike *Goblin Market*, there is no Jeanie haunting the reader from the grave. Instead, the urgency is placed on removing suffering and shame in earthly life, not waiting until the afterlife.

But Gregory and others have argued that Procter’s vision of redemption in earthly life is not consistent throughout her career. Oftentimes, we get a far murkier picture of women’s relationship to suffering, redemption, and the afterlife. Some of this may be due to different purposes for writing; some poems may be written as aids for worship (Dieleman 186), while other poems may be written to illustrate the need for action to solve social ills. Still, whether Procter intended it or not, this leaves her poetry with a contradictory theology about the nature of
suffering or the power of prayer. In “A Legend of Provence,” Angela did not choose to join the convent, but her great devotion to Mary is described in great detail. While Mary does not explicitly state that she is rewarding Angela for her previous devotion, when Mary leaves and the portress returns, Angela is restored holding the hawthorn blossoms that she used to adorn the Mary shrine before she left. Angela’s previous devotion has not been forgotten, and she is allowed relief from her suffering before death, not after, again consistent with medieval Mariology.

Other poems express sympathy for “fallen” or potentially “fallen” women, but they do not provide the same sort of relief from suffering, especially if left to humanity to solve. The poem “Homeless” pits an unfeeling middle-class woman, comfortable inside with her beloved dog, against a “sister-woman” outside in the cold:

Nay, our criminals all are sheltered,
They are pitied and taught and fed:
That is only a sister-woman
Who has got neither food nor bed,—
And the Night cries, “Sin to be living,”
And the River cries, “Sin to be dead.” (19-24)

The sister-woman, unlike lapdogs or incarcerated men, has no good choices. The poem doesn’t end with the sister-woman’s relief but with the indictment of the middle-class woman, with a reference to Lazarus and Dives from Scripture in the closing lines of the poem: “And so Lazarus lies at our doorstep/And Dives neglects him still” (41-42). Procter uses this Biblical image that her readers would have known to caution those who would ignore the suffering of others. Unlike some of Procter’s earlier poems, death is not provided as a solution to the suffering of this life but the consequence of injustice from the apathetic well-to-do. There is no happy resolution for either the sister-woman or the wealthy woman, but a call to action.
“Homeless” is the last poem in *A Chaplet of Verses*. Cheri Lin Larsen Hoeckley reports that this poem “became the frontispiece for Refuge annual reports, circulating in multiple forms across social classes and through Catholic, Protestant, and nonsectarian communities” (95-96). As in “The Angel’s Bidding,” “Homeless” places personal responsibility on individuals to respond to suffering, no matter their religious convictions. Again, we have come to another secular paradox—as God in Procter’s poems demands an individual, authentic response, believers are also called to individual responses to systemic problems. This response seems to call across denominational boundaries without calling for collective action. Yet the collective action may be hidden if we look at the text alone. Again, this was published in a volume aimed at raising money for a homeless shelter, but even more important than that, this poem offers a much stronger indictment of class than poems such as “The Angel’s Story.” The well-to-do woman is not sympathetic but the accused. “Homeless” no longer looks to the heavens for answer but demands a more immediate justice.

IV. Conclusion

Procter is a complicated poet. Her position as a middle-class woman surrounded by Victorian England’s literary elite is at times a barrier in her poetry. While working towards improving the lives of working class women and children, she often denies them agency or dignity. Her poems sometimes fail to question structures of injustice, even as her activism work sought to do just that. Her conversion in some ways narrowed her estimation of other religious choices, and her belief in the joys of heaven at times led her poems to conclude that death was a better fate than life, especially a life of sin and suffering. Again, this seems to contradict her life’s work.
Yet these contradictions make more sense put into context. The same conditions that brought about great social and economic changes in the earlier part of the nineteenth century brought about a deepening but diversifying religious landscape. The traditional rituals and faith Procter turned to in her conversion seemed to provide a sturdy foundation for her progressive activism for women’s rights. These conditions provided both perils and opportunities for the women Procter worked with, but Procter was savvy enough to navigate the Victorian publishing industry to financially support these causes. Her poems imagine a future for women where suffering does not have the last word, where domestic spaces are worthy subjects of poetry, where unmarried women could and should have meaningful lives, and where the middle and upper classes could wake up to the suffering they chose to ignore. She rejected the notion of an artist set apart from the cares of everyday life. She could even surprise Charles Dickens. Procter ultimately sacrificed her life for this work, but she still asks readers, believers and non-believers alike, to pay attention to those in need.
CHAPTER FOUR

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS’ SECULAR RELIGIOUS AESTHETICS

*Now if you value what I write, if I do myself, how much more does our Lord...
there is a time for everything, there is nothing that does not some day come to
be, it may be that the time will come for my verses.*


I. Introduction

Gerard Manley Hopkins is an outlier in this study, most notably because Keble, Rossetti, and Procter were all well-known and well-read during their lifetimes, while Hopkins died in obscurity. Today, however, Hopkins is a canonical poet, loved in turns for his lush and intricate language, the development of his own poetry terms including inscape and instress, his love of nature, and his religious faith. His conversion to Roman Catholicism and his vocation as a Jesuit priest have been well-documented and widely discussed by scholars, and his aesthetic success is often attributed to the theology he learned after joining the Society of Jesus. Bernadette Waterman Ward remarked in *World as Word: Philosophical Theology in Gerard Manley Hopkins* that he “found the freedom for his bold literary experiments within the security of the Roman Catholic Church. In the metaphysics of that ancient community of faith, Hopkins discovered such an inexhaustible variety of understanding, such fierce delight in the multiplicity of truth, that he could scarcely channel it into the boundaries of language” (1). Hopkins’ conversion was indeed a huge turning point in his life, and many scholars including Paul Mariani
and Joseph Feeney, S.J., have provided ample evidence for the deep influence that Catholicism had on the development of Hopkins’ poetry. I am not here to dispute them.

But I begin this chapter with a simple observation: Hopkins’ poetry is very little like other Catholic poets of the period, nor did he even like Catholic aesthetics. In his letter to his father explaining his conversion, Hopkins writes, “I am surprised you shd. say fancy and aesthetic taste have led me to my present state of mind: these wd. be better satisfied in the Church of England, for bad taste is always meeting one in the accessories of Catholicism” (224). As I shall further discuss, his choice of words, forms, and syntax, is different from those of other Catholic poets from the period, who often instead employ liturgical forms and repetition. Other scholars have noticed this, and have remarked on the significance of Hopkins’ religion and education before his conversion. Margaret Johnson in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Tractarian Poetry* has written at length about Hopkins’ Tractarian influence, and despite Waterman Ward’s emphasis on Hopkins’ Catholicism, she also acknowledges the significance of the Tractarians and Ruskin on Hopkins’ work. Still, if we compare Hopkins’ poetry to the poetry of other converts such as Newman, Frederick Faber, and Adelaide Procter, Hopkins’ use of language still stands out. Of course, no movement or religion is a monolith, but if we put Hopkins in conversation with other Roman Catholic poets of the period, we see that shared religion does not mean shared aesthetic choices or expectations.

In this chapter, I want to make the distinction between Catholic theology and the experiences of the Victorian Catholic community, and why that matters in how we characterize Hopkins as a religious poet. Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr has suggested a three-pronged approach to religious authority—Scripture, tradition, and experience. While again I am convinced that Catholic theology influenced Hopkins’ choices, both in his conversion and in his
poetry, I want to put Hopkins in conversation with other Catholic poets of the time to further illustrate this distinction between the theology and experience, especially communal experience. In exploring this distinction, I also explore the fissures in Victorian Catholicism between laypeople, clergy, converts, life-long Catholics, Ultramontanists, English Catholics, and the Irish. Hopkins’ emphasis on intense individuality, education, and nationalism at times alienated him from the communities he served. To say as Waterman Ward proclaims that Hopkins “found the freedom for his bold literary experiments within the security of the Roman Catholic Church” ignores the fact that Hopkins almost gave up writing poetry because of his conversion and vocation, ignores the fact that Hopkins’ poetry was rejected by Victorian Catholics, and ignores the experiences of millions of poor, Irish, and women Catholics who did not find this freedom for bold literary experiments within the church. In other words, I do not claim that Catholicism had no role in the creation of Hopkins’ poetry, far from it. However, I do argue that what Hopkins brings to Catholic aesthetics warrants more discussion, including the advantages he had over poor, Irish, women, and lay Catholics, as well as his theological priorities, shaped by a multitude of influences—Tractarianism, Ignatian spirituality, Romanticism, English nationalism, to name a few.

By hailing Hopkins as a Catholic poet, I point out that we, 21st century readers and scholars, should acknowledge that we favor certain forms of religious poetry and practice over others, particularly experimentation and individualism over tradition, conformity, and community. This is not to say that one set of aesthetic preferences is better than another, but I want to point out that drawing from the same theology does not create uniformity of aesthetic values. This freedom is even more possible in a secular context. Despite Victorian suspicions of Catholicism, Hopkins could still choose to convert, a choice only available in a nation secular
enough where conversion is possible. My observation is that not only could he choose to convert to Catholicism, he could choose what elements of his new faith to emphasize, and he could choose to reject the “bad taste…in the accessories of Catholicism” with art that he preferred, his tastes shaped by class, gender, education, Tractarianism, and nationalism. I argue that Hopkins is a secular religious poet because he still emphasizes individual autonomy over conformity. In a secular context, when there are more religious choices available, more authority is placed on the individual to make decisions. While Hopkins made a deep commitment to Catholicism and used his religious training in his poetry, his poetic project changed religious art, not the other way around.

In this chapter, I will first discuss Hopkins’ time at Oxford and his introduction to Tractarianism while he was there. Next, I want to put Hopkins in closer dialogue with other Roman Catholic and Tractarian poets of the period, including some close readings of his work in dialogue with poetry from other Catholic converts, in particular looking at how their poetry changed with their conversions. Finally, I will summarize his contributions to religious aesthetics, as well as the challenges his work poses for making claims of influence in literary studies.

II. Hopkins and Tractarianism

In this section, I summarize Hopkins’ engagement with Tractarianism at Oxford as well as identify some of the key players in Hopkins’ education and conversion. In her introduction to *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Tractarian Poetry*, Johnson notes the tendency for scholars to consider Hopkins’ work ahistorically for a variety of reasons, especially when characterizing his engagement with Roman Catholic theology and Jesuit spirituality. However, she claims that this “bisects Hopkins, and marginalizes his growth” and spends the rest of the book examining
Hopkins’ Tractarian influences (5). Johnson’s work is a useful starting place to examine the varied religious influences Hopkins brings to his poetry. I also find her comment about the ahistorical nature of some theological readings of Hopkins’ poetry useful. Scholars such as Waterman Ward and Paul Mariani, among others, focus on the conversation that Hopkins has with the theologians and philosophers that he read, especially Duns Scotus or St. Ignatius of Loyola. I have made similar arguments myself in my previous work, and I return to Duns Scotus later in this chapter. But by focusing solely on particular theologians he read during his Jesuit formation, we risk leaving out how Hopkins used that theology. We also risk leaving out the contemporary religious practices, beliefs, attitudes, and aesthetic preferences that Hopkins engaged in as both an Anglican and then as a Roman Catholic. In this section, I begin with Johnson’s work on Hopkins’ Anglican years and Tractarian influences.

We know that Hopkins’ mother gave Hopkins’ father a copy of *The Christian Year* as a gift (Johnson 16). Johnson also claims that Hopkins was familiar with *Lyra Apostolica*, the Tractarian volume of poetry that Keble and Newman contributed to, and she attributes the worship routines at Highgate School where Hopkins attended as a child to the “catholicizing trends which characterized the High Church movement” (18). As Waterman Ward and other scholars have noted, Keble relies on Wordsworth and Coleridge for the development of his own poetic theories, particularly the concepts of imagination and fancy, but Johnson claims “Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s prioritization of imagination over fancy was inverted by Keble, whose own division of poets into primary and secondary depended not on the creative energy which the poets brought to their task but on the amount of divine inspiration which imbued their work” (25). This divine inspiration will come into play in Hopkins’ terms inscape and instress. I will return to Hopkins’ use of Lake School Romanticism later in the chapter, but Johnson
provides ample evidence of Hopkins’ use of Lake School Romanticism that has been refashioned by Keble and the other Tractarians, providing a three-pronged description of this refashioned Romanticism: “the idea of the poet as creator was allied to a concept of the author as a mediator or mouthpiece of God; emotional inspiration was affirmed as an originating poetic force; and poetry was perceived as a revelation of the divine” (29). This notion of the poet/priest as a mediator for God can have its pitfalls, as I shall describe, but I would add another concept to this list: reserve. A term more closely associated with Keble, reserve has its roots in Aquinas’ concept of veiling, the idea that humanity can’t handle the weight and scope of divine truth, so it must be given piecemeal and not all at once. Hopkins’ use of language is frankly more original than Keble’s, and his poetry could be seen as a failure of reserve because originality for originality’s sake wasn’t the point of reserve; the point was to use analogies, liturgy, and daily life to point to the divine. However, Hopkins’ poetry is notoriously obscure. Robert Bridges and Canon Dixon sometimes had trouble discerning his poetry, let alone readers from across the centuries. Yet this obscurity lends itself to Keble’s understanding of reserve. Hopkins often pushes the subject of the line to an unexpected place, creates complicated gerunds, and uses vocabulary either from other languages or words he makes up himself. This in turn often makes understanding and interpreting the poem difficult, requiring multiple read-throughs and work to make it through the line. Truth is not easily given away.

We also know that Hopkins was a good student who wanted to challenge himself to the point of doing damage and demonstrating his penchant for asceticism. At Highgate, he once wanted to see how long he could go without drinking water to the point that his tongue turned black. He also wrote poetry as a student, succeeded at academics, and eventually matriculated to Oxford, where he came into contact with living members of the original Oxford Movement.
Hopkins matriculated at Oxford in 1863 at Balliol College. Michael E. Allsopp in “Gerard Hopkins, Oxford, and Edward Urquhart” argues that the 1860s were a particularly pivotal moment in the Tractarian movement. Allsopp claims that Hopkins had more liberal views when he started at Balliol but quickly became involved with the Tractarians. While Keble was no longer at Oxford when Hopkins attended, Hopkins’ most significant tutors were Benjamin Jowett and Henry Liddon (who went to Keble for confession when Keble was still at Oxford) (Chandler). Benjamin Jowett was the liberal tutor at Balliol College but in 1863 he was charged with going against church teachings in his scholarship (Hinchliff and Press). Liddon was a protégé of Pusey, a member of the original Oxford Movement with Newman and Keble whom I discussed in more detail in my second chapter. Pusey too was devoted to ascetic practices, as well as emphasizing confession and creating celibate religious orders in the Anglican church. Although Pusey was married with children, Liddon felt that he was called to celibacy. Allsopp notes Pusey’s presence at Oxford during his own controversies over scholarship and church teachings. We know Hopkins was friends with several members of the Tractarian group the Brotherhood of the Holy Trinity (although he ended up not joining himself), attended Liddon’s lectures, and began participating in the practice of confession. As Alfred Thomas, SJ puts it:

Before he left [Oxford] in 1867, he had become a full-fledged Roman Catholic, passing in the interim through a Puseyite Gothic-Revivalist stage: he fasted, went frequently to confession and Holy Communion, and even visited churches notorious for their Romish practices; and even if he did not join the Brotherhood of the Holy Trinity as his friends Urquhart, Challis, Addis, and Bridges did, yet he did attend Liddon’s soirées and partook of the ‘tea-and-toast-and-testament’. (2)

When Hopkins was considering conversion, he wrote to John Henry Newman, who at this time was in Birmingham. However, once Hopkins had decided to convert, his parents reached out to Liddon and Pusey to convince Hopkins to stay in the Anglican Church, with no success.
In the next section, I move from Hopkins’ Oxford years and his interactions with the Tractarian community to his life as a Catholic convert and priest in relationship with the multiple Catholic communities that existed in Victorian England, Ireland, and Europe. I put his work in dialogue with other converts while placing it in context with particular theologies as well as popular devotions of the time.

**III. Hopkins, Duns Scotus, and Frederick Faber**

In this section, I put Hopkins in conversation with other Catholic poets, particularly when it comes to the tension between Hopkins’ emphasis on the individual and his treatment of Victorian Catholic themes. It is worth noting the complexity and variety within Victorian Catholicism. One common narrative in scholarship about this period is that of a Catholic revival or, in Newman’s terms, a “second spring” of Catholicism in England, as summarized by Mary Heimann in *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England*. Along with this supposed “second spring” arose debates about which direction the English Catholic church should go. Jill Muller outlined some of these fissures in *Gerard Manley Hopkins and Victorian Catholicism: A Heart in Hiding*, particularly between converts with Ultramontanist leanings, looking to continental Europe for piety and practices, and the “liberal” Newman and his followers, who championed an English identity within Catholicism and pushed back against papal infallibility, among other fissures. She also claims that this tension “was further complicated by hostility between converts and ‘old Catholics’ or recusants, and by suspicion and misunderstanding between an intellectual priestly class (many of them Oxford converts) and a lay population increasingly made up of working-class Irish immigrants” (4). Building upon work by Christopher Hollis, Muller further argues that the new converts were destined to struggle in the Catholic Church because the very qualities that led them to the Church were not entirely welcome within the established church, particularly
with “the virulently anti-intellectual and reactionary papacy of Pius IX” (4). Even among the new converts from Oxford, there was strife.

However, Heimann questions the narratives of these clear divisions in Victorian Catholicism after 1850. “[D]espite the rather grandiose parallels which historians have drawn with the liberal and ultramontane movements of Germany, France, and Italy, the arguments of the extreme ultramontanes and liberals were, in England at any rate, restricted to a very small number of polemicists” (23). Some of these polemicists included Newman, Frederick Faber, Cardinal Wiseman, Cardinal Manning, among others. Like Muller, however, Heimann notes the great influx of Irish immigrants to England after the famine, as well as how different their practice often was from the fervent Oxford converts:

a startlingly low proportion of Irish immigrants had any but the most nominal connection with the formal Catholic Church…even where a claim to Catholicism is clearly supported by evidence of religious behavior and a firm adherence to the fundamental doctrines of the Catholic Church, the expression of faith, mixed as it often was with ‘superstitious’ or at any rate nationally specific customs…may be viewed as either religious, social, or nationalist in primary significance, depending on the view of the commentator. (13-14)

Heimann also discusses the scholarly debate about how much Irish spirituality lost “a native or Gaelic spirituality [to] its replacement with European ultramontanism” or how much Irish spirituality changed through the political and social pressures following the famine.

Older English Catholics, families that had been practicing since before the Reformation, had their own spiritual practices. A common devotional text was called The Garden of the Soul, a long book written in the mid-eighteenth century in didactic language. Heimann has again troubled some of the stereotypes of these believers, most notably that their piety was quieter and more subdued than the Ultramontanes, but she also points out that pieties such as the Stations of
the Cross and Rosaries were not common church practices in England until later in the century (42).

This is all to say that no one narrative can easily summarize the Victorian Catholic community, and it is perhaps more suitable to state that there were multiple communities operating at once, all joined by a common religion and some overlapping concerns but with different priorities and spiritual practices. Hopkins himself noted the differences in Catholic communities as well as the publications they produced. In his letters to Bridges, Hopkins mentions *The Dublin Review*, the *Month*, the *Tablet*, and the *Irish Monthly*. He also calls attention to some of these fissures; in a letter to Bridges dated December 14, 1885, he claims that the *Tablet* does “not like Jesuits” (even though Hopkins himself liked the *Tablet*), the English Catholic gentry were “so nice” while the Irish bishops were at odds with the Irish gentry (*The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* 223). He clearly noticed ethnic and class differences. Yet when scholars point to Hopkins as a Catholic poet, they are usually referring to the Catholic intellectual tradition that he was educated in as a Jesuit, an intellectual tradition that was out of reach for many laity and immigrants and a Jesuit tradition that differed from other religious communities. In doing so, scholarship unwittingly privileges clerical education over lay experience. In the case of Hopkins, this makes sense; he was a priest after all, and there are times when he incorporates local devotions into his work. His St. Winifred poems, for example, show an attention to Welsh piety. However, his poems, devotions, and theological conclusions are not representative of the complexities of the Victorian Catholic experience. Of course, no one poet could ever be totally representative of the many experiences of a faith tradition, but scholarship about Hopkins’ conversion could do more to characterize the nuances in Victorian Catholicism.
Even among other Oxford converts, the choices that Hopkins makes in his poetry still differ, even as he shares their educational background and conversion story.

I put Hopkins in dialogue with fellow converts Frederick Faber and Adelaide Procter to illustrate these nuances. Like Procter, Faber has mostly faded from the canon. Faber was born into an Evangelical family, joined the Tractarians at Oxford, and converted shortly after Newman did in 1845. But Newman and Faber also had their differences. After both of their conversions, the Ultramontanist Faber (who favored Italian forms of worship) eventually split from the Oratory in Birmingham and went to the London Oratory (Gilley). Procter attended the London Oratory after her own conversion and was devoted to Faber’s preaching. Hopkins could have potentially used similar theology as Faber and maybe even leaned on Faber himself as a source but still developed very different aesthetics, and I compare Hopkins and Procter to demonstrate how vastly different depictions of Catholic communities could also lead to very different aesthetic choices. In both of these comparisons, I argue that Hopkins holds onto a form of individualism that Faber and Procter both eventually reject in their poetry, both in their subject matter and their aesthetic choices. Hopkins is drawing from Catholic theology, but his poetry does not conform to the expectations of the community nor advocate for the needs of the community in the ways that Faber and Procter’s work did.

In my previous chapter, I quoted Kristie Blair’s summary of Victorian Catholic poetry and its emphasis on conformity: Roman Catholic poetry was “couched by [Edward] Caswall in terms of the … deliberate eschewal of excitement and individuality. The relative blandness of many Roman Catholic poems by minor poets of the Victorian period, their tendency towards repetitiveness and their lack of lyrical fervor, is a conscious aesthetic choice” (203). Yet this
could not be further from Hopkins’ poetic project, with his emphasis on the individual. In one of
Hopkins’ most famous poems, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”, the speaker cries

    Each mortal thing does one and the same:
    Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
    Selves—goes its self; myself it speaks and spells,
    Crying What I do is me: for that I came. (4-8)

The poem goes on to call on Christ, but this poem could hardly advocate the “deliberate
eschewal of excitement and individuality.” When I teach this poem, I present to my students
evidence in this poem that suggests that the most sacred thing any living creature can do is to
authentically live the unique calling given by God. Scholars have also noted the presence of
Jesuit spirituality in the poem. In one of the Ignatian spiritual exercises, one is asked to reflect on
the idea of “desiring and choosing only those [created things] which may better lead us to the
end for which we were created” (Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works 281). In his 1882
notes on this particular exercise, Hopkins wrote:

    …when I consider my selfbeing, my consciousness and feeling of myself, that taste of
    myself, of I and me above and in all things, which is more distinctive than the taste of ale
    or alum, more distinctive than the smell of walnutleaf or camphor, and is
    incommunicable by any means to another man (as when I was a child I used to ask
    myself: What must it be to be someone else?). Nothing else in nature comes near this
    unspeakable stress of pitch, distinctiveness, and selving, this selfbeing of my own. (282)

In this particular reflection, it is impossible to know anything or anyone as well as one knows
one’s own experiences. We can read some humility in this passage, the understanding that others
will always be to a certain degree unknowable, that no one can truly experience what someone
else experiences. The passage is also Whitmanesque, and Hopkins himself noted the similarities
between Whitman and himself, although Hopkins admitted that Whitman was a scoundrel¹

¹ “…I may as well say what I should not otherwise have said, that I always knew in my heart Walt Whitman’s mind
to be more like my own than any other man’s living. As he is a very great scoundrel this is not a pleasant
Hopkins even refrained from reading Whitman after the comparison was made between him and Whitman (Valley 97). Carla J. Valley in “‘Why Did You Not Say ‘Binsey Poplars’ Was Like Whiman:’ Whitman’s ‘Self’ and Hopkins ‘Selving’” argues that Whitman’s brand of individualism truly puts the individual at the center of experience, while Hopkins’ version is more about the individual’s relationship with the divine:

> For Whitman, God is diluted and dispensed willy-nilly; for Hopkins, God is duplicated. Selving involves letting one’s unique self be manifest in every thought and action. This is not a part of traditional humanism, however, or another way to phrase parts of the New Age philosophy: as Jesuit and practitioner of St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*, Hopkins viewed the self as the ‘human point of intimate contact with God,’ and by selving he meant letting that contact be seen through one’s essential nature. (100)

This argument is supported by Hopkins’ own prayer notes cited above. One encounters the divine by removing any worldly distractions and really paying attention to the purpose that one was created for.

Yet at the same time, this intense focus on the self, even for deeply theological reasons, could also be read as a barrier to connection with others. The curiosity for other’s experiences (what must it be to be someone else?) gives way to a deep sense of distinction to the point of separation. At the very least, this puts the most important relationship in Christianity between the individual and God, and Hopkins puts the world as the “word, expression, news of God…Therefore praise put before reference and service…the world, man, should after its own manner give God being in return for the being he has given it or should give him back that being he has given” (282). Again, this is unsurprising given his vocation, but it is worth noting that at least in this case being invested in community does not seem part of the glorification of God.

---

(254) Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works 254
Instead, this places concerns for fellow humanity below one’s relationship with God, not a manifestation of one’s love of God.

This does not mean that Hopkins did not value community. We do have records of Hopkins’ time in community with other Jesuits. Joseph Feeney, SJ has done extensive work on this. In “Hopkins in Community: How His Jesuit Contemporaries Saw Him,” Feeney compiles different accounts from Jesuits who lived or encountered Hopkins during his lifetime. Feeney points out that these accounts vary and even contradict each other, but several accounts state that Hopkins was well-liked by the Jesuits in the different houses he lived in during the different stages of his formation. Joseph Rickaby, SJ wrote that Hopkins was, “…highly original, even whimsical, and said and did odd things. But he was an excellent Religious and thorough Catholic. He was perhaps the most popular man in the house. Superiors and equals, everybody liked him” (qtd. in Feeney 255). Feeney includes stories of Hopkins trying to help his students, even rescuing a fellow Jesuit’s monkey after it escaped, and his brother Jesuits often called him a gentle man.

However, valuing community did not necessarily translate into conforming to community expectations. Words like “peculiar” and “eccentric” are often used to describe Hopkins. During his lifetime, Hopkins was aware of some of his inability to fit in at times. In a letter to Bridges, he writes, “Alas, I have heard so much about my alleged singularities that they are a sore subject” (qtd. in Feeney 266). Feeney discusses his superiors’ concerns when Hopkins’ mental health was in decline, although in varying degrees of kindness. In 1883, one of his superiors bluntly wrote in a letter to another Jesuit, “Father Gerard Hopkins may, at any time, go stark-staring mad…” (qtd. in Feeney 268).
After his death, an unnamed Jesuit praised his kindness towards the suffering, but also noted his eccentricities and his relationship with Catholic structures:

I have rarely known any one who sacrificed so much in undertaking the yoke of religion [religious life]. If I had known him outside [of the Jesuits], I should have said that his love of speculation and originality of thought would make it almost impossible for him to submit his intellect to authority, and I take it as a great mark of his personal holiness and of the love God had for him, that he willingly and joyfully carried the Cross (for in his case it was no light one) that every good religious has to carry after Jesus Christ. (qtd. in Feeney 277)

Again, I return to the question of what does it mean to be a religious artist working within a certain tradition but not adhering to the aesthetic expectations produced by that tradition. I share some of these anecdotes from Hopkins’ fellow Jesuits not to make a comment on Hopkins’ character per se but rather to note that whatever Hopkins’ personal commitments to his religious community (about which there was no question of his devotion by his fellow Jesuits), this deep commitment did not translate into conforming his aesthetic choices in his poetry. His obituary does not talk about his personal agreeableness or disagreeableness but rather his intellectual difficulties in submitting to authority. For example, he did not rewrite The Wreck of the Deutschland or his other poems to be more understandable to his Jesuit brothers, even as the Jesuits emphasized the importance of Catholic literature. In an 1874 issue of the Month, the Jesuit-run journal edited by Henry James Coleridge, SJ that Hopkins hoped to publish in, an anonymous author wrote about the desire to create Catholic literature that would help convert all of England:

The general revival and restoration of the ancient faith may or may not be in the counsels of Providence; if it is, it must be brought about by, or must bring with it, the development and organization in the Catholic body of all the forms of vigorous social life…Literature, in the sense in which we are speaking of it, is not merely an ornamental growth, but a necessity of life, if we are to hold our own in the battle raging around us…(4-5)
The “battle raging around us” was the presence of non-Catholic beliefs and practices. New Catholic literature was to support evangelization and “fill in the gaps” left by Protestant or secular English literature. The author goes so far as to say that every aspect of life and all subjects including the sciences needed to have Catholic control (6). With such a fervent desire to make Newman’s so-called “second spring” a reality, it would seem that as much Catholic literature as possible would be welcome. However, the author also sets high standards for this new Catholic literature:

Trash is trash, in whatever form it presents itself, and Catholic trash is worst of all...There is an evil in the air...that evil is frivolity – the childish indolence of uneducated shallowness, which shrinks from serious thoughts, and resents it as an intolerable hardship when minds created for the eternal contemplation of the Living Truth, are invited to turn away for a moment from the dolls and sugarplums of the nursery. (10)

The author does not name any specific titles of Catholic trash (although one wonders if poets like Procter who wrote with more sentimentality fit under this umbrella), but within these expectations and critiques seem to lie a declaration of class and gender expectations as well. Catholic literature was supposed to demonstrate education that would have been out of reach for poorer Catholics, women, and most of the laity, and hyper-masculine – a literature that was to do battle with the non-Catholic world and be devoid of anything that would be too feminine or childish.

We know that Hopkins’ poetry was said to be rejected because of its obscurity; both Jesuits and non-Jesuits alike had difficulty deciphering *The Wreck of the Deutschland*. But one wonders if part of the rejection of Hopkins’ poetry was its failure to live up to the expectations of the new Catholic literature that this *Tablet* article presents, a poetry that could be used in service of evangelization and elevating the kind of powerful, masculine Catholicism to the masses,
especially as anti-Catholic bias was associated with homophobia and xenophobia. We know that Hopkins shares some similarities with the all-or-nothing attitude towards conversion depicted in the essay. For example, by the end of the 1860s, in his letters to his friend Urquhart, he is adamant about the need to convert to Catholicism (Allsopp 184-185). In August 1877, he wrote to Bridges, “I do not write for the public. You are my public and I hope to convert you” (*The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges* 46). Of course, this wasn’t entirely true; Hopkins wrote to other people and had tried to get his poetry published in the past. He also failed to convert Bridges by either persuasion or poetry. In his letters to Urquhart, he also claims that “the whole Catholic world is agreed on the infallibility of the Pope in some form or other” (qtd. in Allsopp 182), although whether that was actually true in practice is debatable. However, Heimann characterizes the *Month* as a “strongly pro-infallibilist journal” (7), so it seems that Hopkins’ position on at least this issue was not at odds with the journal. Still, Hopkins’ experiments with language and form may have excluded him from the vision of Catholic literature outlined in “The Idea of Catholic Literature.”

Much of Hopkins’ theological emphasis on the individual has been attributed to his interest in the 13th century Franciscan philosopher Duns Scotus. As *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* states, “Scotus supplements the traditional Aristotelian kinds with a haecceitas or ‘thisness’: a uniquely individuating concept under which only one object falls. Scotus was a realist about universals and his emphasis on the unique individual and its importance in metaphysics and knowledge is reflected in ethics in the primacy he accords to individual freedom…” (Blackburn). Evidence of Hopkins’ enthusiasm for Scotus is found throughout his journals, letters, and poems. In 1872, Hopkins wrote, “At this time I had first begun to get hold of the copy of Scotus on the Sentences in the Baddely library and was flush with a new stroke of
enthusiasm. It may come to nothing or it may be a mercy from God. But just then when I took in any inscape of the sky or sea I thought of Scotus” (211). In 1879, he penned the sonnet “Duns Scotus’s Oxford,” which clearly indicates Hopkins’ reverence for Scotus. In the turn of the sonnet, the speaker moves from the scene of Oxford to the theologian: “Yet ah! This air I gather and I release/He lived on; these weeds and waters, these walls are what/He haunted who of all men most sways my spirits to peace” (8-11). Hopkins, or at least the speaker of the poem, clearly feels that he has found a kindred spirit.

Hopkins’ admiration for Scotus has been widely discussed in Hopkins scholarship. A common narrative is that Hopkins’ terms inscape and instress are related to Scotus’s *haecceitas*. Donal Walhout in “Scotism in the Poetry of Hopkins” defines *haecceitas* as “individual essence…In philosophy today ‘individual essence’ is sometimes taken to mean a property of a thing which is both essential to that thing and exclusive to it” (115). Another common narrative is that Hopkins did poorly on his theology exams at St. Beuno’s in Wales because he put too much emphasis on Scotus and not enough on Thomist theology, which went against the grain of his Jesuit training since Scotus had fallen out of favor in the 19th century. Feeney again has researched this moment in Hopkins’ life, pointing to another account by Fr. Rickaby: “In speculative theology he was a strong Scotist, and read Scotus assiduously. That led to his being plucked at the end of his third year: he was too Scotist for his examiners…” (qtd. in Feeney 101), and he also points to some unnamed notes that make a similar claim.

Recently, however, these narratives have been challenged. In his 2015 essay, “The Theology of Gerard Manley Hopkins: From John Duns Scotus to the Baroque,” Trent Pomplun argues that Scotus theology, at least a familiarity with Scotus, was far more common in Victorian Catholic circles than is recognized. Pomplun also argues that Hopkins had actually developed his
terms inscape and instress before he read Scotus. In particular, Pomplun argues that Scotus was important in the development of arguments in favor of the Immaculate Conception, which did not become dogma in the Catholic Church until 18542.

Pomplun argues that some of Hopkins’ friends mentioned in his letters were known to either be familiar with Scotus or be admirers of Scotus, which was also true of major figures in the Oxford Movement, including John Henry Newman, Newman’s Catholic bishop William Bernard Ullathorne, and Frederick Faber. In *The Great Dissent: John Henry Newman and the Liberal Heresy*, Robert Pattison claims that Scotus was vital to Newman: “From the first, he contended for the primacy of truth, the archetypal reality of ideas, and the scientific demonstration of doctrine. The philosopher closest to him was Duns Scotus, whose similar views, recondite terminology, and scholastic metaphysics were a constant inspiration in Newman’s later works” (149). Pomplun argues Ullathorne uses Scotus’s ideas to justify the Immaculate Conception, and eventually, Faber would make this connection even more explicit in *The Creator and the Creature*3. Pomplun also emphasizes the popularity of these ideas as well as the popularity of Faber, writing, “We do not know which … sources Hopkins may have known. We do know that selections from Faber’s *The Blessed Sacrament, The Creator and the Creature*,

---

2 Scotus argued that the Incarnation was predestined, that Christ would have come to earth whether Adam had fallen or not instead of Atonement theories that contended that Christ came only because of Adam’s Fall to redeem humanity. Later theologians then reasoned that if Christ’s Incarnation was predestined, then Mary’s sinlessness must have also been predestined, contributing to the increased emphasis on Mary in the 19th century and teachings on the Immaculate Conception.

3 Faber describes a God that is both passible (capable of being swayed by passion, temptation, or emotions) and impassible (incapable or separate from passion, temptation, and emotions):

The third view of the Incarnation, and the one assumed throughout this essay to be true, is the view taken by the Scotists, and by Suarez … It teaches, that our Lord came principally to save fallen man, that for this end he came in passible flesh; but that even if Adam had not fallen He would have come, and by Mary, in impassible flesh, that He was predestinated the firstborn of all creatures before the decree which permitted sin… (Faber qtd. in Pomplun 6)
& Bethlehem—each of which recommended the Scotus position on the motive of the Incarnation—were read in the refectory as Hopkins trained to be a Jesuit” (10), as well as noting their mutual friends. To sum up, Pomplun concludes that Hopkins’ interest in Scotus was “neither counter nor original” (11).

Yet while Hopkins may be tapping into theological conversations shared amongst members of the Oxford Movement and lifelong Catholics, Pomplun argues that his use of Scotus is not consistent with the ways that 19th century scholars were using Scotus: “[Scotus] was read principally for his teachings on the motive of the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Immaculate Conception. What we now think of as the Subtle Doctor’s distinctive metaphysical and epistemological doctrines—the univocity of the concept of being, the formal distinction, haecceity—were little studied and found few advocates” (11).

We do find evidence of Hopkins’ Scotistic justifications for the Immaculate Conception in his poetry. He ends “Duns Scotus’s Oxford” with a nod to the Immaculate Conception, claiming that Scotus “fired Fránce for Máry without spot” (14), likely alluding to Scotus’ time in Paris but also the implications of a predestined Christ and therefore a predestined, sinless Mary. In “The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe”, the speaker states that Mary’s “power is/Great as no goddess’s/ Was deemèd, dreamed; who/This one work has to do—” (27-29), implying that Mary’s role was planned ahead of time for her one great task. However, it is worth asking whether Hopkins was drawn to Scotus and then turned towards more individualistic ways of thinking or whether Hopkins already privileged individuality and autonomy, and was therefore drawn to Scotus. Pomplun asserts that it was latter, leaning on evidence from Todd Bender’s work: “As all responsible critics admit, the ideas of Hopkins are fortuitously congruent to those of Scotus rather than derived from him” (Bender qtd. in Pomplun 1). We also know that
Hopkins used the word “inscaped” in a journal entry from 1868⁴, after he had converted but before he had joined the Jesuits. It is also clear from his journals and letters from the 1860s that he had already developed his keen eye as well as his lush descriptions of the natural world that he would maintain throughout his poetry and prose.

Although we do not know with certainty whether Hopkins read Faber, the parallels and Faber’s strong presence in Hopkins’ milieu point to Faber as an influence. Faber was far better known for his poetry during his lifetime. After graduation, from 1837 to 1842, Faber lived in Ambleside in the Lake District, where he met Thomas Whytehead, Lord John Manners, and George Smythe, which precipitated what Blair dubbed a personal crisis with the acknowledgement of his attraction to these men, Smythe in particular (Hopkins’ own crisis of sexuality has been well-documented⁵, and his celebration of male beauty arises often in his poems and sermons). In the Lake District, Faber also befriended Wordsworth and “has been credited with influencing Wordsworth’s much debated move toward a more High Church position in his later poems” (Blair 26), while Wordsworth’s impact on Faber’s earlier poetry is apparent, as I shall discuss below. Faber published a handful of volumes of poetry during his lifetime, but Blair notes how his style changed with his conversion: “Roman Catholicism appeared to provide Faber with an outlet for his intensely emotional poetics, a license to express passionate love for Christ and Mary” (25). Other significant changes in his poetry include

---

⁴ “Rushing streams may be described as inscaped ordinarily in pillows—and upturned troughs” (194).

⁵ “Hopkins was aware of how easily sexual drive could be aroused…and no doubt disquiet at this unruly side of himself played a part in channelling his feelings into religious fervour. It is clear, however, that despite a certain suppressed sexuality and frustration of ambition, evident in the mature poems, he was able to develop great warmheartedness, wit, and exceptional honesty” (Phillips xix). See also Saville, Julia F. *A Queer Chivalry: The Homoerotic Asceticism of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Charlottesville and London: The University Press of Virginia, 2000.
exchanging figurative language for more literal language, descriptive language for straightforward praise, and eventually dropping some of his use of nature scenes. “Much of Faber's early poetry consists of fairly standard Wordsworthian hymns to the beauty of Nature and sentimental memories of his time spent in Oxford, Europe, and the Lakes” (Blair 25), including the volume *The Cherwell Water-Lily*, published before his conversion. Interestingly enough, Faber also includes a kingfisher sonnet in this collection, called “The Brathay Kingfisher” published a generation before “As Kingfishers Catch Fire.” While Hopkins’ kingfisher poem emphasizes individuality, “The Brathay Kingfisher” emphasizes royalty and dominion:

Thou hast a fair dominion here, Sir King!  
And yon tall stone beneath the alder stem  
Seems a meet throne for a gay crowned thing  
That wears so well its tawny diadem.  
Thou hast a fair dominion—pools and bays  
With heath and copse and nooks of plummy fern;  
And tributes of sweet sound the river pays,  
Changing to blithe or sad at every turn.  
The gilded flies, when noon’s faint zephyr stirs,  
Upon the sunny shallows walk or swim;  
And swallows too, those welcome foreigners,  
Under thy bridges, summer tourists, skim,  
Like the light crowd of English yearly thrown  
On river-banks less lovely than their own. (1-14)

Brathay Bridge is located in the Lake District, and there are certainly elements of Lake School Romanticism here, most notably the natural setting and the use of the natural scene to meditate on the condition of England. Hopkins himself later grouped Faber as a Lake poet, claiming that “the Lake School expires in Keble and Faber and Cardinal Newman” (253). (Note that Hopkins groups these men together because of poetry and not by their ultimate religious affiliation).

There are also some formal similarities between this poem and Hopkins’ “As Kingfishers Catch
Fire,” written decades later in Wales. Besides beginning the poems with the image of a
ing kingfisher, Faber employs the sonnet form and even builds lines using alliteration around the
word lovely. The last two lines of Faber’s poem recall the second to last line in Hopkins’ sonnet:
“Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his” (13).

Faber’s sonnet, however, is a celebration of English nationalism. Faber presents a natural
order ruled by the King/kingfisher, complete with diadem and dominion. The kingfisher’s
authority is not challenged by visitors; everything is in its place. The traveling swallows are
welcome to this beautiful tourist destination while compared to English travelers who go to less
favorable places than England. Strangely enough, the use of the word lovely is used to create a
hierarchy, with England at the top. Faber even uses the English/Shakespearean sonnet form, with
its ababcdcdefgg rhyme scheme and the thematic turn coming during the last two lines, moving
from the particular nature scene to comment on England as a whole. Hopkins instead uses the
Italian/Petrachan sonnet form in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” with its abbaabbaacbdee rhyme
scheme and its turn after the octet from the nature scene to God’s work in humanity. While
Hopkins’ poem is obviously indebted to the beauty of Wales and is akin to earlier Romantic
nature poems, his sonnet is less a celebration of nationalism (and perhaps because this beauty
comes from Wales and not England) and more of a theological treatise emphasizing the
individual. It is not that Hopkins doesn’t have nationalist tendencies (more on that later), but in
this comparison, Faber imagines creatures of the natural world in relation to each other (albeit in
top-down relations) while Hopkins’ creatures act independently from each other. They are
interested in what they set out to do, no more nor less.

Yet after Faber’s conversion, his poetry leaves behind several elements of Lake School
Romanticism in favor of more fervent forms of worship in his poetry. His Hymns, published in
1848, contained almost entirely explicitly Christian poems, filled with lots of exclamation points, repeating words and phrases, refrains, and simple rhymes. If Faber failed to be reserved in *The Cherwell Water-Lily*, Blair notes that his conversion to Catholicism allowed him to be exuberant in his passion for God. The opening poem, “The Unity of God”, begins as thus:

One God! One Majesty!
There is no God but Thee!
Unbounded, unextended Unity!

Awful in unity
O God! We worship Thee,
More simply one, because supremely Three! (1-6)

The impact of the short lines, abundance of exclamation marks, and simple rhyme scheme give the poem a hymn feel. To be fair, not all of the poems in this volume have lines that are so clipped, and the impact of shorter lines is very different when say put to music or read out loud than read silently on the page. The speaker’s exuberance for God is apparent (again, Blair has well-documented Faber’s struggles with reserve), but it is repetitive and simple. The emphasis is not on the beauty of individual words or figurative language or a Romantic scene anymore but a much more literal praising of God.

One of the few nature poems in this volume is called “The Starry Skies,” part of a “Miscellaneous” section much shorter than the other sections in the volume. Some of the nature imagery and figurative language has come back; the speaker compares himself to a bird, safely nested and looking up at the heavens. The poem eventually turns to contemplating God as true home, not far away in the heavens but all around us:

How have I erred! God is my home,
And God Himself is here
Why have I looked so for Him
Who is nowhere but near?
Oh not in distant starry skies,
In vastness not abroad,
But everywhere in His whole Self
Abides the whole of God. (37-44)

The speaker ultimately concludes that God is seeking a place in the speaker’s heart, and so that
God is not in the distant universe but always present if one turns inward to look for God. Again,
the subject matter echoes one by Hopkins, this time “The Starlight Night.” Hopkins’ poem also
imagines God’s home as the speaker looks up at the stars (and also contains an abundance of
exclamation marks). But here the similarities end. Hopkins choses the sonnet form again, but
relies on a feast of descriptive words, sprung rhythm, and careful alliteration, pushing the
subjects of the lines towards the end and therefore forcing the reader to pay attention to every
word, as well as employing hyphens and other punctuation marks to indicate not just exuberance
but pauses and beats. The speaker of Hopkins’ poem also comes to a very different conclusion
about the relationship between the stars, God, and home. God is not personal but vast:

Buy then! Bid then! —What?—Prayer, patience, alms, vows.
Look, look: a May—mess, like on orchard boughs!
Look! March—bloom, like on mealed—with—yellow sallows!
These are indeed the bar; withindoors house
The shocks. This piece—bright paling shuts the spouse
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hallows. (9-14)

Hopkins’ speaker has come to a much different conclusion than Faber’s speaker. God is not a
wanderer, seeking the believer’s heart to find a home and a personal relationship with the
believer like in Faber’s poem, which in turn creates a home for Faber’s speaker wherever the
believer goes. Instead, for Hopkins, home with God must be bought and won through hard work,
prayer, and sacrifice. While Hopkins suggests in other poems that “The world is charged with the
grandeur of God,” he does not suggest that heaven and home with “Christ and his mother and all
his hallows” are accessible just by inwardly letting them into one’s heart, and instead God
demands action. As Faber depicts a more human, soothing and more parental God (in some ways, still more akin to the kind of God that Keble describes even after Faber’s conversion), Hopkins depicts a more supernatural omnipotent God. The heavens are more sublime—awe-inspiring but shocking.

In other words, Hopkins retains more vestiges of Lake School Romanticism after his conversion than Faber, despite Faber’s connection to Wordsworth. Faber and Hopkins both attended Oxford, both were influenced by Newman’s conversion (albeit a generation apart), both converted to Roman Catholicism, both became priests, both read Scotus and indeed it is possible that Hopkins read Faber’s thoughts on Scotus, yet these figures come to very different theological and aesthetic conclusions. With his conversion, Faber’s poetry loses some of the poetic choices—nature scenery, descriptive language, alliteration, employment of the sonnet form—that Hopkins so famously uses in abundance after his conversion. Faber turns to repetitive lines and less figurative language the deeper into Catholicism he goes; Hopkins does the opposite. If Faber experiments at all after his conversion, it is to experiment with expressing emotion, not with form or theology.

I put these two authors in comparison to illustrate some of the pitfalls in the narratives that scholars have told about Hopkins. One is that Hopkins should be considered a staunchly Victorian Catholic writer because he is deeply ingrained in Victorian Catholicism. Another narrative is that Hopkins should be considered a modernist because he was too ahead of his times, rejected by his contemporaries, and only loved once aesthetic taste caught up with Hopkins’ project. I have demonstrated that Hopkins is indeed engaging with Victorian Catholic ideas, theological debates, and art, but that doesn’t mean he came to the same conclusions as his contemporaries on art or theology. This may appear obvious to anyone who has compared
Hopkins to his contemporaries but this begs the question: is an artist a religious artist if she or he produces art that supports its teachings and practice? Or can artists be considered religious artists because of the source material that they begin with, even if they come to different conclusions than the norms set by that religion? How much do the personal beliefs of the artist matter in the creation of religious art? These are perennial questions, of course, but a central assumption of my whole dissertation is that scholars can make explicit connections between religious practice and art. Keble preached that there is an intimate connection between religion and art, poetry in particular. However, in this case, Hopkins’ conversion does not seem to have changed some of the particular aesthetic choices in his poetry as drastically as it did for Faber. Hopkins wrote in a letter to R. W. Dixon that “The Lake School expires in Keble and Faber and Cardinal Newman” (Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works 253). Newman came to rely on Roman Catholic liturgical forms in his poetry post-conversion, The Dream of Gerontius being the most famous example, in a move that on one hand seems to support Keble’s thesis but on the other hand firmly declares his commitment to Roman Catholicism. Hopkins’ use of Catholic forms is more complicated.

IV. Hopkins, Adelaide Procter, and Lay Communities

In this section, I compare Hopkins’ poetry with the poetry of Adelaide Anne Procter. I illustrate how Hopkins and Procter – both converts from the Church of England, both familiar with Faber, both familiar with London’s literary scene – could produce such different poetry. Procter is lay woman and activist and while she was well-educated as shown in my last chapter, she did not have the same years of theological training at Oxford and with the Jesuits that Hopkins did. Yet she did receive some of the theology I described above through Faber’s sermons and writings.
One important distinction is that Hopkins’ poetry often focuses on the sacredness of the individual while Procter often looked at the individual’s relationship with the community, in particular at lay interactions with social and political structures. Again, I do not want to argue that Hopkins does not value community, but that community relationships are not as central to his work as they are for Procter, nor does Hopkins so often call his readers to direct action the way that Procter does. There were significant differences between the kinds of Catholic communities in which these poets found themselves—the most obvious being that Hopkins joined a celibate religious order while Procter worked as a lay person in both Catholic and non-Catholic circles. Arguably few of Hopkins’ poems engage with what it was like to live in Jesuit communities. Hopkins does write a poem dedicated to the Jesuit saint St. Alphonsus Rodriguez, translated a hymn to Saint Francis Xavier into Welsh, and wrote other poems dedicated to other saints and members of religious orders (most notably in *The Wreck of the Deutschland*), and we get a sense of living with the other Jesuits in Hopkins’ journals and letters, and it is perhaps obvious that some of his poems grounded in particular places were possible because the Jesuits sent him to specific places. On the other hand, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Procter doesn’t have many poems that focus on religious orders, although *A Legend of Provence* is arguably one of her most important poems that centers around a convent.

When Hopkins does introduce members of the laity, the speaker of the poem often takes a priestly or instructional role. In “Spring and Fall,” the adult speaker addresses a young child who is upset that the leaves are falling off the trees in the fall. After the speaker instructs the child in the difficulties of life, the speaker concludes that Margaret is actually upset about her own mortality. The speaker’s meditations on the passing of time and mortality are moving. However, we don’t get the point of view from Margaret. The speaker is narrating her experience to her
instead of Margaret conveying her own experience. Since Margaret is a child, this is perhaps unsurprising, but in the end, the speaker seems to be using this interaction with an upset child to talk about his own observations about grief, time, and death. Margaret may be grieving that things end, but maybe not—the reader will never know. She is not allowed to “selve” herself or proclaim, “What I do is me, for that I came” like Hopkins’ kingfishers. Instead, her voice is mediated through a priestly voice, a figure with more power and agency than she has. We don’t know her words, the cadence of her speech, or what she cares about.

Other poems celebrate the laity while maintaining a priestly/observational distance.

“Harry Ploughman” celebrates a workman, although it is much more an ode to male beauty than a consideration of working-class life or a call to social justice. In an 1887 letter to Bridges, Hopkins claims that the visual image of the ploughman is the most important aspect of the poem: “I want Harry Ploughman to be a vivid figure before the mind’s eye; if he is not that the sonnet fails” (Letters 265). The physicality of Harry Ploughman is striking in the poem, even as Bridges failed to totally understand it (Letters 265).

Hard as hurdle arms, with a broth of goldish flue
Breathed round; the rack of ribs; the scooped flank; lank
Rope-over thigh; knee-nave; and barreled shank—
Head and foot, shouldér and shank….
And features, in flesh, what deed he each must do—
His sinew-service where do.
He leans to it, Harry bends, look. Back, elbow, and liquid waist
In him, all quail to the wallowing o’ the plough. ‘S cheek crimpson; curls… (1-3; 8-10)

The workman’s body is central to the entire sonnet. Hopkins seems aware of this deep sensuality; before Bridges read the poem, Hopkins asked him, “..when you read it let me know if there is anything like it in Walt Whitman, as perhaps there may be, and I should be sorry for that” (Letters 262).
Yet Hopkins could also be tough on the lay people that he served. Feeney recounts a story where one of the women in a Jesuit parish found Hopkins somewhat difficult, stating that Hopkins “was a fine priest, but, my, he had a *bit of a temper*” (qtd. in Feeney 264). Hopkins’ complicated relationship with his Irish community has also been well-documented. Muller notes that Hopkins was often at odds with the Irish Jesuit community in Dublin. The University College (the same college that James Joyce attended nine years after Hopkins died) was struggling financially after Newman abandoned it, and the Irish Jesuits were not in agreement about Hopkins’ appointment (Muller 73-74). Home rule was gaining traction, and some wanted to stick with an Irish Jesuit, while others wanted an Englishman with English training in the classics (and the funds for the school that would come from an English appointment) (Muller 74). According to Muller, Hopkins did not help his case: “Among the prejudices that Hopkins would encounter was an Irish view of Oxford converts as aloof, aesthetic, and effeminate. It was an opinion he would do nothing to dispel” (74). She goes on to describe the ways in which Hopkins would at times flaunt his loyalty to England, including wearing a red flower in his lapel on St. George’s Day (75). While Hopkins eventually writes to Bridges that he supports Home Rule, it is a begrudging support that comes less from a sense of justice or remorse for the role that British empire has played in Ireland’s sufferings but from a fear of violence and a sense of the inevitable: “I shd. be glad to see Ireland happy, even though it involved the fall of England, if that could come about without shame or guilt. But Ireland will not be happy: a people without a principle of allegiance cannot be; moreover this movement has throughout been promoted by crime” (Hopkins, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works* 267). While Hopkins wrote poetry in Latin and Greek and showed great interest in the Welsh language, we don’t see as much enthusiasm for the Irish language.
“Tom’s Garland: upon the Unemployed” was written at the same time as “Harry Ploughman.” Hopkins tells Bridges that both poems “were conceived at the same time” and therefore had “many resemblances” but besides their working-class subjects, the poems have little in common (Letters 271). “Harry Ploughman” focuses on the beauty of one figure, while “Tom’s Garland” focuses on the social and environmental failings of a group of working-class men. Both Canon Dixon and Bridges had a difficult time discerning “Tom’s Garland,” but in a letter written in 1888, Hopkins chides Bridges for not understanding it. “I laughed outright and often, but very sardonically, to think you and the Canon could not construe my last sonnet…Must I interpret it? It means then that, as St. Paul and Plato and Hobbies and everybody says, the commonwealth or well-ordered human society is like one man…(O, once explained, how clear it all is!)” (270-271). The condescension gets darker when Hopkins turns towards the laborers at the heart of the poem. In the letter, after explaining the metaphor of society as a human body, with the king as the glorified head under the heavens and the laborers as the feet, he claims that the garland in the title of the poem pertains to the nails of the laborers. He also blames the workmen for ecological destruction:

for it is navies or daylabourers who, on the great scale or in gangs and millions, mainly trench, tunnel, blast, and in other ways disfigure, ‘mammock’ the earth and, on a small scale, singly, and superficially stamp it with their footprints…the scene of the poem is laid…when they are giving over work and one after another pile their picks, with which they earn their living, and swing off home, knocking sparks out of mother earth not now by labour and of choice but by the mere footing…taking all easy. (Letters 273)

Hopkins seems to imply the working classes enjoy ecological destruction without questioning the ways that the upper classes are implicated in industrialization as well. Hopkins writes in same letter that the lower classes get to enjoy an “ease of mind, absence of care,” (Letters 273) which seems to contradict his own experiences of the suffering of the poor in Liverpool and Ireland. It
is also clear from his letters that he is acutely aware of how pollution and industrialization hurt the working classes, yet here he is harsh on the navies and daylabourers for their own suffering (as opposed to Procter, who is well aware of how upper and middle class indifference plays a direct role in the suffering of the lower classes). Then, the letter turns, and he seems to remember that he is writing from Ireland:

…I remember that this is all very well for those who are in, however low in, the Commonwealth and share in any way the Common weal; but that the curse of our times is that many do not share it, that they are outcasts from it and have neither security nor splendor; that they share care with the high and obscurity with the low, but wealth or comfort with neither. And this state of things, I say, is the origin of Loafers, Tramps, Cornerboys, Roughs, Socialists and other pests of society. (271)

Hopkins admits that the Irish are kept out of the protections and wealth of the British empire. To Hopkins, political enfranchisement is important in solving social problems. However, in “Tom’s Garland,” he doesn’t present day laborers as merely “pests of society” but as unfeeling, unsophisticated men who turn into sinister beasts when unchecked:

Undenizened, beyond bound
Of earth’s glory, earth’s ease, all; no-one, nowhere,
In wide the world’s weal; rare gold, bold steel, bare
In both; care, but share care—
This, by Despair, bred Hangdog dull; by Rage
Manwolf, worse; and their packs infest the age. (15-20)

There is once again the acknowledgement of the suffering caused by the British empire; the “undenizened” are kept out of earth’s glory and ease. Yet at the same time, a dark condemnation and fear of unchecked “pests of society.” The laborers are described in less than human language, while state oppression by the empire is not described in nearly so sinister terms.

Richard Isomaki notes that Hopkins’ description of the working classes is even more deliberate than might be gleaned from his letters. In “Hopkins, Community, Functions: ‘Tom’s Garland,’” Isomaki writes that his use of the word “‘unemployed’ came into common usage in
the 1880s, when unemployment was first seen not as some moral failing of individuals alone but as an economic condition” (475). He described the cyclical labor protests in London in the 1880s, including the Bloody Sunday protest in 1887 that killed and injured several people (473). He also argues that Hopkins’ use of the words “Loafers, Tramps, Cornerboys, Roughs, Socialists” is also deliberate: “In assembling a list of words that implies the mob was willing to be violent but unwilling to work, Hopkins…aligns himself with the London press and with organizations designed to relieve or control the poor…which generally assumed that the demonstrators were not reliably employable workers but shiftless thugs” (476). Yet Isomaki also points out that Hopkins “…in the course of his Jesuit experience had known firsthand the wretchedness of much contemporary urban life, and he has expressly pitied it” (476). Isomaki argues that Hopkins cared very much for people who were disenfranchised but “Tom’s Garland” “distinguishes willing workers from the shiftless and the violent” (479). Workers who were unemployed too long risked falling into violence. In his reading of the poem, Despair is actually what begets the “Hangdog dull” and Rage is what creates the packs of violent men. Yet it is worth asking whether that message actually gets across to the reader; again, both Bridges and Dixon struggled with the poem’s syntax and meaning. The poems also ends with the “packs infest[ing] the age,” not the forces that led to the despair in the first place, nor does the poem indicate that it is a fair representation of the laborers protests in London.

The depiction of class relationships in “Tom’s Garland” contrasts with Procter’s scathing critique of the uncaring wealthy in “Homeless,” who care more for their dogs than the homeless women stuck between a life of shame and poverty or death by suicide. In “Homeless,” poverty is not a result of someone who is unwilling to work, and the violent deaths of poor women are
because of the uncaring upper and middle classes. “Homeless” starts with an individual woman
but then concludes with a call for all of England to change its ways:

Nay; —goods in our thrifty England
Are not left to lie and grow rotten,
For each man knows the market value
Of silk or woollen or cotton…
But in counting the riches of England
I think our Poor are forgotten. (31-36)

Procter clearly makes a connection between national apathy and materialism and the suffering of
the poor and focuses less on who is deserving of aid and who is not. Procter is clearly writing
with her readership, especially her middle-class female readership, in mind and spurring them to
action. The language of the poem itself may or may not please the reader, but in a poem
advocating for social change, using straightforward language is important in crafting a call to
action. Evangelization – whether for a religious or social cause – needs to be clear enough for the
evangelized to understand. There’s little doubt in “Homeless” about what Procter wants you to
pay attention to.

V. Hopkins, Procter, and Aesthetic Choices

In my previous section, I focused on the different representations of community between
these two poets, especially in lay communities. In this section, I want to call attention to the
differences in how these poets use language and previous Catholic forms. Hopkins’ unusual
syntax, his use of accent marks, his playfulness with multiple languages, his experiments with
form have all been widely discussed in scholarship. However, these choices made him unpopular
with Victorian Catholic editors and made him more popular with secular 20th century audiences.
As I demonstrated in my previous section, the language of Hopkins’ poetry did not lend itself
easily to evangelization; his embrace of ambiguity and obscurity despite his theological
convictions may have put his poetry at odds with the ideals of churchmen who sought unambiguous truth like Newman, or leaders who did not easily tolerate ambiguity like Pope Pius IX and his *Syllabus of Errors*. Letting the beauty of language or image or music lead to slow contemplation within the viewer differs from declarative transactional language, nor does it easily lend itself to build particular habits by repeating oft-used words, chants, prayers.

For example, there are some remarkable similarities between Procter’s poem “Two Worlds” and Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur.” Procter’s poem begins with marveling at God’s creation:

```
God’s world is bathed in beauty,
God’s world is steeped in light;
It is the self-same glory
That makes the day so bright,
Which thrills the earth with music,
Or hangs the stars in night.
```

```
Hid in earth’s mines of silver,
Floating on clouds above, -
Ringing in Autumn’s tempest,
Murmured by every dove, -
One thought fills God’s creation
His own great name of Love! (1-12)
```

The poem begins with confident statements that state that the world belongs to God, that the world is good, and that the natural world from the stars to storms to birds is driven by divine love. The meter is consistent – alternating lines of iambic tetrameter with an additional falling foot with lines of iambic trimeter. The rhyme scheme is also consistent, with every other line in a stanza rhyming. The imagery of nature, precious metals, and mining, the call to glorify the divine, and even the bird imagery echo in Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur”:

```
The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
```
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings. (1-14)

Again, there are striking similarities between this poem and Procter’s, but the reader must work a little harder with each line than in “Two Worlds.” For example, the opening line of “Two Worlds” begins with a possessive – the world is God’s world. Hopkins’ poem on the other hand, begins with the world and then works its way through the line to God. The “It” of the second line of “God’s Grandeur” is also somewhat ambiguous—is “it” the world or the grandeur of God? The second line of Procter’s poem also offers some ambiguity, but since the following lines refer to the brightness of the day and the stars, this “it” seems to refer to the light that is inseparable from God’s glory. Procter also writes about a dove, a common symbol of the Holy Spirit. Hopkins remarks on the Holy Spirit directly, but instead of using the typical image of the dove, mentions attributes of a dove or bird – the brooding and nesting and wings of a bird taking care of the world like an egg. Unlike some of Hopkins’ other poems, he sticks close to the traditional Petrarchan sonnet form here, but in some of the lines, Hopkins makes his reader work harder to discover the subject or referent.

“Two Worlds” even shares some of the same words when describing the more painful parts of existence:
Man’s world is black and blighted,
Steeped through with self and sin;
And should his feeble purpose
Some feeble good begin,
The work is marred and tainted
By Leprosy within.

Man’s world is bleak and bitter;
Wherever he has trod
He spoils the tender beauty
That blossoms on the sod,
And blasts the loving Heaven
Of the great, good world of God. (36-42)

Both poets create a similar picture of human suffering, even using the same words like “trod” or similar words like “sod” and “soil,” or synonyms like “smeared” and “spoils”. Again though, Procter begins the line with a clear possessive, this time of “Man’s world” which is clearly at odds with God’s world. Procter employs the language of disease to talk about inner personal depravity that results in the destruction of the world, while Hopkins’ poem locates that depravity on trade and industry. In this case, Hopkins is less harsh on the individual than Procter is.

Both poems contain a turn. Procter’s turn states, “And yet God’s world is speaking:” while Hopkins’ turn in the final sestet states “And for all this, nature is never spent;” (9). Again, Procter continues to begin with God and repetitively reminding the reader of God’s authority. Hopkins, however, does not begin with God, but with nature again. The sestet ends with the Holy Spirit, but the reader must work through the sestet to get there. In this comparison, Procter always begins with God, Hopkins ends with God, either at the end of the line or the end of the sestet. Procter clearly makes a distinction between what is good (God, Nature, light, love) and what is bad (Man, selfishness, sin, disease, destruction). Hopkins makes similar distinctions, but he does not easily give this point. He does not begin with God but instead with nature and builds to the conclusion of God’s goodness. Procter once wrote, “I do not think there is any neutral
ground in belief” and “Two Worlds” does not leave much neutral ground in diagnosing the source of goodness. Hopkins’ personal beliefs also did not allow neutral ground in belief, but his poetic language, in its difficulty and unusual syntax, lets ambiguity slip through and put this poetry at odds when devotional texts like The Garden of the Soul that employ direct instructional language, and with a Church that wanted to make the “second spring” in England a reality through conversion and evangelization. Ambiguity, while not a bad thing and often fruitful for creativity and contemplation, may not be an obvious tool for evangelization; it may be difficult to convert a reader if they do not understand what ideas or beliefs are being conveyed in a work of literature.

Besides their use of language itself, these poets have different relationships with the received traditions of their new faith. Procter embraces the pre-existing stories, prayers, and devotions that already existed in the Catholic church; Hopkins embraces them but wants to insert his own language within the tradition. This includes the Marian traditions. The deeper into Catholicism Procter goes, the more she leans on pre-existing Catholic traditions of Mary in her work, as well as the new enthusiasm for Mary beginning in the 1850s. In “The Names of Our Lady,” Procter does not try to be original, nor does she stray from her subject matter. She uses titles already ascribed to Mary—Star of the Sea, Bright Queen of Heaven, Our Lady dear of Victories, Queen of all Saints, Fair Queen of Virgins, True Queen of Martyrs, to name a few—to organize her stanzas. She never strays from the focus of the poem. As previously discussed in my third chapter, Procter’s treatment of Mary is intensely reverent. Blair and Karen Dielman have drawn the connection between Procter’s treatment of Mary and different forms of Catholic worship. Drawing on the work of E.C. Stedman, Blair connects the recitation of the rosary with
the repetitive nature of “The Names of Our Lady,” although Dielman notes that the use of the 
rosary in lay practice was a newer practice and lay people commonly said chaplets instead (235).

On the other hand, Hopkins does not depend so heavily on previous titles for Mary in his 
Marian poetry. He certainly pulls from the Mary traditions (again, gaining more popularity after
the Immaculate Conception is made doctrine), referring to May and springtime as Mary’s month
(“The May Magnificat”), Mary’s predestined sinlessness (“Duns Scotus’s Oxford”), and
obviously her role as Christ’s mother occurs throughout the Marian poems. However, Hopkins
does not praise Mary the same way as Procter does. In “The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air
we Breathe,” he begins with a close contemplation of air and moving to the comparison with
Mary. There are moments when the poem seems to meander away from the metaphor (Mary is
like the air in that she is everywhere and as necessary as breathing) and the poem moves to
contemplate the beauty and marvel of the atmosphere instead of focusing on his religious
subject. The poem uses riveting language, bizarre similes and metaphors that ask the reader to
consider the sky with fresh perspective, and Hopkins’ emphasis on inscape. At times, the
emphasis on Mary is somewhat lost to the beauty of the atmosphere itself. Starting on line 73,
Hopkins does not explicitly mention Mary until 104, and even then he does not call her by name
but by her motherhood. Hopkins also at times struggles to reconcile Mary’s womanhood with her
divine purpose:

    Mary Immaculate,
    Merely a woman, yet
    Whose presence, power is
    Great as no goddess’s
    Was deemèd, dreamèd; who
    This one work has to do—
    Let all God’s glory through (24-30)
Johnson also notices the backhanded compliment given to Mary in the poem, stating that Hopkins “sees Mary as ‘merely a woman,’ …Her presence, however beneficial, is ultimately dependent upon her subordinate status as it relates to the divinity of son…she parallels Hopkins’ conception of Eve, who is subordinate to Adam and has no independent authority to sin or not sin” (129-130). This is a far cry from the depiction of Mary in Procter’s “A Legend of Provence,” where Mary was granted the power to forgive sins, perform miracles, and restore dignity to women who have been exploited. It is worth noting how common Marian poems are in Procter’s last and most Catholic volume of poetry.

This is not to argue that Hopkins had no place for depictions of Mary or female saints. However, at a time when Marian devotion was great, Hopkins’ poetry seeks to adapt and repurpose these devotions rather than use them verbatim in his poetry, whereas Procter embraces these devotions with little change. The fact that her last volume of poetry was called *A Chaplet of Verses* attests to this, and the fact that the volume was able to sell to fundraise for Catholic causes attests to the taste of her readers.

**V. Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to illustrate the complications of dubbing Hopkins a Catholic poet, not to call the sincerity of his conversion into doubt, but to ask what exactly we mean when we say Catholic –what we privilege and what we leave out. Do we define religious art by the particular texts or famous religious leaders informing it, or rather by its relationship with popular devotion, worship practices, and religious texts, especially those used by the laity? I am indebted to scholars such as Jasper Cragwall, Colin Jager, Mary Heimann, and Karen Dieleman for bringing up these questions in their own research, and I find this approach to be a valuable tool in Hopkins studies. By focusing on Hopkins as poet and priest, we risk
decontextualizing his work away from other Catholic artists working at the same time, including
downplaying the role of the laity in Victorian Catholic culture and overemphasizing famous
figures like Newman. While the Catholic Revival ushered in some important cultural shifts, the
hope of the wholesale re-conversion of England never came to pass. Hopkins’ own efforts to
supply poetry for that project were thwarted because his poetry did not conform to almost
anyone’s expectations of what poetry was supposed to be, let alone the Idea of Catholic
Literature proposed by the *Month*. While Hopkins wanted to be part of the evangelization of
England, his poetry failed as a tool to achieve that goal, at least during his lifetime. His poetry
fails at being a tool for conversion, framed as battle against the forces of evil, or to propagate the
newer Marian devotions (even as he writes Marian poetry himself). His poetry does not always
represent the political or social desires of the lay people he serves, nor does it neatly conform to
either Tractarian or Catholic aesthetic trends even as he clearly engages those ideas. If anything,
his poetry clings to elements of Romanticism that are at odds with the Catholic Revival project,
although scholars such as Pattison have argued that neither Romanticism nor Catholicism could
have existed without enough secular freedom to co-exist. Yet his contributions to religious art,
Catholic art in particular, are immense. This is yet again one of the consequences of secularism –
a faith tradition that is forced to coincide with other faith traditions or accept converts from other
faith traditions may in fact be changed by these outside groups. In a secular world, decisions
about belief and conversion are placed on the individual, and Hopkins’ aesthetics creates, for
better or worse, an individualist religious aesthetic. In many ways, Hopkins’ poetry presents the
loneliness of religious experience in a secular world, not because there are not other co-
religionists (far from it) but because the fervor and responsibility to choose right beliefs are so
great. The stakes of Hopkins’ conversion and vocation were high, and Victorian Catholicism’s
emphasis on individual culpability and the movement to re-convert the country made any failures or feelings of ambiguity particularly difficult. Art for art’s sake, whether that is by employing language that cares more about beauty and cadence than conveying meaning, can be a salve for this holy loneliness, perhaps unwittingly paving the way not for evangelization, but an even more secular, less religious poetics. Hopkins’ life and poetry expose the contradictions of secularism, how even the most ancient religious traditions can be changed, and the complicated relationships between believers and art.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


—. "Christina Rossetti's Christian Year: Comfort for the 'weary heart'." *The Victorian Newsletter* 72 (Fall 1987): 36-42.


King, Joshua. *Imagined Spiritual Communities in Britain's Age of Print*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015.


VITA

Dr. Mary Harmon graduated from St. Ambrose University in 2012 with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Bachelor of Science in biology. She received a M.A. in English from Loyola University Chicago in 2013, where she continued her Ph.D. studies. She successfully defended her dissertation *Secularism, the Oxford Movement, and Religious Aesthetics in John Keble, Christina Rossetti, Adelaide Anne Procter, and Gerard Manley Hopkins* on September 1, 2021. She has a passion for teaching and for her work as the former manager of the Loyola Community Literacy Center. Dr. Harmon was drawn to 19th century poetry because of the ache that these poets expressed to reconcile faith, the natural world, and their own human desires.