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THE PURSUIT OF DIVINITY:
RELIGIOUS FAITH AND FEAR IN LATE VICTORIAN WOMEN'S POETRY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

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

By

Sharon L. George

May 2011

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Sharon L. George

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RELIGIOUS FAITH AND FEAR IN LATE VICTORIAN WOMEN'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT

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By

Sharon L. George

May 2011

Dissertation supervised by Daniel P. Watkins, Ph.D.

The relationship that the Victorians had with their God(s) was not an easy one. Despite the age's oft mocked attachment to religiosity, many individuals underwent profound re-evaluations of their faith, spurred by the combined forces of legislation that challenged the monolithic Anglican Church and the burgeoning fields of High Criticism, scientific inquiry, and technology. For some, religious introspection led to profound spirituality and a deeper understanding of their Christian faith. Others were drawn to alternative systems of faith characterized by a fluidness of belief. Most found the process of navigating their faith to be terrifying because religion was a high-stakes venture that not only affected their everyday lives but also the afterlife. Death and dying, as well as the trappings of funereal rites and burial practices, take on particular urgency for the Victorians because garnering a comfortable place in heaven was no longer a surety. In

literature, gothic conventions give voice to the anxiety that, for the Victorians, characterized issues of faith.

In *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Christina Rossetti engages the female corpse tradition to illustrate the misplaced fear that many of her contemporaries associated with death and the afterlife. While arguing for a renewed faith in God, Rossetti enacts a radical revision of the female corpse tradition that gives agency to the traditionally silenced, objectified dead. Mary Elizabeth Coleridge employs negative capability in *Fancy's Following*, where she fluidly combines religious and gothic discourse to demonstrate the necessity of tempering faith with a healthy sense of questioning and doubt, as humans are incapable of fully comprehending the divine. E. Nesbit hybridizes socialism and Christianity in *Lays and Legends*, where she suggests that all people are divine and, thus, should be granted social, political, and financial equality, which will extend the peace and plenty of the afterlife to the physical life. In *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets*, Graham R. Tomson posits that life has no divine purpose or reward; accordingly, all experiences, both positive and negative, must be embraced as ends in and of themselves.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgement.....	vi
Introduction: Religious and Gothic Influences in Victorian Women’s Poetry.....	x
I. Victorian Faith.....	xii
II. Intersections of Religion and Literature.....	xv
III. Intersections of Religion and the Gothic.....	xix
IV. Redefining the Divine.....	xxiii
Chapter One: Faith and Devotion: Death and the After-Life in Christina Rossetti’s <i>Goblin Market and Other Poems</i>	1
I. Established Faith: The Anglican Church During the Victorian Era.....	5
II. Contemporary Critical Reception: Rossetti and the Female Corpse Tradition.....	8
III. Heavenly Reunion: “Echo” and “Advent”.....	13
IV. Deferred Reward: The State Between Death and Paradise in “Sound Sleep,” “Rest,” “Song [When I am dead, my dearest],” and “Sweet Death”.....	21
V. Moments of Doubt: “At Home,” “A Peal of Bells,” “After Death,” and “Up-Hill”.....	31
Chapter Two: Existing in Doubt: Negative Capability in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s <i>Fancy’s Following</i>	45
I. “Outside the Gates of Fairyland”: Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s Literary Inheritance.....	47
II. Intellectual Roleplaying: Negative Capability and the State of Victorian Faith...52	
III. Christianity in England: Dissent, Catholicism, and Anglicanism.....	57

IV. Blinded by the Light: Mistaken Belief in “The Devil’s Funeral,” “Doubt,” and “There Was No Place Found”.....	60
V. Being in Uncertainties: The Benefits of Doubt in “The Witch,” “Master and Guest,” and “The Other Side of a Mirror”.....	72
VI. Dust to Dust: Accepting Mortality in “Self-Question”.....	86
Chapter Three: Songs of Freedom: Intersections of Christianity and Socialism in	
E. Nesbit’s <i>Lays and Legends</i>	89
I. Victorian Socialism: The Fabian Society and Christian Socialists.....	93
II. Fighting for Equality: Christian Ethics in “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice”.....	100
III. Worshiping Liberty: Rewriting Divinity in “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn””.....	112
IV. Family and Freedom: Parental Responsibility in “The Dead to the Living,” “Baby’s Birthday,” and “Children’s Playgrounds in the City”.....	119
Chapter Four: Living Without God: Redefining Redemption in Graham R. Tomson’s	
<i>The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets</i>	134
I. Challenging Morality and Faith: Characteristics of Fin-de-siècle Poetry.....	139
II. Divine Neglect: Life With an Absent God in “Le Mauvais Larron” and ““Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?””.....	145
III. Coming to Terms With Existence: The Necessity of Strife in “Evening,” “On the Road,” and “Hymn of Labour”.....	157
IV. Accepting God’s Decline: Death and Regeneration In “The Smile of All- Wisdom” and “The Quick and the Dead”.....	166

Conclusion.....	176
Notes.....	181
Works Cited.....	236

Introduction

Religious and Gothic Influences in Victorian Women's Poetry

Of particular concern for this project is the liminal space between faith and doubt and between gothic and spiritual, particularly in the poetry of late Victorian women. The authors I explore—Christina Rossetti, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge (“Anodos”), Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), and E(dith) Nesbit—demonstrate various levels of faith, with Rossetti at the extreme of devotion and Tomson at the extreme of disbelief. Despite their differing levels of belief, all four authors attempt to discover methods of expressing and solidifying their spirituality. An essential component for all four women entails the nature of human existence and of the hereafter. For all four women, conceptions of the afterlife become an integral aspect of human life. These conceptions function as a goal for the faithful and as motivation for “proper” behavior. That the tropes of the gothic would be used to explore conceptions of the afterlife is fitting not only because of the gothic’s concern with death and hauntings but also because of the gothic’s concern with the unknown. Faith by its very nature must always only remain conjecture.

In their exploration of faith, many women relied on already established conventions that were used to explore the supernatural. Gothic conventions and religious explorations are well suited to each other because the gothic, with its stock devices of restless souls; omnipotent, god-like men; and otherworldly visitations, provides a language and structure that was developed in order to explore the unknown. Christian religion, of particular concern for this project, necessarily entails an element of the supernatural. Elton E. Smith and Robert Haas explain that “it is the Judeo-Christian

tradition that defines the supernatural for both eminent and ordinary Victorians.

Whether the Bible is humankind's search for God or God's search for humankind, the royal will of God is sovereign" (x). Though the orthodox Victorians tended to represent God as a benevolent father figure, the Biblical God, particularly from the Old Testament, arguably reflects a figure that is more powerful, demanding, and dangerous. Moreover, the *Bible* contains various examples of otherworldly power through miracles, the veracity of which the Victorians strongly contested.

In arguing that the Victorians used the gothic to explore their faith, I am not suggesting that they attempted to create belief around some sort of nightmarish deity. Rather, they used that with which they were familiar in order to approach that from which they felt distanced. The proliferation of gothic tropes allowed authors to update biblical teachings without detracting from the philosophies they transcribed. In fact, Margaret L. Carter suggests that the already existing tradition of gothic literature helped bolster faith in the *Bible*. She argues that "when the supernatural in the 'higher' sense (miracles, special providences, and revelation) came under attack, the 'lower' supernatural (e.g. hauntings and witchcraft) came to seem untenable. Conversely, instances of the latter were often used to buttress belief in the former" (16–17). For many people, letting go of religion not only meant losing God but also losing any sense of divine grace. The idea of an afterlife, which for so long had bolstered Anglican faith, was not easy to let go of. The gothic obsession with corpses, ghosts, and restless spirits presented the ultimate proving ground for Victorian conceptions of the hereafter.

I. Victorian Faith

Religion was a fundamental aspect of the lives of the Victorians, regardless of each individual's level of faith or denomination. Religious faith and religious practice had reciprocal relationships with one's education, work opportunities, and social standing well through the nineteenth century. In Victorian England, religion was divided primarily among the various forms of Christian worship, including Anglicanism, Dissenting Protestantism, and Catholicism, though it to a lesser extent included various non-Christian beliefs, agnosticism, and atheism. While the Victorians feared that disbelief was on the rise, Owen Chadwick definitively states that "Victorian England was religious. Its churches thrived and multiplied, its best minds brooded over divine metaphysic and argued about moral principle, its authors and painters and architects and poets seldom forgot that art and literature shadowed eternal truth or beauty, its legislators professed outward and often accepted inward allegiance to divine law, its men of empire ascribed national greatness to the providence of God and Protestant faith" (1). Despite Chadwick's emphatic declaration, not all Victorians were convinced that religion held the level of importance that they wished it to, and some of its "best minds" may have wavered in their faith. Still, the age as a whole retains a distinct sense of religiosity and a clear preoccupation with issues of faith.

Many Victorians, as well as some of their historiographers, believed that the age was suffering from a crisis of faith, and though there is no definitive proof that the Victorian churches saw a decline in public worship, the fear was very palpable for the people living through the time of religious turmoil. Julie Meknyk explains that "the Victorian era was a religious age, but it was not an era of peaceful faith and doctrinal

conformity—it was an era of religious controversy and, increasingly, of religious freedom” (2). Victorian religion was challenged both internally and externally by the fact that various forms of Christian worship gained prominence in Victorian England, challenging the hegemony of the Church of England, and by the fact that scientific and industrial developments disproved what, for the Victorians, had been long established religious truths.

While Victorian faith was most likely not in the midst of a full blown religious crisis, at the very least, as the nineteenth century ran its course, various social and intellectual developments reshaped Victorian faith, which indeed could have given the appearance of disintegrating faith, particularly to Anglicans who held true to their national religion. The growing availability of religious choice, both within and outside of the Anglican Church, would certainly make it difficult if not impossible to measure faith quantitatively. Meknyk suggests that “one source of unsettlement was the increasing sense of individual choice in religious life. As laws that discriminated against them were repealed, non-Anglicans gradually gained acceptance as full British citizens. These repeals created a kind of free market in religion in which each individual could choose his or her favorite ‘brand,’ but which undermined the sense that any one brand could make exclusive claims to truth” (134). The establishment of a national religion became fundamental to the lives and beliefs of many British citizens. Because the state successfully squelched any resistance to Anglicanism for so long, Anglican beliefs went relatively unexamined. However, the rise in popularity of Dissenting and Catholic faiths implicitly challenged the efficacy of Anglican doctrine and explicitly challenged the spiritual totalitarianism the Church of England enjoyed. While freedom of religion has

its obvious benefits, adjusting to those benefits proved difficult for a nation that was used to being told what to believe.

Religious freedom was not the only development to shake the Victorians' faith. Science and industry are most frequently assigned culpability for the disintegration of faith. And though they certainly failed to destroy religiosity, they did pose some significant impediments to Victorian worship. According to Lance St John Butler, "it could be said that the churches were vulnerable to the advances of science at any time from 1830 onwards. There was enough material in Lyell's *Principles of Geology* of 1831–3 to justify considerable alarm, but the alarm was only felt after Buckle, Darwin and Colenso had done (or rather, published) their work in the late 1850s and early 1860s. The problem seems only to have been felt after this later spate of the popularizing of science" (6).¹ Further, Alister McGrath suggests that "there is no doubt that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution caused the smoldering crisis of faith in Victorian England to burst into flames. If any scientific development can be said to have converted the Western world to atheism, it is the theory originally proposed in Darwin's *Origin of Species* and subsequently developed by Darwin and others into a full-blown account of the origins of biological life, including human beings" (98). The dilemma arose because scientific developments helped to prove that the *Bible* could no longer be read as a factual document, and as a result, much of the history that Christianity was built upon became destabilized and forced practitioners to question the basis of their faith.

II. Intersections of Religion and Literature

The saturation of religion in the lives of the Victorians necessarily carried over into the cultural arts, and it holds a privileged position in all forms of literature. As Meknyk comments, “every careful reader of Victorian novels or poetry recognizes the impact of religion on these works. Religious issues and characters crop up everywhere” (1). The prominence of religious language, ideology, and debate in Victorian literature rises in part from the larger cultural debates on the state of Victorian faith and on the validity and accuracy of religious belief. In part, religious overtones in literature also resulted from religion’s role as a shared cultural experience. Herbert Schlossberg suggests that “during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the ordinary language of the English increasingly took on a biblical sound. This was a natural result of their familiarity with the Book of Common Prayer and the popularity of sermons, sermon books, bible reading, hymn singing, Sunday schools, religious publications, and every other manifestation of the religious revival” (245). The prominence of religion, particularly Anglicanism, in the early nineteenth century carried through the Victorian era. All Victorians had exposure to Anglicanism, whether they welcomed their national religion or were oppressed by it, and as a result, they had recourse to a shared discourse, whether they embraced that discourse or struggled against it.²

Because the language of religion is so pervasive in Victorian literature, as Meknyk notes, it can be difficult to distinguish between literature that conveys a specific religious motivation and literature that uses that language of religion for secular purposes. Meknyk comments that “much of mainstream Victorian literature, from Dickens to Brontë to Meredith, uses religious language and addresses spiritual themes,

and many Victorian authors were regular attenders at Christian worship services.” She goes on to suggest that “some of the distinguishing features of religious literature will be internal to the works. For instance, sometimes the work clearly sets out to achieve a particular religious goal—salvation, moral edification, worship, or doctrinal debate; sometimes it will make much use of particular kinds of religious writing such as scriptural exegesis, homily, or hymn” (108–09). Meknyk advocates distinguishing between spiritual literature and literature that uses religious language and imagery; however, the enterprise may be futile and unnecessary. Towards the end of the Victorian era it becomes increasingly difficult to separate literature that adopts and rewrites the language of religion from literature that advocates religious faith at least in part because authors were attempting to recreate their relationships with religion and spirituality, and this recreation necessarily entailed discovering new loci of faith and new foci for devotion. Attempts to recreate systems of spirituality remain equally important as those that reproduce prescribed methods of worship.

Since there is a fine distinction between devotional literature that was aimed at a strictly non-secular audience and religious doctrinal writing that was aimed at lay readers, the crisis of faith experienced by John Henry Newman and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the fits of doubt experienced by Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold, and the seemingly unflappable faith of Christina Rossetti and John Keble are well-documented facets of literary and religious history. Though religion was prominent in the social if not personal lives of all Victorians, it does not face an even representation in current literary studies. A rich critical tradition explores the struggles of Newman, Tennyson, Carlyle and Arnold, as well as the religious critiques by Robert Browning

and Charles Dickens. Yet discussions of women's relationships to their faith are relatively sparse. Cynthia Scheinberg suggests that "although the triumphs of the past twenty years of active feminist literary criticism have suggested that women writers deserve as much recognition as the male writers who have been at the center of literary canons for centuries, women's poetry that deals with explicitly religious topics and texts still faces a kind of discriminatory treatment by both male-centered and feminist critical orientations" ("Measure" 1-2). There are studies that focus on devotional literature, particularly that of Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Dora Greenwell. But these studies, much like the devotional, still tend to exist on the fringes of literary scholarship.³ Moreover, discussions of religious writing by women poets tend to lack the critical texture that characterizes discussions on male poets; those women poets who are brought into discussions of faith tend to be the women who upheld acceptable Christian beliefs, again with Rossetti and Barrett Browning being the main subjects. While many women writers struggled publicly and personally to identify and accept their levels of faith, these writers are often left out of discussions of faith and morality. Hence, this project focuses solely on women poets in order to add women's voices to discussions of faith in the Victorian era.

There are a few possible explanations for the neglect of women's writing on religion, with the most obvious being that women writers are still positioned tenuously in the literary canon(s). Part of the neglect also stems from the relationship between gender and religion or, more specifically, feminism and religious patriarchal structures. Sue Morgan contends that "just as church historians have shown little interest in gender issues until comparatively recently, so the feminist historical challenge has not yet extended to a

serious evaluation of the role and dimension of religion in women's lives" (1). This argument, which Scheinberg also proposes, suggests that women's religious writing tends to be overlooked because of the fraught relationship between feminism and the traditionally patriarchal Christian religions. Scheinberg argues that "it would seem that for many current feminist critics, women writers who actively supported religious institutions and affiliations were necessarily didactic, submissive, unenlightened, and uncreative reproducer of male religious hierarchy; they are, it would seem, somewhat of an embarrassment to our twenty-first-century secular feminism" (Introduction 9). While I agree with Morgan and Scheinberg's assessment that Victorian women who favored Christian traditions could be seen by modern feminists as supporters of patriarchal institutions, this theory still does not address the lack of attention that has been paid to women's poetry of doubt. Perhaps because Victorian women were expected to write spiritual, though not theological, poetry, the genre has been assumed to be critically devoid of any sort of feminist statement.

Yet any religious poetry by women, whether it attests faith, doubt, or some liminal state, necessarily constitutes a feminist statement because of the way women were positioned with respect to literature and religion. In both traditions the Victorians positioned women as superfluous to the intellectual and aesthetic debates that largely shaped those traditions. Much as we see today that Victorian women had influenced the secular literary tradition, we can see that they also influenced a spiritual literary tradition. For women poets, addressing issues of religious faith and doubt necessarily entailed both a spiritual and a political act. Scheinberg explains that "because it was assumed that women could not 'understand' philosophical, theoretical or abstract ideas, and because

women were seen as creatures of their own emotional responses, women were rarely granted the cultural authority to speak prophetically, to voice their own experience as an authoritative mode ‘to teach the living’.” She goes on to clarify that “defined as essentially non-prophetic in their very existence, women were thus excluded from being the dominant figure for a poet in the period. For in order to be a poet/prophet, a speaker must be understood as moving between two realms, the earthly, individual realm and the universal, divine realm; likewise, he must be able to move between two rhetorical realms, private devotional utterance and public persuasive utterance. In Victorian England, those realms tended to be gender specific, coded female and male respectively (“Measure” 263). Though women were permitted to write popular literature and though they were identified as spiritual paragons, they were not thought capable of the philosophical introspection necessary for the attainment of Christian truths. Despite the fact that they were not always taken seriously, women engaged in literary discussions on issues of faith and doubt. Because women were not seen as legitimate cultural or spiritual authorities, writing about religious issues, even if it is to support them, becomes a radical act in itself. That women wrote publicly to disparage and reconstruct existing religious tenets suggests an even more radical engagement with faith.

III. Intersections of Religion and the Gothic

For the late Victorians, changing relationships with the Divine emphasized the element of mystery and the unknown in religion. Shifting away from a literal reading of the *Bible* allowed scholars to realign the religious with the gothic by focusing on the supernatural aspect(s) of the divine. Emphasizing the supernatural refocused empirical studies that attempted to prove the validity of Biblical teachings and religious writings

that explored the divine nature of God. Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell suggest that foregrounding the divinity of God was a logical move because the Victorians “believed in the super natural.” They argue that “this belief ranged from the wishful make-belief of many of those who wrote about the fairies and other supernatural figures of folklore, through the circumstantial belief of those visited by true dreams, premonitions and telepathic encounters, to the sometimes unwilling, sometimes eager belief of Spiritualists and Theosophists and the alternately enthusiastic and doubtful faith of Christians of all denominations. The supernatural was both fearful and terrible and ardently desired; it was a spooky sense that there was more to the world than the everyday, and an intimation that reality might be transfigured by something above and beyond” (1).

Gothic conventions provided a way for the Victorians to understand and express issues of faith in part because, much as it was with religious discourse, the literary realm was haunted by gothic narratives. Vernon Hyles suggests that “the nineteenth century was so steeped in the marvelous that everyone from Blake to Southey to Byron, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning, and the Pre-Raphaelites requires mention” (4).⁴ Moreover, Bown, Burdett, and Thurschwell suggest that “the Victorians were haunted by the supernatural. They delighted in ghost stories and fairy tales, and in legends of strange gods, demons and spirits’ in pantomimes and extravaganzas full of supernatural machinery; in gothic yarns of reanimated corpses and vampires” (1). For the Victorians, their God seemed strange and unknown, as much of that they held to be true was, in fact, questionable. Smith and Haas also suggest that “it is important to note that Victorian ghost stories were created at a unique point in history. Throughout the nineteenth century, Western society

experienced ideological changes that affected perceptions about the world and the place of humanity in that world” (vii–viii). The destabilization of long held beliefs made the world an unfamiliar and frightening place. Additionally, the rest and respite that Christianity guaranteed was no longer seen as a surety. The Victorians had to adapt their systems of belief to accommodate intellectual, technological, and scientific development. And as the earlier writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggest, exploring one’s faith can take on nightmarish proportions. The gothic, however, not only provided the Victorians a means of exploring fear but also of exploring faith. While the gothic conventions revolve around mystery, that mystery is not always impenetrable.

Because of its focus on the unknown, the gothic successfully throws religions ideologies into relief. Cornered and confused subjects tend to be hallmarks of gothic literature, and these subjects are repeatedly in the midst of situations where they must make sense of that which is beyond logic. Ruth Bienstock Anolik argues that the encountering the unknown “informs most of the tropes that conventionally identify the Gothic: the dark and labyrinthine castle that resists apprehension by the hapless characters who invariably get lost in its depths; the equally dark and labyrinthine text that resists readerly comprehension; the ghosts and other supernatural beings who resist human understanding; the tendency of the Gothic text to open in a belated moment, ensuring that neither reader nor characters understand the situation in which they find themselves” (1). James Kincaid also suggests that unknowability is an essential characteristic of the gothic. He argues that the gothic has “got always to reach towards what cannot be spoken; if all can be spoken, then there is no gothic. It can gesture towards the sublime, toward the blasphemous, or towards the magical, but it must never

fall into the prosaic: the gothic has to alert us to the presence of agencies we cannot explain. We cannot explain them because they lie outside the realm of the explicable, outside of language” (3). Because it is a literature that focuses on giving voice to the unknown and unknowable, the gothic is perfectly suited to explorations of the divine, which by its very nature must remain mysterious and outside of human understanding. The enterprises of the gothic and of religious exegesis share the same goal of framing and theorizing the unknown.

In addition to being well suited to religious exploration, the gothic is particularly suited to women writers. Most critics agree that this is so because of women’s limited social authority in the Victorian era. Juliann E. Fleemor argues that “the Gothic world is one of nightmare, and that nightmare is created by the individual in conflict with the values of her society and her prescribed role. It is also created by women writers writing within a literary tradition which reveals limitation and transcendence. Ambiguity rules such a world” (10). Karen F. Stein casts the same argument in slightly different terms, suggesting that as “the product of a sensibility that glorifies the self in isolation from society, the Gothic explores the darker side of the romantic vision. In the Gothic mirror, the self is reflected in the extreme poses of rebel, outcast, obsessive seeker of forbidden knowledge, monster. [. . .] for women the roles of rebel, outcast, seeker of truth, are monstrous in themselves.” Stein continues to suggest that “for a man to rebel, to leave a comfortable home and to search for truth are noble acts. Thus, this pattern of behavior is expressed in the heroic epic. For women, however, such assertions of questing self-hood have been deemed bizarre and crazy; consequently the Gothic mode—and in particular the concept of self as monster—is associated with narratives of female experience” (Stein

123). Women who use the gothic to give voice to their faith are literally and figuratively writing from the margins. The conventions they use combine the language of popular literature, which with women were permitted to engage, with issues of spirituality that they were not deemed fit to theorize. The use of the gothic becomes doubly appropriate because of the monstrosity inherent in women who step out of their assigned roles to think like men—it is no accident that many of these women used androgynous or masculine names.

IV. Redefining the Divine

This project, then, examines the ways in which women writers use the gothic to explore issues of faith and doubt. I begin with Christina Rossetti, who functions as a necessary touchstone in this (and in most all) discussion of women poets and religion. She presents fairly conventional Anglican High Church views; however, her method of presenting those views in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* is hardly in keeping with High Church rhetoric. As the titular poem indicates, Rossetti's secular and devotional poetry in the volume use the language of the fantastic to express her faith. *Goblin Market* includes a shocking number of speakers who return from the dead in order to alternatively instruct, taunt, and berate the living who simply do not understand the importance of faith and devotion. Rossetti includes a number of newly dead speakers for whom the afterlife takes on an immediate importance, and through them she emphasizes the necessity of faith, as it is the only way to obtain comfort after death. Her almost obsessional focus on death illustrates the weight the afterlife takes on for the living and the dead. Though some of her speakers waiver, Rossetti makes clear that heaven, that

final resting place for all who seek it, will bring rapturous reunion with family and God, the father.

Next, I examine Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, who demonstrates a similar literary preoccupation with death, though she is not as constant in her faith as Rossetti. Rather, Coleridge specifically warns against the formation of the sort of fixed belief to which Rossetti adheres. *Fancy's Following* combines spiritual and gothic poems to illustrate the inability of humans to truly understand the nature of God and to illustrate the dangers that arise when humans follow fixed sets of beliefs. In developing a form of negative capability, Coleridge advocates spiritual exploration while lambasting fixed states of belief and disbelief. Accordingly, because it is impossible to truly define the divine, adhering to only one system of belief is as dangerous as not believing in the divine at all. Coleridge acknowledges that lacking a stable belief system can be frightening and uncomfortable, particularly when it comes to issues of death and the afterlife; however, she maintains that questioning and searching for multiple answers is the only option for avoiding false or misplaced faith.

While Rossetti and Coleridge rely extensively on gothic characteristics, in *Lays and Legends* E. Nesbit, who I address in the third chapter, is a bit more measured in her use of the uncanny, in part because she tempers it with a heavy dose of social awareness. As a Fabian Socialist, Nesbit attempts to replace God-focused Christianity with human focused spirituality. Essentially, she rewrites religious ideologies so that they focus on human sanctity rather than the worship of an intangible, deific figure. In so doing, she draws on the darker aspects of the Old Testament God, in which God functions as a figure of divine retribution. However, Nesbit excises the domination and power struggle

inherent in gothic literature and replaces it instead with an idyllic vision of heaven on earth where peace and prosperity reign. Though she ultimately denies the existence of a Christian afterlife, she relies on ghosts to motivate readers to mend their beliefs and actions so that they work toward universal equality.

Where Nesbit tempers faith in the supernatural with her socialist beliefs, Graham R. Tomson tempers it with the natural. *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets*, which I examine in the final chapter, is peopled with ghosts, fairies, and other monsters, yet it remains eerily attached to reality. Through her depiction of the Christ figure, Tomson most explicitly expresses the connection between the gothic and the religious. Here, Christ is alternately a predatory outlaw and a condemned man who has been abandoned by his God. Abandonment, in the volume, is total, and Tomson posits no opportunity for heavenly reward, be it divine or otherwise. The darkness that proceeds from this view characterizes the volume, as she attempts to identify a purpose for a godless life. Ultimately, she suggests that life and death are essential, natural processes that must be endured for their own sake. Tomson strips nature of any spiritual significance and suggests that neither life nor nature is intended to be peaceful or comfortable.

All four authors engage in a process of religious exploration by using the familiar language and tropes of the gothic to frame abstract philosophical beliefs. This approach is particularly useful because of the shifting grounds of Victorian—especially late Victorian—faith. During what has been perceived as a late-Victorian crises of faith, women poets utilized a variety of strategies to adapt and revise Christian ideology. In her 1862 volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Christina Rossetti holds fast to her

Anglican faith. Mary Elizabeth Coleridge embraces the challenges that accompanied the shift to a faith-based religious system and builds her 1898 volume *Fancy's Following* around religious ambiguity, suggesting that religious faith should not be fenced into a cohesive system of belief. E. Nesbit's 1886 *Lays and Legends* hybridizes Christian rhetoric with Fabian Socialist ideologies in order to locate the divine in the human. In her 1889 volume *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets*, Graham R. Tomson flouts Christian propriety and suggests that faith should be divorced from the human condition. In reappropriating Christian ideology, all four women retrofitted traditional religious beliefs to late-Victorian social conditions. The common denominator in these strategies is the attempt to reconcile human suffering, both personal and social, with the existence of divinity.

Chapter One

Faith and Devotion: Death and the After-Life

in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market and Other Poems*

For most modern audiences as well as for most of her contemporaries, the name Christina Rossetti is and was synonymous with religious poetry. Her poetry provides a necessary starting point for studies of Victorian Christianity because of its High Church Anglican discussion of faith. Rossetti lived and wrote during a very active period of religious history in England that began with the Anglican Church struggling against the influences of Catholicism and ended with the Anglican Church fighting the forces of disbelief. Though she was High Church, Rossetti never converted to Catholicism, remaining a loyal Anglican throughout her life, and from this position, she readily joined the fight against disbelief. Lynda Palazzo points out that “not only did Rossetti’s early religious upbringing take place during the later days of the Oxford Movement when bitter dissensions had arisen and the exodus to Rome was at its peak, but it took place within one of the most active Tractarian parishes in London, Christ Church, Albany Street, under a fervent disciple of Pusey, Rev. Dodsworth” (3). The Rossetti women, Christina, her sister Maria, and her mother Frances (née Polidori) were devout practitioners of Anglican High Church faith. Meknyk explains that “religion in the Rossetti household was divided along gender lines: her father and brothers Dante and William took little notice of religion, though they used much religious imagery in their work, while her mother, her sister Maria, and Christina herself were fervent Christians” (121).

Despite her association with the not always popular High Church, Christina Rossetti's religious poetry was well received.⁵ However, in part because of the growing lack of faith in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Rossetti's reputation as a poet became typecast. According to Anthony H. Harrison, "Rossetti's reputation as a devout 'prophetess' and saintly woman, along with consistently strong reviews of her work (especially her devotional poems and prose), attracted a remarkable audience, as other commentators late in her career indicate" (88). However, as the nineteenth century waned, the reading public increasingly viewed Rossetti's piety as an obstacle. Diane D'Amico suggests that modern audiences have difficulty coming to terms with Rossetti's faith and, as a result, are unable to recognize her engagement with social issues.

D'Amico explains that "although the Victorian critics indeed saw Rossetti as a woman of faith, and saw her poetry as a product of that faith, the saintly image they present tends to diminish her power and importance by removing her from her own time; in other words, she is seen as an idealized figure responding to her God but not her age" (15–16). That she is misrepresented greatly limits the relevance of Rossetti in her time as well as ours because, as D'Amico suggests, "the Victorian image of Rossetti excludes from consideration her involvement in and response to some of the controversial issues of her day, such as the establishment of Anglican sisterhoods, the treatment of fallen women, and the extension of the franchise" (16). Rossetti's engagement with social problems is noteworthy because it demonstrates that Rossetti is more than just a religious poet, although (equally importantly) she is that too. While her devotional writing is certainly merits study, recognizing that Rossetti's poetry entails more than just devotion allows for a broader understanding of her literary merit for the Victorians and for current scholars.

Rather than positioning Rossetti as either a devotional poet who occasionally wrote ephemeral poems like “Goblin Market” or as a feminist poet who had an unsightly tendency towards proselytizing, Rossetti must be viewed as a feminist religious poet who routinely engaged with gothic aesthetics, primarily through the female corpse tradition.

While her religiosity may not have been a severe drawback during the height of her career, Rossetti’s status as a devotional poet often limits her relevance in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. D’Amico argues that “for the first generation of critics, those of the late Victorian period and early decades of the twentieth century, Rossetti is viewed as a woman of great humility whose poetry reveals the invisible world of her Christian faith. For those writing during the mid-twentieth century, she is either the repressed morbid woman whose poetry reveals sexual frustration or an intellectual woman whose poetry is mostly sweet sound without sense. Most recently, she is a highly intelligent woman in a patriarchal society whose poetry reveals both victimization and subversive feminism” (1). Additionally, Sara Choi comments that “although her fervent religiosity was perceived as a mark of literary distinction by her nineteenth-century contemporaries, feminist criticism over the past several decades has rewritten the scriptural influence on Rossetti as signifying something else—anything else, that is, besides the powerful hold it had on her imagination” (481). Rossetti’s poetry becomes problematic because modern sensibilities, particularly academic sensibilities, tend to disfavor Victorian religious poetry as maudlin or as lacking in status when compared to secular poetry. During its early states, feminist literary criticism focused primarily on women writers who either overtly or covertly promoted women’s rights. Religious writing was largely excluded from this discussion because it was assumed to have upheld

a sexist, male dominated establishment. Moreover, until recently, devotional poetry was the domain of male poets, such as Tennyson and the Tractarians, and female religious poetry was generally dismissed as mundane despite the fact that, at least during the Victorian era, there were many popular devotional and religious women poets.⁶

In *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), Rossetti presents a cogent discussion on the nature of death and the afterlife in light of Anglican High Church faith. In so doing, Rossetti engages and radically revises the female corpse tradition, which framed women as best viewed as silent, still, and blank canvases. Rossetti's dead, in addition to representing both genders, are anxious and often active agents. They reveal that, for those with true faith, death becomes a joyous occasion rather than a moment of mourning. In order to understand Rossetti's corpses, one must first come to terms with her conception of heaven. In keeping with the limited biblical conception of heaven and with the Tractarian belief in renunciation, Rossetti only obliquely defines what heaven entails, as she does in "Echo" and "Advent." Heaven, in this schema, functions as a place of peaceful reunion among all souls and God. Because of the reunion, death becomes an object of anticipation rather than derision for Rossetti, and for all those with true faith, death becomes a joyous occasion rather than a moment of mourning. In the poems "Sound Sleep," "Rest," "Song [When I am dead, my dearest]," and "Sweet Death," Rossetti explores the liminal state between death and ascension to heaven, where the soul is at rest while it dreams of its impending reunion with God and with all those who have died before. Here Rossetti suggests that those with true faith will finally find ease and comfort in their beliefs. However, she does include a set of secular poems that express mistaken views of life and death. "At Home," "A Peal of Bells," "After Death," and

“Up-Hill” depict characters who have unformed or misinformed beliefs on the afterlife. All four poems act as a corrective to those mistaken beliefs, with the goal of showing why faith in God is a necessity as well as a comfort.

I. Established Faith: The Anglican Church During the Victorian Era

The Anglican Church was influential in all aspects of English life, including spiritual, political, social, and economical. Meknyk explains that “church and state in nineteenth-century England were intimately connected. The church participated directly in the government of the state” (13). The government’s rule in the church had ramifications in terms of both religious identity and national identity. Because church and state were not separated, one’s religion often influenced one’s political beliefs as well as one’s ability to hold political power, which could only be attained by declaring allegiance to the Anglican faith. Moreover, the Anglican Churches were also centers for socializing and for attaining social support, such as education (through Sunday school) or as applicable, financial assistance. As Meknyk explains, “for many nineteenth-century English men and women, attending the local Anglican Church on Sunday was an expected and largely habitual form of participation in community life, an act that had a social significance that outweighed its religious meaning. For them, the Anglican Church was a fact of life, taken for granted both as their ancestral faith and as part of their national identity” (18). Ultimately, the Anglican Church formed a part of the identity of all English people, whether it was by virtue of inclusion or exclusion from the dominant religious organization.

Despite being a ubiquitous presence in English life, the Anglican Church was far from unified in its belief system. Generally, there were three branches of Anglicanism in

the nineteenth century: Low Church, or Evangelicalism; High Church, or Tractarianism; and Broad Church. Though all three groupings held to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion,⁷ the groups had different beliefs about the nature of worship and the role of the church in society. Evangelicals⁸ advocated worship as an integral part of everyday life and believed that all individuals had direct access to God; as such, they tended to de-emphasize the importance of church hierarchy. Tractarians favored the re-integration of Catholic aspects of worship and called for greater structure for church hierarchy. Broad churchmen⁹ were less coherent in their beliefs and generally favored opening church doctrine in order to modernize it and to accommodate a variety of individual beliefs. Though all three groups had different agendas, the individuals involved did not always fall along hard, fast party lines. It was not unusual for individuals to adhere to one set of beliefs and then grow into another, as Newman did, for example, prior to his conversion to Roman Catholicism. It was also not unusual for the groups to have overlapping beliefs. So while the nineteenth-century Anglican Church had different factions with differing viewpoints on the direction the church should take, the factions were not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Where the Evangelicals believed that every individual had the right to define his/her relationship with God and their method of worshiping God, the Tractarians favored a strict clerical hierarchy that acted as intermediaries between parishioners and God and favored ritualistic religious services. Meknyk explains that “the name ‘Tractarian’ derives from a series of ninety pamphlets, called *Tracts for the Times*, which leading Anglican High Churchmen published between 1833 and 1841, each one arguing for a particular point of doctrine or practice that they regarded as important to the Church

of England. The group was also called the Oxford Movement, because so many of the leading figures, including John Keble, Edward Pusey, John Henry Newman, and Hurrell Froude, were academics at Oxford” (23). The Tractarians rose to power in the late 1830s and early 1840s, though their influence lasted well into latter part of the nineteenth century, in part because the movement influenced writers such as Christina Rossetti. The Tractarians adhered to the High Church movement not only because they favored a strict religious hierarchy but also because they favored the elevation of the Anglican Church over the state. Schlossberg suggests that “the movement also represents a reaction against the Erastian tendencies that the Tractarians saw taking place in England, the increasing domination by functionaries of the state in religious matters, which lowered the high position they believed was due the Church” (80). Additionally, Rosman suggests that the Tractarians “sought to defend their church against the threat which they believed was posed by the development of a liberal, secular state” (181).

While the Tractarians opposed state interference in Anglican Church policy, they also sought to revise Anglican teachings in accordance with what the Tractarians thought were the Church’s original teachings. Schlossberg explains that the Tractarians “believed they were recovering certain ancient teachings about the Church: its status as the repository of the gospel, the efficacy of the sacraments and the powers of the priests that administered them, and the role of the bishops as the heirs of the apostolic succession” (80). However, returning to the Anglican Church’s roots meant a return to Roman Catholic teachings and traditions, which did not sit well with the public. The public’s fear and hatred of Catholicism stemmed initially from the Anglican Church’s break with Rome, and it continued because of fear that the Roman Church would once again gain

religious and political power in England. Meknyk explains that “as more and more tracts were written expounding different elements of Tractarian doctrine, concern grew over the ‘Romanizing’ tendencies of these doctrines, the way that Tractarians seemed to be making the English Church more and more like the Roman Catholic in its doctrine and ceremonies” (26). Though the Tractarians favored some aspects of Roman Catholic worship, they were opposed to returning the Church of England to the Roman Catholic fold. Rather, they wanted to incorporate aspects of Roman Catholic worship into the Church of England, arguing that these methods of worship were once an integral part of Anglican faith. Among the practices that the Tractarians wanted to introduce were the formation of sisterhoods, the enforcement of priestly celibacy, the sacrament of confession, and the use of rituals during religious services. Far from wanting to give Rome power over the Anglican Church, the Tractarians wanted to limit even the power that the English government had over Church matters. Though many High Churchmen later defected to Catholicism, at least initially, they were fervent believers in the authority of the Anglican Church.

II. Contemporary Critical Reception: Rossetti and the Female Corpse Tradition

Though *Goblin Market and Other Poems* is best known for its title poem, I will focus on how the various death poems in the volume express Rossetti’s Anglo-Catholic faith. William Michael Rossetti suggests that “death, as the avenue to a higher life, was contemplated by Christina Rossetti without nervousness or repulsion, even for the most part with desire; and this in her youthful as well as her later poems. Whether that was ‘morbid’ or not, readers may form their own opinion without any assistance from me” (x). While William Michael Rossetti may have been concerned with the implications of

Christina Rossetti's focus on death, the Victorian era was rife with poems that focused on death to lament it, to welcome it, or (sometimes) both. Anne Jamison comments that "the topic is nothing unusual for the era whose most celebrated poem was entitled *In Memoriam*" (258). Doreen Rosman also argues that death was a popular topic for the Victorians because of its primacy in their lives: "for much of Victoria's reign, as for centuries before, life was dominated by the threat of death. Few parents saw all their children reach maturity and everyone recognized that even the healthiest man, woman, or child might suddenly be struck down by an incurable disease." She goes on to say that "the ever-present expectation of death was reflected in the religions of the day. Death-bed scenes were common subjects of popular religious tracts" (267).¹⁰ The preoccupation with death in secular culture and religious writings may help account for Rossetti's interest in using death as a vehicle for religious introspection. At the very least, it suggests that her focus was not "morbid."

Rossetti's death poems have been studied by a variety of scholars including but not limited to Jerome J. McGann, Angela Leighton, Dolores Rosenblum, Susan Conley, Elizabeth F. Gray, and Jamison. Leighton suggests that "Rossetti's obsession with being dead, with a state of posthumous exclusion from the world [. . .] may be interpreted in several ways: as a form of worldly renunciation, the imaginative equivalent to religious mortification; as a morbid and macabre skepticism, which fails ultimately to accept the idea of salvation; as a form of indirect social protest (women's lives are effectively a life-in-death); as a whimsical bed for imaginative liberty, without moral or emotional purpose" (355). Most critics who discuss Rossetti's oeuvre of death poems tend to focus on the aesthetic or political ramifications of a poetics of death and dying. Recent critics

almost invariably study Rossetti's death poems by contextualizing them in terms of the gender implications of a female writing in a male dominated poetic tradition and in terms of the popular subject matter of the female corpse, who shows up in poems by Tennyson, Browning, and the Pre-Raphaelites; who was popular in devotional odes to real women poets who were deceased; and who provided inspiration for some of the more prominent Victorian painters.¹¹

Hallmarked by Edgar Allan Poe's assertion that "the death of a beautiful woman, is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world," the female corpse tradition encompasses the centuries of women (real and imagined) whose primary reason for existing was to die and serve as inspiration for male authors, readers, and characters in the literary work. Often, the dead woman becomes a simple plot device, a blank canvas onto which the characters can write their own story, which supersedes and, to an extent, erases that of the female corpse. In the prototypical *Hamlet*, for example, Ophelia's death affords Hamlet the opportunity to show his true feelings and Laertes further reason to challenge Hamlet. The focus, ultimately is not on Ophelia's absence, but rather on the male characters who use her death as a precursor to one-up each other. Engaging with the female corpse tradition allows women to give the dead some agency. While eulogies for real women often serve as memorials, they also serve to immortalize the author. In fictional representations, the female corpses drawn up by women authors are rarely as well behaved as their counterparts who are authored by men. Catherine Earnshaw Linton's restless spirit is far more typical of the women penned female corpse tradition than Ophelia's cast off corpse. Rossetti's dead, whether male or female, follow

Catherine's spiritedness and alternatively teach and torment the living that lament their absences.

While the female corpse literally and figuratively served as a passive object for male poets, both Jamison and Rosenblum suggest that the dead woman tradition also offered women poets a viable alternative to poetics focused on love and family and offered women poets the ability to enter a poetic sphere often dominated by male writers. Rosenblum concludes that "Rossetti's dead woman testifies both to the transcendence of desire and to the persistence of desire: she is dead because life is not *enough*—and because the aesthetic of renunciation requires this ultimate gesture" (127). For Rosenblum, Rossetti's corpses serve as reminders of the extreme ramifications of denying "real" women subjectivity and of forcing them to be closed religious vessels. Jamison, however, suggests that Rossetti's dead women contradict Rossetti's oft-ascribed aesthetic of renunciation: "Christina Rossetti's own sub-genre of dead woman poems calls for a revision of the 'aesthetics of renunciation' with which she was long associated" (265). I agree with Jameson's conclusion, and would further suggest that Rossetti's legions of dead men and women illustrate a celebration of life and death.

Many critics take the prominence of the female corpse tradition as a backdrop for Rossetti's corpses and argue, in turn, that Rossetti's legions of dead women mask her feminist poetics. Rosenblum illustrates the contrast between male and female inscribers of the female corpse by arguing that "for the male poet [. . .] the figure of the dead woman can serve as a symbol of ultimate enigmas: the still perfection of art, the indifference of nature. For the female poet, however, the dead woman can represent only the perfection of her reification in life: the face composed in death is an extension of the

smiling mask in life” (128). Similarly, Jamison suggests that “Rossetti’s corpses, like the poems that form them, give little away, tending rather to obscure what they seem to set out to disclose.” She goes on to say that “Rossetti’s play with the female corpse may be viewed as a way of deforming an oppressive metaphor, taking it to conclusions its more usual context does not anticipate, reversing the male fantasy of ultimate control and relegating the male viewer/reader/lover to the emotional and textual periphery” (274). In other words, Rossetti transforms her corpses from passive objects that are subjected to the whims of their male authors and audiences into subjects who, through death, are able to evade the reach of male privilege.

While Jamison and Rosenblum’s conclusions provide essential elucidation of many of Rossetti’s female corpse poems, their readings are complicated by the contradictory viewpoints expressed in Rossetti’s death poems and, more so, by her slippage of gender markers. These readings allow their authors to depict Rossetti as a feminist poet, which has helped improve Rossetti’s cultural reception, yet they overlook essential aspects of Rossetti’s poems both in terms of assigning non-textually present gender markers and in terms of devaluing the explicitly spiritual nature of death in the volume. Rossetti’s absolutely re-inscribes the female corpse to give her agency, but Rossetti also radically alters the tradition by showing that women are not the only ones who die. In other words, she expands the corpse tradition by inscribing dead women and men. In fact, in some poems—problematically, some that Jameson reads—it becomes impossible to give the corpse a sex or gender identity. Far from lessening Rossetti’s engagement with the female corpse tradition, her expansion of the tradition radically alters the power dynamic between female author and male character. Yet Rossetti avoids

the power dichotomy that exists between male authors and female subjects, and she affords her dead males just as much agency as her dead females. In the process of rewriting the female corpse tradition, Rossetti's death poems illustrate various levels of faith and doubt. Though Rossetti herself remained a devout Anglican, her writing illustrates the suffering that accompanies doubt. Deathbed scenes serve as the perfect locus for examining the importance of faith and doubt because death serves as the moment in which faith may be revealed as reality or, more darkly, as having been completely misplaced. Because faith and devotion were such important parts of Rossetti's life and poetry, the death poems need to be read as an expression of religious faith while retaining their engagement with a feminist viewpoint.

III. Heavenly Reunion: "Echo" and "Advent"

In order to understand Rossetti's corpses, we need to examine her view of the afterlife. I want to emphasize the religious ideology developed in the death poems; still it is worth noting that Rossetti's debate over the nature of heaven and the afterlife locates her within a feminist tradition. As D'Amico notes, "when Rossetti began writing her religious verse, religion was seen as an especially appropriate subject for a woman poet; however, both male and female critics of the time tended to dictate certain limits" (27). Similarly, Gray points out that "the poetry of Heaven provides a venue for articulating the ongoing struggle of Victorian women against gender barriers to authoritative religious speech" (37). In passing these limits, Rossetti exhibits a feminist Christian stance through her engagement in biblical exegesis.¹² Generally, eschatology and biblical exegesis fell to the hands of male writers, yet biblical exegesis constitutes a significant part of Rossetti's poetry. Dinah Roe suggests that Rossetti "refers to the Bible, either by

quotation or allusion, in nearly every poem, often recycling the same quotations and images in different poems. Read exegetically, her poems present complete theological arguments, not only about God's relationship to man, but also about the relationship of the Old Testament to the New, and the relationship of God, the ultimate creator, to the poet, the human creator" (9). Biblical commentary and study were perfectly appropriate for women; however, Rossetti's examination of the *Bible* surpasses that of the novice and approaches that of a biblical scholar. In offering her views as a scholar, Rossetti steps into a world that many, particularly High Anglicans, deemed unfit for women. That Rossetti enters this world without regard to gender norms suggests that she did not entirely support the misogyny often associated with the High Church, which took literally the biblical suggestion that women were made to be subservient to men.

Despite Rossetti's preoccupation with death and the afterlife, she is somewhat reticent when it comes to discussing heaven in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. Though she presents a significant number of poems that discuss the immediate nature of death (not limited to those discussed here), she has relatively few that explain what happens in paradise. Rossetti's volume may lack a discussion of heaven because of her subscription to the doctrine of reserve, which held that not all theological truths should be publicly discussed. Emma Mason explains that "the doctrine of reserve indicated that God's scriptural laws should remain hidden to all but the faithful, urging commentators on theology to encode or restrict their presentation of religious knowledge" (197). Rossetti's adherence to reserve helps account for the mysteriousness that critics frequently attribute to her poetry and helps explain why a volume largely concerned with death and the afterlife would neglect to discuss the afterlife in any detail. Indeed, one of the reason's

that Rossetti was so focused on heaven may be that only there, according to the doctrine of reserve, could she fully understand God and the purpose of human existence. As Mason suggests, “preventing an increasingly secular audience from accessing scriptural law, reserve also indicated that some of God’s tenets were simply beyond all human comprehension, only to be revealed to the faithful in heaven” (198). Although Rossetti suggests that anyone can get to heaven if they so choose, she is primarily concerned with addressing those who are open to belief. While the doctrine of reserve, as Mason notes, suggests a sort of elitism in catering to believers, Rossetti’s concern seems not so much to cast out nonbelievers as it is to avoid formulating a doctrine that could not fully be supported, at least not by the living.

Rossetti may have hesitated to describe heaven not only because she believed that God could not fully be understood but also because she had no biblical precedent to build on. Michael Wheeler notes that “in the New Testament the object of the Christian hope remains indefinite: outside the Book of Revelation there are no detailed descriptions of the future life. One explanation for the infrequency and generality of Jesus’s teaching on the subject in the gospels is that he took life after death for granted” (9). In addition to adhering to the doctrine of reserve, Rossetti may have been staying true to biblical precedent in her early volume. Though her latter devotional prose and poetry discuss paradise, in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, her concerns lie with the more immediate state that comes between physical death and judgment. However, she does broach the subject of heaven in the nondevotional poem “Echo” and in the devotional poem “Advent,” where she presents a typical Victorian Anglican picture of heaven as a place of reunion with God and with family.

In “Echo” and “Advent,” Rossetti works to combine traditional Christian views of heaven with the more popular views that her contemporaries were developing during the Victorian period. She depicts heaven as a place of reunion where friends and family will be forever reunited in the comfort of God. “Echo” begins with a discussion of sleep and then transitions into the wakening and heaven:

Come to me in the silence of the night;
Come in the speaking silence of a dream;¹³
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright
As sunlight on a stream;
Come back in tears,
O memory, hope, love of finished years.
Oh dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter sweet,
Whose wakening should have been in Paradise,
Where souls brimful of love abide and meet;
Where thirsting longing eyes
Watch the slow door
That opening, letting in, lets out no more.
Yet come to me in dreams, that I may live
My very life again tho’ cold in death:
Come back to me in dreams, that I may give
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath.¹⁴
Speak low, lean low,
As long ago, my love, how long ago.

Here, heaven becomes a point of reunion where loved ones will join together. However, entry into heaven does not seem to come in one mass movement for all people, as the dead, even after their awakening, will still have to wait for their loved ones to join them. Rossetti's depiction of heaven is very much in keeping with that of her time. Wheeler suggests that "in the Victorian Age, highly conventionalized social customs and funerary ritual eased the transition from the death-bed to the bed that is the grace, and consolatory Christian literature emphasized the continuities between this life and the next, and particularly the idea of heaven as community" (5). Rossetti's depiction of heaven in "Echo" is also in keeping with secular descriptions of heaven. Rosman suggests that "in the second half of the nineteenth century images of heaven changed and the traditional portrayal of a place dedicated to the joyful worship of God was supplemented by pictures of heaven as a home." She continues to say that "the Victorian image of a heavenly home—'home, sweet home' in the words of the hymn writer Fanny van Alstyne—carried with it the assumption that families separated by death would be reunited there. In the past little had been said about any such meetings in heaven but by the late nineteenth century it was taken for granted that people would recognize each other" (268).¹⁵ In "Echo," Rossetti expands the idea that heaven is a place like home by combining the "home" imagery with that of a love poem. Paradise is a place where souls can be reunited with those they left behind, as the eager watching suggests.¹⁶ However, Rossetti expands this image by marrying it to a love poem. Though the poem nowhere identifies the beloved, the longing of the narrator suggests that he/she is waiting for God. Although earthly love is important, Rossetti's poems (particularly the death poems) place human love as secondary to divine love. Paradise is desirable certainly because it will allow

families and friends to reconnect, but more so because it signifies the return of the soul to God.

Though Rossetti describes heaven as a place of joyful reunion, she emphasizes the image of heaven as a place of worship of God, as demonstrated in “Echo” and “Advent.” In the devotional poem “Advent,” the speakers are awaiting the coming of God and their subsequent entry into heaven. However, “Advent” clearly states the hierarchy that is implied in the other death poems:

One with another, soul with soul,
They kindle fire from fire:
“Friends watch us who have touched the goal.”
“They urge us, come up higher.”
“With them shall rest our waysore feet,
With them is built our home,
With Christ.”—“They sweet, but He most sweet,
Sweeter than honeycomb.”
There no more parting, no more pain,
The distant ones brought near,
The lost so long are found again,
Long lost but longer dear:
Eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard,
Nor heart conceived that rest,
With them our good things long deferred,
With Jesus Christ our Best. (25–40)

Rossetti clearly sets in place a hierarchy where the ultimate goal of paradise is reunion with God. Reunion with friends and family, while important, becomes a secondary benefit. By placing God above human relationships, Rossetti demonstrates why many of her dead and dying speakers have no qualms about leaving the world of the living. Those who possess faith know that they will rejoin the loved ones from whom they are separated, and more importantly, the faithful know that God will lovingly preside over all of them. Death is merely a temporary condition that separates people from each other and from God. Rossetti's use of the term advent in this particular death poem is telling. Kate E. Brown explains that "'Advent' is a concept of eventuality in which the future is neither determined by nor even predictable within the historical present. The primary meaning of *advent* is 'arrival' [. . .] 'advent' denotes a susceptibility to happenings whose unpredictability exceeds contingency: happenings that are 'advenient,' that is to say, additional superadded, motivated by some force that is independent of the person (or era) to whom the arrival occurs" (15). As Brown's definition suggests, even though the speakers hope to attain heaven, they ultimately have no control over their arrival.

Despite the emphasis on "hope deferred," "Advent" suggests that those who are faithful will not only find the wait worthwhile but also willingly undergo the suffering of separation from God in order to partake in eternal life with God. The purpose of heaven is not only to grant eternal life, but more importantly to grant eternal union with God:

We weep because the night is long,

We laugh for day shall rise,

We sing a slow contented song

And knock at Paradise.

Weeping we hold Him fast, Who wept

For us, we hold Him fast;

And will not let Him go except

He bless us first or last.

Weeping we hold Him fast tonight;

We will not let Him go

Till daybreak smite our wearied sight

And summer smite the snow:

Then figs shall bud, and dove with dove

Shall coo the livelong day;

Then He shall say, "Arise, My love,

My fair one, come away." (41–56)

Unlike Brown, I would suggest "Advent" ends with the expectation that heaven will be achieved. Brown suggests that "the 'hope deferred' that characterized the adventual anticipation makes the present moment profoundly meaningful [. . .] yet also empty" (18). However, for Rossetti 'hope deferred' would have implied a state of patient waiting rather than of tedium or hopelessness. Throughout her poetry, Rossetti regularly references "hope deferred" as it appears in *Proverbs*: "Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life" (*King James Bible* 13.12). Rather than leading to emptiness or nothingness, "hope deferred" leads to eternal life.

"Advent" ends with the romantic love that characterizes "Echo"; in "Advent," however, the earnestness with which the speakers long for heaven is far more cogently depicted than in Rossetti's other death poems. Here she echoes *Song of Solomon* directly

in the last two lines of “Advent” and indirectly through the directive to maintain faith in the beloved and to look for the return of the beloved. Contrary to the peaceful sleepers of Rossetti’s other death poems, the speakers of “Advent” are actively awaiting their reunion with God. Rossetti builds on the New Testament directive to watch and be prepared for the coming of the Lord. She also addresses any threat of doubt by reassuring the reader that the return to paradise will come eventually, even if it does not come immediately. Though her conception of heaven is not very pronounced in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, she provides enough commentary in “Echo” and “Advent” to demonstrate her attempt to mesh Victorian Anglican depictions of heaven and Victorian secular depictions of heaven, with the result being a heaven where all families and loved ones will exist together eternally in the presence of a beloved and loving God. This combination satisfied Rossetti’s devotional belief while still making heaven a place to which all believers have access.

IV. Deferred Reward: The State Between Death and Paradise in “Sound Sleep,”

“Rest,” “Song [When I am dead, my dearest],” and “Sweet Death”

While heaven is the final resting place, for Rossetti, entrance into heaven is not immediate. The secular poems “Sound Sleep,” “Rest,” and “Song [When I am dead, my dearest]” and the devotional poem “Sweet Death” suggest that death shall be a peaceful dream that ends with the speaker waking in Paradise. Death, however, does not offer immediate reunion with God. In one of the earliest commentaries on Christina Rossetti’s view of death, William Michael Rossetti notes that “it may be remarked in general that Christina’s poems contemplate (in accordance with a dominant form of Christian belief) an ‘intermediate state’ of perfect rest and inchoate beatific vision before the day of

judgment and the resurrection of the body and sanctification in heaven” (ix). However, the origin of this conception of sleep—the “dominant form of Christian belief” referenced by William Michael Rossetti—has proven somewhat controversial today. D’Amico comments that “throughout her life, Rossetti accepted the doctrine that after death the soul did not enter into its full heavenly reward but had to wait until the Second Coming of Christ, when all would be judged, the living and the dead, and those chosen would then enter into the new Jerusalem” (34). The issue up for debate is the origin of Rossetti’s belief.

McGann, Linda E Marshall, and Meknyk describe possible origins for Rossetti’s “intermediate state.” McGann suggests that Rossetti subscribed to the Anabaptist notion of Soul Sleep. Arguing that “the orthodox view distinguishes between the Particular Judgment, which the soul undergoes at death, and the General Judgment, which takes place at the end of the world,” he goes on to explain that “according to traditional doctrine (epitomized in Episcopalian and Roman Catholic theology), the soul at death passes to its final reward [. . .] and suffers no ‘waiting time.’ The body corrupts in the grave and is reunited with the imparadised soul on the Last Day. According to Adventist doctrine of Soul Sleep, however, death initiates the period during which the soul is placed in a state of ‘sleeping’ or suspension. Only at the Millennium, on the Last Day, is that sleep broken and the soul confronted with its final reward” (135). However, Linda E. Marshall directly refutes this view by suggesting instead that “to believe in a waiting period between death and Judgment did not identify one as a premillennarian, as McGann suggests, but as an Anglican, possibly but by no means inevitably High” (56). She goes on to argue that “in Christina Rossetti’s devotional writing, Hades—‘the coffin of

mortality, the cradle of immortality’—is ‘the intermediate abode’ between death and judgment, and ‘includes Paradise’ as one of its two regions” (55). Meknyk seconds the conclusion that Marshall develops and comments that “while Anglicans rejected the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory, some High Anglicans, including Christina Rossetti, believed in the doctrine of ‘soul sleep.’ According to them, the soul of the dead would not go directly to hell or heaven but would instead remain in suspended animation until the Day of Judgment, when their eternal destiny would be pronounced” (84). Regardless of whether Rossetti was influenced by the Anabaptists or the Anglicans (the latter of which seems more likely), she clearly expounds the notion that a period of sleep comes between life and the afterlife; Rossetti distinctly suggests that the soul is quite literally laid to rest before awakening in heaven.

“Sound Sleep” makes use of the notion of soul sleep to suggest that death will be a pleasant state, even before the soul enters into heaven. The poem mimics the dichotomy between the faithful and the faithless that runs through *Goblin Market and Other Poems*:

Some are laughing, some are weeping;
She is sleeping, only sleeping.
Round her rest wild flowers are creeping;
There the wind is heaping, heaping
Sweetest sweets of Summer’s keeping,
By the corn fields ripe for reaping. (1–6)

The poem initially seems odd, in its suggestion that death prompts laughter; however, in Rossetti’s schemata of life and death, laughing at someone’s passing is perfectly

acceptable because death signals that the individual is one step closer to entering the New Jerusalem. Though Rossetti refrains here from conceptualizing heaven, she gives a very clear depiction of what happens between death and entry into Paradise:

There by day the lark is singing
And the grass and weeds are springing;
There by night the bat is winging;
There for ever winds are bringing
Far-off chimes of church-bells ringing.
Night and morning, noon and even,
Their sound fills her dreams with Heaven:
The long strife at length is striven:
Till her grave-bands shall be riven,
Such is the good portion given
To her soul at rest and shriven. (12–22)

This depiction suggests that the dead are going to still be motivated by hope for and visions of heaven. “Sound Sleep” posits that though the dead are in a dream state, they are cognizant of their surroundings, and they do retain their spirituality. Counter to the death experienced by those in the female corpse tradition, the dead subject here retains mental agency. For the faithful, the primary difference, then, between being alive and being dead is rest. Both states are characterized by longing for heaven, but the former state is bereft of the peace that is afforded by the latter state. Death brings freedom to contemplate God without having to struggle against the temptations that beset the living.

However, as the last verse indicates, only those who are prepared for death (i.e. “shriven”) will find it peaceful.

Rossetti also addresses the state between death and heaven in “Rest.” As the poem suggests, despite the lag-time between death and entrance into heaven, the intermediate state does not greatly affect those who are dead. After passing the point of death, the individual no longer struggles with spiritual quandaries and is thus able to wait patiently for heavenly reward:

O Earth, lie heavily upon her eyes;
Seal her sweet eyes weary of watching, Earth;
Lie close around her; leave no room for mirth
With its harsh laughter, nor for sound of sighs.
She hath no questions, she hath no replies,
Hushed in and curtained with a blessed dearth
Of all that irked her from the hour of birth;
With stillness that is almost Paradise.
Darkness more clear than noon-day holdeth her,
Silence more musical than any song;
Even her very heart has ceased to stir:
Until the morning of Eternity
Her rest shall not begin nor end, but be;
And when she wakes she will not think it long.

“Rest” entails not only waiting for entry into heaven but also forsaking the strife and the pleasures of the living in favor of the eventual attainment of something more dear. Death here occupies a space of deferred reward: “with stillness that is almost paradise” (8).

“Sound Sleep” and “Rest” present complimentary depictions of death as a release from life. The poems suggest that while life may be pleasant and full of laughter, it is still less preferable than the “stillness” and dreams that are mere shadows of heaven, let alone heaven itself. Though “Sound Sleep” and “Rest” involve the living imposing their interpretation of death onto the dead subjects, the poems suggest that the dead are comfortably at peace with their lack of life and with their as yet inability to enter into heaven. Moreover, rather than focusing on the physicality of the corpse and its meaning to the living, which would be typical of a female corpse poem such as Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover,” Rossetti’s poems emphasize the spiritual state of the dead.

“Sound Sleep” and “Rest” use the metaphor of sleep to describe the intermediary state between life and death. Both poems present sleep as occurring within the comfort of nature, with the earth and flowers growing up around the dead. The image of the body becoming one with nature—metaphorically within the poem and literally through decomposition—suggests a separation between the consciousness of the individual and the physical self. In her discussion of “Goblin Market,” Mary Arseneau addresses the simultaneous dichotomy and parallel between the natural and divine. Based on Rossetti’s conception of nature, which was influenced by Keble, Arseneau notes that nature functions as a parallel of the divine while also permitting the temptation to forsake the divine in favor of earthly pleasure (81). She explains that “the natural world has an important part to play in Rossetti’s theology and aesthetics, for while she recognized it as

a lesser good than the heavenly reward to which she aspires, this world remains an important avenue to God. We learn about God through His creation, and we work toward our own salvation according to how we think and act in this world” (82). Through death and interment, Rossetti’s characters are able to have the best of both worlds. Death shuts the body’s eyes to nature, thereby eliminating any temptation to attachment. Moreover, the body becomes one with the natural world and is able to assimilate itself into a representation of the divine. Death, then, brings the individual closer to divinity not only through the passage of the spirit but also through the passage of the physical body.

The idea that death brings us one-step closer to heaven helps to explain the speaker’s request in “Song [When I am dead, my dearest],” where the speaker asks to not be eulogized. The narrator’s plea is at odds with the desire for remembrance that is associated with death and dying in the Victorian era. The anonymous speaker’s ambivalence over whether he/she is remembered contrasts sharply, for example, with Tennyson’s “Ulysses” and Robert Browning’s “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church,” where the speakers hope to gain eternal renown through acts of heroism and monuments, respectively. Rossetti’s speaker, however, cares little for posterity:

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;¹⁷
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;

And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.
I shall not see the shadows,
I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
Haply I may remember,
And haply may forget.

Critics have offered different reasons for the narrator's ambivalence; however, it can best be explained in the context of Rossetti's vision of death. Despite Conley's suggestion that "the desire for death rather than the beloved speaks loudest in the poem; death as an escape from a life that is enigmatically unsatisfactory, from an intimate relationship that mysteriously falls short" (267), the speaker's reaction becomes less puzzling when placed against Rossetti's faith. If the narrator's relationship falls short, it does so because he/she measures that relationship against his/her relationship with God. Death moves the individual closer to God and is a necessary fate rather than something to be feared and shunned. The desire for heaven helps explain the plea of the speaker—"When I am dead, my dearest, / Sing no sad songs for me"—which is initially a bit startling, particularly if the poem is conceptualized in terms of a love lyric. Reading this line in terms of the female corpse tradition, despite the lack of a gender signifier, Jamison argues for a literal reading where a female speaker asks her dearest to refrain from "singing" about her

(265). However, when read in a religious context, it becomes apparent that the speaker needs no “sad songs” or trappings of a proper Victorian grave because he/she will be oblivious to the world he/she left; rather, the speaker will be engaged in the peaceful dream of heaven that occupies the dead before their final awakening. Again, a necessary part of death becomes the interment of the individual who physically becomes part of nature.

Though Rossetti uses the physical layout of *Goblin Market and Other Poems* to isolate her devotional poems from the secular poems, the devotional poems are thematically similar to the secular poems, with the caveat that the religious content of the latter is not always overt. The devotional poem “Sweet Death” compliments “Sound Sleep,” “Rest,” and “Song” by further explaining why death is desirable. In “Sweet Death,” Rossetti presents a cut and dry discussion of death that cogently restates the message of “Sound Sleep,” “Rest,” and “Song.” The poem begins by demonstrating that death is a natural process of life:

The youngest blossoms die.
They die and fall and nourish the rich earth
From which they lately had their birth;
Sweet life, but sweeter death that passeth by
And is as though it had not been:—
All colours turn to green;
The bright hues vanish and the odours fly,
The grass hath lasting worth.
And youth and beauty die.

So be it, O my God, Thou God of truth:

Better than beauty and than youth

Are Saints and Angels, a glad company;

And Thou, O Lord, our Rest and Ease,

Art better far than these.

Why should we shrink from our full harvest? why

Prefer to glean with Ruth? (9–24)

Again, Rossetti frames her discussion of death in terms of its significance to nature, thereby normalizing the process in an attempt to remove the fear and mystery that tend to be associated with the loss of life. That death exists in nature, which is an image of the divine, should provide comfort vis-a-vis the notion that God intended all life to be temporal, which again emphasizes that individuals should focus on eternal life with God rather than the transitory joys of the current life. Moreover, she introduces the idea that life will always exist through the eternally green grass. In addition to suggesting that death should be welcome because it is natural, Rossetti stresses that death will lead to reunion with God, thereby making it desirable as well as normal.

Rather than being “morbid,” as William Michael Rossetti feared, Christina Rossetti’s death poems are celebratory because of the impending reunion with God. When read from a secular perspective, Rossetti’s death poems appear harsh and even cold because they express a celebratory image of death that, at least initially, seems incongruous with the physical ramifications of death. However, Rossetti’s focus is not to deny the importance of earthly relationships but rather to contextualize them with respect to the divine. Death in this context becomes a shuffling off of the body and of mortality

in return for the (eventual) eternal life of the soul in Heaven; in other words, death is a beginning of eternal life as much as the termination of temporal life. The faith that they will be reunited with God motivates that speakers of “Sound Sleep,” “Rest,” “Song,” and “Sweet Death” to conceive of death as desirable respite while they wait for entry into heaven. Where some writers, such as Nesbit and Tomson, valorize death because it leads to an end of human suffering, Rossetti valorizes death because it leads to a perfect existence in the proximity of God.

V. Moments of Doubt: “At Home,” “A Peal of Bells,”

“After Death,” and “Up-Hill”

Though Rossetti is primarily known as a devotional poet, with good cause, she does have a few poems where she explores states of doubt, if only to dismiss doubt as being unfounded and fruitless. In “At Home,” “A Peal of Bells,” “After Death,” and “Up-Hill” Rossetti depicts characters who resist death because of a refusal to relinquish the material aspects of life and because of a fear of what the afterlife will hold. Though these poems clearly express states of doubt, they do not endorse disbelief but rather work to educate those who are infirm of faith. Rossetti clearly believed that life and nature represented lesser forms of what would be found in heaven. She was concerned about the risk of holding this life in higher esteem than it was worth and consistently endorsed the belief that life in heaven would be far better than life on earth. Though all four poems are secular and fail to mention God even obliquely, the poems work with Rossetti’s religious verses as examples of how not to approach death. The absence of God in the poems is indicative of the confusion expressed by the characters in the poems, rather than being symptomatic of a larger cultural condition.

In "At Home," Rossetti presents a dead speaker who is loath to find rest. Unlike Rossetti's faithful dead, who are pacified with dreams of heaven until they reach the real thing, the speaker of "At Home" follows Catherine Earnshaw Linton and falls into the category of wandering dead, or those spirits who are too preoccupied with the living to find solace in God. The speaker of "At Home" prefers to haunt his/her former home rather than seeking rest:

'Tomorrow,' said they, strong with hope,

And dwelt upon the pleasant way:

'Tomorrow,' cried they one and all,

While no one spoke of yesterday.

Their life stood full at blessed noon;

I, only I, had passed away:

'Tomorrow and today,' they cried;

I was of yesterday.

I shivered comfortless, but cast

No chill across the tablecloth;

I all-forgotten shivered, sad

To stay and yet to part how loth:

I passed from the familiar room,

I who from love had passed away,

Like the remembrance of a guest

That tarrieth but a day. (17-32)

Despite being a restless wanderer, this speaker lacks Catherine's spirit. The speaker here fails to recognize that his/her rightful place is the grave; rather, he/she seeks remembrance, which is a vain form of trying to continue his/her past life. The speaker's inability to find his/her true place directly counters the "ironic consciousness" that Jamison attributes to the speaker (269). She argues that "the 'passing' ghost departs from the static, dry and perfect female corpse to embody an ungendered, androgynous language that allows more freedom of movement, performativity and sensuality in language" (269). She goes on to claim that "the speaker's death and apparent absence grant her insight and capabilities that evade the living" (269). Jamison's reading is weakened by a lack of evidence to determine the sex of the speaker; instead, she relies on the existence of a tradition of female death poems, ignoring in the process Rossetti's tendency to write poems from the perspective of both male and female speakers. Moreover, Jamison's reading does not account for the speaker's refusal to relinquish the world of the living. The speaker of "At Home" falls victim to a condition possessed by many of Rossetti's characters who are not strong in their faith. Rather than passing into the sleep of death and looking forward to God and heaven, the speaker instead lags behind in the haunts of the living, where he/she is still tempted by that which is second best.

Moreover, in "At Home," a sharp discrepancy exists between the speaker and his/her friends. Despite the speaker's refusal to pass on, his/her friends look forward to their own passing. Counter to Jamison's suggestion that the speaker ultimately possesses an insight that his/her friends lack and that "their faith in the inevitable continuity of temporal progression from present to future distracts them from any insights they might

derive from remembering the death of their friend and so blinds them to the very inevitability that infinite time must one day out-progress them in a finite life” (270), I would argue that the finite nature of life is precisely what the friends are discussing:

I listened to their honest chat:
Said one: ‘Tomorrow we shall be
Plod plod along the featureless sands
And coasting miles and miles of sea.’
Said one: ‘Before the turn of tide
We will achieve the eyrie-seat,’
Said one: Tomorrow shall be like
Today, but much more sweet.’ (9–16)

The imagery that they employ suggests that their concern with tomorrow is directly intertwined with their desire for heaven. Though Jamison finds a sort of fatalism in the comment “tomorrow shall be like / Today, but much more sweet,” this imagery crops up repeatedly in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* as a vision of acceptance that while this world is good, the next will be better (15–16). The friends’ rally cry of tomorrow does contain a certain sadness because it excludes the speaker; however, that exclusion ultimately is due to the speaker’s reticence to leave the past and to embrace his/her movement to rest and ultimately to heaven, where the speaker and the friends will eventually reunite. Rather than expressing the hope of his/her friends, the speaker exists in a sort of stasis. Within the specific context of Rossetti’s work and the broader context of Victorian death poetry, the speaker’s reticence is significant not only because he/she

holds excessively to life in preference to eternal reward but also because those whom the speaker holds onto are those with whom he/she would be reunited in Heaven.

The fear of death expressed by the speaker of “At Home” is similarly expressed by the speaker in “A Peal of Bells,” which presents a sort of reversal of “At Home” in that the latter is spoken by a dead individual who contemplates his/her living friends and the former is spoken by a not yet dead speaker who contemplates his/her dead friend. Much like the speaker of “At Home,” the speaker in “A Peal of Bells” is not content with the prospect of death:

Strike the bells solemnly,
Ding dong deep:
My friend is passing to his bed,
Fast asleep;
There's plaited linen round his head,
While foremost go his feet—
His feet that cannot carry him.
My feast's a show, my lights are dim;
Be still, your music is not sweet,—
There is no music more for him:
His lights are out, his feast is done;
His bowl that sparkled to the brim
Is drained, is broken, cannot hold;
My blood is chill, his blood is cold;
His death is full, and mine begun. (16–30)

What begins as a lament for the passing of a friend transition into a lament for the self. Significantly, though this corpse is male, the mislead speaker of the poem engages in a sort of objectification that female corpses typically are subjected to by their male viewers. Yet this is not an attempt to flip the power dynamic of the corpse tradition but rather to illustrate the speaker's misunderstanding of death. The speaker's fear of death is such that the poem becomes a requiem for the living. One reason for the speaker's dread can be located in his/her emphasis on material goods. Comparing the corpse to his/her plate ware, the speaker emphasizes the material decay of the physical body rather than the spiritual release that is to be found in the religious poems. Much like the speaker of "At Home," the speaker of "A Peal of Bells" is foiled by his/her inability to give up past material aspects of life in order to welcome the immaterial future. Where both poems invoke feasting, "A Peal of Bells" differs markedly from "At Home" in terms of the emphasis placed on the physical aspects of feasting, as represented in the former, versus the communal aspect of feasting, as emphasized in the latter. Where the group of friends in "At Home" welcome death, the living speaker of "A Peal of Bells" seems unwilling to leave behind his/her golden lamps, plates, and fruit. Moreover, the speaker's depiction of his/her dead friend suggests that death is a broken and miserable state. The focus then becomes what is lost rather than what is gained through death.

Much like the speaker of "At Home," the speaker of "A Peal of Bells" struggles against his/her inability to give up the past and welcome the future. While Rossetti explores the hesitancy to embrace death in "At Home" and "A Peal of Bells," she does not do so to suggest that death is undesirable. As Arseneau notes, Rossetti demonstrates concern that this world would prove a distraction from the next in her devotional prose

work *Annus Domini*: “O LORD Jesus Christ, King for ever and ever, suffer not the kingdoms of the world or the glory of them to enslave any heart from Thy free service. Let not the worldly influence sway us, or worldly glory dazzle us or this vain life enthrall us in its shadow, or riches weigh us down to earth, or pleasure slay us. Amen” (qtd. in Arseneau 83). The speakers of “At Home” and “A Peal of Bells” respectively express preference for pleasure and riches, which diverts them from their true course of action, which should be to worship God. The speaker’s friends in “At Home,” with their calls of tomorrow, seem to recognize that the feast they are engaging in pales in comparison to what awaits them in heaven.

Rossetti presents an additional example that compares true faith with false faith in “After Death.” The poem most directly mocks and counters the female corpse tradition by giving the corpse voice, where her viewer can only manage to say three words. Jamison suggests that “the triumph of the female corpse is most thinly veiled (or shrouded)—it is the surviving male who is blinded (unable to see that he is being watched and heard), watery (weeping) and silenced, while the female corpse watches, listens, interprets, and speaks through the poem” (266). In addition to having voice, the dead speaker also has access to a knowledge that her¹⁸ audience lacks. The poem presents a dead speaker who recognizes the value of death but who is faced by a living viewer who lacks the speaker’s insight. The living man in “After Death” exhibits a misunderstanding of death similar to that of the speakers of “At Home” and of “A Peal of Bells”:

The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept
And strewn with rushes, rosemary and may

Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay,
Where thro' the lattice ivy-shadows crept.
He leaned above me, thinking that I slept
And could not hear him; but I heard him say:
'Poor child, poor child:' and as he turned away¹⁹
Came a deep silence, and I knew he wept.
He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold
That hid my face, or take my hand in his,
Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:
He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is
To know he still is warm tho' I am cold.

While his expression of pity may initially seem touching, it has no place in Rossetti's expression of death as a passage to heaven. Death, here, is not only a time of mourning but also a time of joyousness; while one may lament the separation that death enacts, one must also realize that separation is only temporary.

"After Death" is not explicitly religious, still it does make sense to read the poem as keeping with Rossetti's religious death poems. In this context, the speaker aligns with those who express true faith in God. In comparing the speaker to the viewer, Jamison comments that the speaker is "privy to privileged information, and possessed of unclouded vision and insight, while he still suffers, weeping, without access to the knowledge and vision that would reveal his true seclusion" (266). Though death does not automatically grant one insight, the dead speaker of "After Death" does indeed have

access to knowledge that the viewer lacks. The speaker recognizes death as a step to heaven. Though she is not yet interred and one with the earth, she is still surrounded by images of nature (i.e. the rushes, rosemary, may, and ivy). The speaker's recognition of the benefits of death may help explain the last two lines of the poem and clarify the narrator's satisfaction with her death in the face of the viewer's life. That the viewer has not yet come to terms with the nature of death suggests that he needs more time to find faith before he really needs it.

Though "Up-Hill" does not express the same level of misguidance as "At Home," "A Peal of Bells," and "After Death," it depicts the questioning and conversion that must be undergone by the characters in the other three poems.²⁰ "Up-Hill" involves two speakers, one who is firm of faith and the other who is full of questions. Ultimately, "Up-Hill" echoes the sentiment that death is desirable through its question and answer format and through its depiction of life as a journey that ends in rest:

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?

Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?

From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting-place?

A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?

You cannot miss that inn. (1-8)

As the two speakers alternate lines, the poem addresses the questioner's earthly concerns: do I have to struggle to get to heaven and will I have trouble finding it? These concerns

seem calculated not only to dismiss pedestrian fears of being unable to get into heaven but also to address more specifically the Evangelical belief in predestination, where only the elect could ascend to heaven.

In “Up-Hill,” Rossetti explicitly counters the idea of predestination by suggesting that all people will find their way and will be welcome:

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?

Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?

They will not keep you standing at that door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?

Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?

Yea, beds for all who come. (9–16)

That there will be “beds for all” and that those who arrive will be rewarded for their travails counters predestination not only by welcoming all but also by offering reward for toil, a belief which nineteenth-century Evangelicals denied. Evangelicals believed that all who underwent conversion, or experienced God in their lives directly, would be rewarded with salvation. The Evangelicals took literally the seventeenth Article of Faith, Of Predestination and Election,²¹ which held that faith alone was necessary for salvation. Rossetti’s offer of reward for labor is, however, in keeping with Tractarian practice, which held that both faith and actions were necessary for heavenly reward.

Though “Up-Hill” is comprised of questions and answers that explore the nature of doubt, the purpose of the poem is to reaffirm faith rather than to emphasize doubt.

Nonetheless, of “Up-Hill, McGann comments that “the speaker questions her divine interlocutor about the pilgrimage, but the answers she gets are strange and mysteriously portentous through the first twelve lines. Finally, however, Rossetti is told, in a disturbingly ambiguous phrase, that her laborious journey will be complete” (134).

While the answers provided in “Up-Hill” may be ambiguous, I would suggest that they are so because death is not something that can be fully understood by the living. Though she is discussing Rossetti’s views on religion in general rather than on death specifically, Roe’s discussion of Rossetti’s engagement with Tractarian belief is applicable here. Roe offers that “the oft-cited secrecy and mystery of Rossetti’s writings have less to do with her personal desire to be elusive than with her artistic desire to represent God and the sanctity of human emotion in a way which is mindful of the problematics of such a project” (12). This “problematic” that Roe discusses is precisely what we encounter in “Up-Hill,” which attempts to provide reassurance to those who struggle with doubt while still acknowledging that there are no definitive answers to be had. However, by framing death and heaven in terms of what they are not—i.e. not based on predestination—Rossetti is able to provide a sense of comfort while negating a powerful, long held doctrine and while replacing it instead with her own Tractarian influenced beliefs.

The poems “At Home,” “A Peal of Bells,” “After Death,” and “Up-Hill” are among the most prominent poems of doubt that are present in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, but they are by no means the only poems of doubt to be found in Rossetti’s oeuvre. Though they have been identified as “morbid,” Rossetti’s death poems are noteworthy as explorations of religious faith and doubt. The set of doubt poems show that while Rossetti gained the reputation of a religious devotee, she focused, especially in

her early career, on poetry that uses death as a vehicle to explore doubt and the struggle inherent in maintaining faith. Catherine Musello Cantalupo argues that “for Rossetti, devotional poetry is poetry that records the poet’s subjective and incessant spiritual vicissitudes, the emotional waxing and waning of spiritual values such as faith, hope, and love, and the poet’s consequent grasp of the appropriate revelation and religious tradition by which to understand these feelings. The devotional poet uses her emotions to lead herself, and her readers, into the meaning of biblical revelation, doctrine, and, for the Anglo-Catholic such as Rossetti, the traditions of the church” (275). Though they are not devotional poems, “At Home,” “A Peal of Bells,” “After Death,” and “Up-Hill” work similarly to explore and dismiss doubt.

Rossetti’s religious beliefs were not particularly radical in anything other than their extreme devotion, yet her writing maintained continued influence during the latter years of the Victorian era, even as religious doubt and questioning grew. While many later Victorian women poets admired and attempted to imitate Rossetti’s craft and status, few retained her level of devotion. Isobel Armstrong explains that “at the end of her life [Rossetti] came into the orbit of late nineteenth-century journalism and the diversification of print media, taken up as she was by the celebrity interview and the specialist review alike. Katherine Tynan wrote a number of ‘celebrity’ articles on the strength of her friendship with the older poet (1895, 1912). Amy Levy wrote on her for Wilde’s *Woman’s World* (1888). Alice Meynell also reviewed her work.” However, despite Rossetti’s general popularity, Armstrong suggests that among women poets “the response is on the whole wary and uneasy, circumspect and puzzled. [Rossetti] is felt to be an

anomaly, despite what all these poets had learned from her compressed, compact lyric and formal adventurousness” (23).²²

In his preface to her collected poems, William M. Rossetti predicted that the reception of Christina Rossetti’s devotional poems would wane as the century progressed: “the deepest interest of the authoress’s life was devotional; her Christian faith being of the most absolute and also of the most literal kind, and, rationalizing days when old dogmas have to pass through the crucible and come out transformed, one cannot readily foresee when further religious poems, on quite the same likes as those of Christina Rossetti, are likely to be forthcoming” (ix). As doubt grew at the end of the Victorian period so too did the exploration of doubt and faith in Victorian woman’s poetry. While Rossetti’s legacy of devotion can be traced to her contemporaries Dora Greenwell and Jean Ingelow and to her devotee Gerard Manley Hopkins, the struggle with faith and with conceptions of the afterlife can be seen in male and female poets with whom Rossetti is not generally associated. Though they were writing almost twenty years after the publication of *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, E. Nesbit, and Graham R. Thomson explore issues of faith and doubt in lyrics that are reminiscent of those that Rossetti presented in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. However, the views of Coleridge, Nesbit, and Tomson depart from Rossetti’s in that where Rossetti remains firm in her conviction that there is a heaven and a loving God, the other three writers allow for the possibility that Anglican faith was not the only available belief system. Coleridge, whose views are closest to Rossetti’s, generally held to Anglican faith but tempered her belief with the assertion that doubt could be beneficial; Nesbit advocated Christian morality while making her “religion” human centered rather than God centered;

and Tomson denied the existence of a God who took interest in humanity, as Rossetti's loving God did. Though the three later writers revise the Anglican definition of religion, an understanding of the God that dominated that religion, as depicted by Rossetti, is essential in order to understand what the later writers were reacting against.

Chapter Two

Existing in Doubt: Negative Capability

in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's *Fancy's Following*

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's life (1861–1907) appears to be almost puritanical when compared to the lives led by E. Nesbit and Graham R. Tomson; Coleridge's experience mirrors much more closely the life led by Christina Rossetti. Where Nesbit and Tomson railed against their middle-class upbringing, Coleridge flourished within bounds that would have been intolerable for the other two women. Like Rossetti, Coleridge was exceptionally well educated and well cultured for a middle-class Victorian woman. She never married, instead remaining a part of her parents' household. Like all three women, Coleridge wrote in a variety of genres, including poetry, fiction, and prose nonfiction. She wrote novels and short stories, and a variety of reviews and articles. In addition to being active in literary circles, Coleridge belonged to a prominent literary family, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge being her great-great uncle and Sara Coleridge being her great aunt. Among family friends were Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Robert Browning; the Pre-Raphaelite artists Holman Hunt and Sir John Everett Millais; actress Fanny Kemble; and singer Jenny Lind.

Though her lifestyle was much different from Nesbit and Tomson's, like Rossetti's, Coleridge's poetry is thematically similar to the poetry of the other two women. Coleridge attempts to modernize traditional religious beliefs for a late Victorian audience who would have struggled with issues of faith and doubt, and in the process, she relies heavily on the gothic to illustrate the darkness that accompanies religious faith. Despite her relatively staid lifestyle, Coleridge's 1898 volume *Fancy's Following*

explores various levels of religious questioning.²³ As the volume moves through various stages of faith and doubt, two issues become apparent: not all questions have answers, and not all answers should be accepted without asking further questions. In *Fancy's Following*, spirituality becomes an intimate and personal experience, and the volume allows for a variety of perspectives on faith and doubt, which at once accommodate and reconcile the volume's combination of devotional and gothic poetry. Applying Coleridge's discussion of faith and mortality to the gothic poems allows both for a bridging of the divide between her religious poems and her gothic poems, which are generally divided into two separate veins.

Thematically, the issues addressed in Coleridge's religious poetry carry over into the poems that are frequently isolated in a separate gothic tradition. As Coleridge handles them, the two genres differ in that the religious poems employ explicit Christian language and imagery to explore the nature of faith where the gothic poems explore secular expressions of spiritual crises. Because the gothic and the Christian poems adopt questions of mortality and doubt as their focus, these poems should be read as part of the same tradition. Moreover, even the explicitly Christian poems retain elements of the gothic in order to illustrate the fear and anxiety Coleridge associates with death and the afterlife. While exploring varying levels of Christian belief, Coleridge presents extreme states of belief, namely blind faith and complete disbelief, in the poems "The Devil's Funeral," "Doubt" and "There Was No Place Found"; here she examines the ramifications and drawbacks of such extreme states of belief and suggests that neither is optimal. Coleridge equates atheism and Christian zealotry not only with closed mindedness but also with the potential for adhering to the wrong conclusion. For

Coleridge, God is not something that can be fully understood; therefore, forming fixed religious beliefs is not only presumptuous but also indicative that these beliefs are not entirely correct.

Though Coleridge denounces fixed states of belief, she acknowledges that existing in doubt is not always comfortable and indeed can be terrifying. In her gothic and non-gothic poems, Coleridge explores the hopelessness that accompanies varying levels of doubt; specifically, Coleridge draws on a dread of mortality and a fear of the afterlife in such poems as “The Witch,” “Master and Guest,” and “The Other Side of a Mirror.” Through her engagement with contemporary discussions on the afterlife and loss of faith, Coleridge returns to the Romantic notion of negative capability. Her expression of Keats’s theory becomes apparent as her various narrators search for answers. Though Coleridge suggests that searching for answers is important, if uncomfortable, she ends *Fancy’s Following* by suggesting that ultimately humans cannot achieve any firm conclusions about religious matters. Nonetheless, “Self-Question” advocates the continued study of nature and art in order to seek understanding of divinity while acknowledging that there are things to live for other than God.

I. “Outside the Gates of Fairyland”:

Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s Literary Inheritance

The scholarly discussion of Coleridge’s poetry primarily revolves around her “magical” gothic poems, such as “The Other Side of a Mirror,” “The Witch,” and “The Witches’ Wood” and her choice to publish her poetry pseudonymously.²⁴ Typically, the gothic poems are studied in a separate tradition from her other types of poetry and are read with the assumption that they respond directly to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s gothic

poems.²⁵ The level of Samuel Taylor's influence on Mary Elizabeth has long been a source of debate. Though she signed her name to her published prose, both fictional and nonfictional, multiple critics have suggested that she was loath to follow suit with her poetry because her relationship to the elder Coleridge made her uncomfortable presenting her poetry to a public audience. Christine Battersby suggests that Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's "poetry was written for a small circle of friends, and was not designed for public consumption, [. . . and that] she was even bullied into publishing a selection of the verses" (254). Though Battersby's depiction of the circumstances that surrounded the publication of Coleridge's first volume of poetry is rather harsh, Coleridge was initially reluctant to see the edition printed.²⁶ Beatrice White, Theresa Whistler, and Edith Sitchell (Coleridge's friend and posthumous editor) suggest that Coleridge's reluctance to publish resulted not from fear of the public eye but rather from fear that her poetry would be viewed through the lens of her familial poetic heritage, which she supposedly did not want to tarnish. White claims that "the name of Coleridge is an uneasy inheritance for a poet" and that in adopting a pseudonym Coleridge was "taking refuge in a genuine humility, for she set small store by her writing" (81–82).

While I agree that Coleridge had a lot to live up to in terms of her family's literary reputation, both with respect to Samuel Taylor as well as Sara, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's use of a pseudonym is not necessarily indicative of her views on her own poetic merit or lack thereof. Dorothy Mermin presents a strong case that the use of pseudonyms was common practice among female and male poets of varying statures. She comments that "female novelists' use of male pseudonyms has been said to characterize the period from the 1840s to 1880. In this as in other ways, women's

entrance into literature was facilitated by an established convention which they used with special intensity and an inflection peculiar to themselves.” She goes on to argue, however, that pseudonymous work was not limited to women writers. In terms of poetry, the use of pseudonyms was governed at least in part by the author’s experience or lack thereof. Mermin explains that “most male poets inaugurated their careers without disclosing their identities, testing the waters while following a tradition going back to Renaissance poets’ eagerness to define themselves as gentlemanly amateurs; such poets, the venerable convention went, wrote for their own and their friends’ amusement, published more or less inadvertently, and were indifferent to reward—a useful pose for women too. Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, like Elizabeth Barrett and the Brontës, sent their first books forth anonymously.”²⁷ Coleridge certainly adopted the pose that Mermin suggests, and her early critics just as eagerly perpetuate the notion that she was indifferent to poetic merit.

Regardless of whether she was simply following custom or was indeed concerned about preserving her family’s literary reputation, Coleridge’s poetry is frequently read against her family’s tradition. Coleridge’s supposed fear of her “uneasy inheritance” proved valid, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s shadow indeed hovers over much of the critical discussion of her poetry. Placing Coleridge in her great-great-uncle’s shadow is not a recent critical phenomenon. When her poetry was first published, it received little public attention, but Henry Newbolt’s *Poems by Mary E Coleridge*, a posthumous collection that contained new and previously published poems, was suddenly in high demand when the reading public discovered that “Anados” was the great-great-niece of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Interest in the literary relation between the two Coleridges

continues today. For example, Alison Chapman and Katherine McGowran read Mary Elizabeth's gothic poetry as a direct response to the gothic poems of Samuel Taylor. In her discussion of Mary Elizabeth's "The Witch" and Samuel Taylor's "Christabel," McGowran comments that "it is as if Mary herself is speaking from the gates of her own imaginary landscape, pleading admittance perhaps to the 'Fairyland' of her great-great-uncle's poem" ("Restless Wanderer" 188). In addition, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar adopt a similar reading practice, though they argue that Mary Elizabeth's poetry not only responds directly to Samuel Taylor but also responds indirectly to all male writers.

Studies that compare the Coleridges are not without their faults. As Chapman rightly points out, in discussions where Mary Elizabeth Coleridge is studied in comparison to Samuel Taylor, the authority and reputation of Mary Elizabeth's great-great-uncle overshadow the presence, perception, and reception of Mary Elizabeth herself: "Mary Elizabeth Coleridge is always the outsider, the slave to the master-male poet" (109). However, Chapman suggests that while Mary Elizabeth is "in the thrall of her male mentors," she does manage to turn the "master/slave binary" between the male and female Coleridge to her advantage (110). It is apparent that Coleridge labored under no illusions and was indeed aware of the precarious position she was placed in because of her family's literary heritage. In her diaries she wrote that "I have no fairy god-mother [. . .] but lay claim to a fairy great-great-uncle, which is perhaps the reason that I am concerned to wander restlessly around the Gates of Fairyland, although I have never yet passed them" (qtd. in Sichel 11). Although her acknowledgement does not preclude her admittance to fairyland, today Coleridge is still forced to loiter at the gates and is only able to gain admittance, for many critics, by virtue of her familial name. The fame of

Coleridge's great-great-uncle still supersedes her own, often even in studies ostensibly focusing on her work, and the resulting dichotomy is not an exchange between two equals, as, for example, the partnership between the elder Coleridge and William Wordsworth was, but rather is an exchange between a poet and his apostle. The unintended implication is that Mary Elizabeth's poetry is worth studying only in order to trace the literary influences of Samuel Taylor, despite the fact that most studies that focus on Mary Elizabeth are simply trying to suggest a context for reading her poetry. Such studies suggest that her poetry exists as a corrective to his and as an attempt to feminize an otherwise masculine poetics. The unintentional result of such scrutiny, however, is the suggestion that Mary Elizabeth was myopically focused on her great-great-uncle and was unable to assert an independent creative energy. Coleridge's engagement with gender and her legacy need to be studied; however, these studies must be undertaken in a way that positions her as a poet in her own right.

Not only is Coleridge's poetic authority damaged when she is repeatedly seen as an imitator rather than an originator or creator, but also historical poetic aesthetics are neglected in the interest of establishing familial poetic connections. Connections inevitably will and indeed should be drawn between members of literary families; however, temporal differences, along with any accompanying social, political, philosophical, and aesthetical differences, must be accounted for in order to ensure that familial connections are drawn responsibly.²⁸ Critics who read the Victorian Poet through the eyes of the Romantic Poet often fail to recognize the social repercussions of that act, particularly by assuming that Mary Elizabeth Coleridge is not only the author of but also the speaker in her poems. Most scholarship on Coleridge's poetry focuses on

individual poems, and in the absence of a clearly defined speaker, scholars generally attribute the poetic voice to Coleridge herself, much as they would with the elder Coleridge in his conversational poems.²⁹ However, this attribution is impractical, if not impossible, when Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's volume *Fancy's Following* is studied in the whole because the result of absorbing all the speakers into one individual is a fractured, noncohesive, and intersexed identity. Coleridge regularly presents both male and female characters, and often relies on characters with no distinct sexual or gender markers. Her use of the pseudonym Anodos reflects the play of voice that encompasses much of the volume because the speaker is both figuratively and literally "The Wanderer," in part because the speaker sifts through different beliefs and points of view and in part because the speaker refuses to be tied down to any one specific perspective.³⁰ Through her play with voice, Coleridge demonstrates a feminist move that is far more radical than her revisionary aesthetics. By speaking from a variety of gendered perspectives, Coleridge demonstrates a refusal to be limited to a 'feminine' voice.

II. Intellectual Roleplaying: Negative Capability and the State of Victorian Faith

In addition to taking cues from her great-great-uncle's literary output, Coleridge taps into John Keats' philosophy of negative capability, which holds that it is possible to explore many different states of belief without committing to any single, fixed philosophy. In his 1817 letter to his brothers, Keats defines Negative Capability: "at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable

reaching after fact & reason—[Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration”(1275). Jacob D. Wigod explains that “it is clear, particularly in his reference to Shakespeare as possessing the quality of negative capability to an enormous degree, that Keats is thinking of the world of men and the problems of men, of struggling humanity on a darkling plain,³¹ when he speaks of the ‘uncertainties, mysteries, doubts.’ He wants to be free, as Shakespeare is free. He would detach himself from, yet be part of, the madding crowd”³² (383). Wigod goes on to suggest that “Keats would see into the heart of things, ‘into the heart and nature of Man,’ as he phrases it in the Mansion-of-Life letter. This means to him, as it does to Shakespeare, the maintaining of an open mind, a capacity for change, and an aversion to forming comfortable but in reality unsatisfying-resolutions and philosophies” (384).

While Keats’ theory of negative capability has long been recognized as a Romantic precept, in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s oeuvre it has not received extensive examination at least in part, I would suggest, because of the limited availability of Coleridge’s poetry in volume form. In reading *Fancy’s Following* as a volume, the contradictory and exploratory nature of the speakers becomes apparent. Theresa Whistler suggests that:

not all of [Coleridge] is in the poems [. . .] they do reflect [a] refusal to be tied to one viewpoint, a variableness that was capricious, but not superficial. It was indeed a poetical quality, her personal form of what Keats called negative capability—the power of being ‘in uncertainties,

mysteries, doubts, without any excitable reaching after fact and reason.’
Her mind was, as he said a poets should be, a ‘thoroughfare for all
Thoughts, not a select Party,’ and like Keats she could become whatever
she beheld and slip from one identity to another. (46–47)

As Whistler notes, the various speakers allow Coleridge to sample a variety of viewpoints in a sort of intellectual role-playing. Katharine McGowran suggests that “Coleridge’s gendering of the protean nature of imagination produces a dynamic ambiguity which is recreated in many of her poems. It is precisely this negative capability, this elusiveness and studied idiosyncrasy, which make Coleridge such an intriguing poet” (“Re-reading Women’s Poetry” 585). Much as Rossetti does in *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, Nesbit does in *Lays and Legends*, and Tomson does in *The Ballad of the Bird-Bride*, throughout *Fancy’s Following* Coleridge moves between male, female, and nonsexed speaking voices with little apparent concern for a discernable order. Even when the poems are read chronologically according to their composition dates, they demonstrate little regard for narrative consistency. Yet where McGowran states that “these qualities [. . .] frustrate attempts to locate Coleridge within a tradition of women’s poetry,” I would suggest that these qualities indicate a direct response to the boundaries placed on women’s poetic traditions (“Re-reading Women’s Poetry” 585).

Coleridge’s role-playing allows her to break out of and away from the gendered constraints that a female poet, particularly one who publishes, would be bound by. Under the androgynous³³ or potentially masculine name of Anados, Coleridge would hardly be taxed for adopting a male voice. Though she remained a member of the comfortable, middle-class and did not need to rely on making money from sales of her works, as

Nesbit and Tomson did, Coleridge would still be expected to govern her writing according to poetic topics and tastes that her contemporary audience would deem appropriate for a woman of her station. Kathleen Hickok suggests that “popular women poets, particularly, were not writing for the intellectual, elite male reader of William Wordsworth or Matthew Arnold, but for a less educated, middle-class female reader of gift books and periodical verse. Consequently, much of their poetry was narrative and descriptive; despite the frequent appearance of tropes, it was essentially literal and representational” (7). She goes on to argue that “*most* narrative poetry by women in the nineteenth century was concerned with episodes of love: filial, romantic, marital, maternal, or religious” (20).³⁴ With respect to religious poetry, Mermin explains that “religious belief (or, in some celebrated instances, disbelief) could provide not only subject matter but also a justification for writing. To the most painful and intractable problems of the age, moreover [. . .] the only truly helpful responses possible, it seemed to many people, were sympathy and love: qualities believed to be quintessentially feminine and communicable through literature, and therefore double in the domain of literary women” (xvi). Though Hickok and Mermin discuss the topics appropriate to “proper” women writers, Coleridge demonstrates only a tenuous relationship to the standards expected of women poets.

For the daughter of an upper-middle class Victorian family, religion was an acceptable topic for literary endeavor because it was safe enough that it could provide amusement without any fear of exciting the mind or body of its adherent. However, much as Rossetti did, Coleridge went beyond the scope of acceptable religious devotion, and in her hands, religion became a tool of philosophical investigation that often led to

religious and sexual upheaval. By virtue of her pseudonym, which effectively masked her identity until after her death, Coleridge freed her writing from all prescribed forms because it could not clearly be tied to any set of social references. As McGowran puts it, for Coleridge “the business of assuming a pseudonymous identity becomes a positive act, a means of casting off the burden of selfhood in order to enter a new one in writing.

While it involves a rejection of authority and (feminine) identity, the ‘negative’ function of the pseudonym (the extent to which it masks identity) is offset by the evocation of the creative possibilities afforded by this new style” (“Re-reading Women’s Poetry” 585).

Writing as Anados allowed Coleridge to slip between male and female voices and opened up the possibility of writing from a nongendered position in that the speaker’s sex is not always clear in the poems. She was also able to move across social spheres and write from multiple social perspectives, because the poet, and in some cases the speaker, cannot be tied to any single social signifier and the volume cannot be tied to any set of social standards. As such, she could freely explore a variety of topics, including morality, doubt, and existential dread, with no fear of societal repercussions, and she essentially escaped all limitations that were placed on women writers.

By virtue of her pseudonym and her desire to write from multiple perspectives, Coleridge was able to enact what for Keats was an essential role of the poet—that is, the ability to adopt any role that was required for the author’s purpose. An essential component of negative capability is the ability to consider a variety of viewpoints equally. Wigod suggests that Keats believed “an important phase of the poet's capacity to feel the harmony of the universe and the place of good and evil in it is his desire to paint all sides of life, good and evil together, in all their shadings.” Wigod supports this point

by explaining that “in a letter to Woodhouse on 27 October 1818 Keats distinguishes the true ‘poetical Character’ from ‘the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime’: ‘It has no self it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion [sic] Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation”” (387). Coleridge’s poetry, like much post-Darwinian poetry, tends to reflect a religious and philosophical searching, which is similar to the reaction to and against Enlightenment thought that is characteristic of much Romantic poetry. While Theresa Whistler and Edith Sitchell biographically describe her as being a devout Christian and practicing Anglican,³⁵ her unwillingness to accept religious principles without question is clearly demonstrated in *Fancy’s Following*, where quite literal soul searching manifests itself through a series of poems that question the meaning of life, death, and the hereafter.

III. Christianity in England: Dissent, Catholicism, and Anglicanism

Though I have thus far located Coleridge with respect to a Romantic heritage, her non-dogmatic stance and her expressions both of searching and of doubt represent Victorian commonplaces. The exploration of faith Coleridge enacts in her poetry reflects the state of religion in Victorian England, where a variety of Christian denominations jostled for dominance. During the nineteenth century, the political arena of religious belief in England opened up from solely favoring the Anglican Church to relaxing regulations that were placed on Dissenters³⁶ and on Catholics.³⁷ As the nineteenth century progressed and religious regulations relaxed, Dissent became an increasingly

popular religious choice. Catholicism also became more acceptable; however, it did not enjoy the same wide spread popularity as Dissent. From the time of the reign of Elizabeth I well through the mid-nineteenth century, hatred and fear of Catholicism was common in England, despite (or perhaps because of) the growing political acceptance of Catholicism demonstrated by the 1829 passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act.³⁸ The rights of Dissenters were impinged upon until the 1828 passage of the Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, and in many districts Dissenters still had to pay tithes to their local Anglican parishes through the Victorian Era.³⁹ According to Schlossberg, “in the half-decade beginning with 1828, the Church was rocked by successive blows to its prestige. The repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts followed by the Roman Catholic Relief Act marked the beginning of the end of its privileged position, as first Dissenters and then Roman Catholics received their full political rights” (Schlossberg 278).⁴⁰ The Repeal of the Test Act meant that civil servants and military officers no longer had to declare their allegiance to the Church of England, and the Catholic Emancipation Act allowed Roman Catholics to hold seats in Parliament.⁴¹

With legal limitations lifted and the Catholic bishopric restored in England during the mid-nineteenth century, it became increasingly acceptable to opt out of the Anglican Church. Doreen Rosman suggests that “nineteenth-century people had more religious choice than any previous generation. As the population of England doubled and then nearly doubled again, thousands of new places of worship were erected, catering for a wide range of religious tastes. The Church of England, which had once sought to serve the spiritual needs of the whole nation, faced fierce competition” (178). The movement of individuals away from traditional Anglican cathedrals to Dissenting and Catholic

churches may have fostered the appearance that fewer people were partaking in traditional forms of worship. Moreover, as various religious outlets became readily accessible and acceptable, Victorians would have greater opportunity to evaluate their own beliefs, which may also have fed perceptions that faith was declining, since beliefs that previously went unquestioned were now being subject to deliberation.

It was no longer possible to read the *Bible* as a true story, which many people did during the early nineteenth century. As scientific understanding developed, particularly during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the historical accuracy of the Bible was called into question. Stephen Pricket explains that “the nineteenth-century crisis of faith over the historical accuracy of the Bible which had begun in England as early as the 1820s was, in fact, a conflict between two attitudes of mind which were both relatively new. Both depended upon what we may loosely call the ‘modern’ ideal of history.” He goes on to suggest that “only with the rise of a concept of ‘history’ as a verifiable (and therefore ‘objective’) record of human events do we get the corresponding attempt to treat the Biblical narrative as an ‘inspired’ record of such events” (262). Biblical Criticism or Higher Criticism entailed reading the Bible through the lens of historical and literary criticism rather than through the eyes of an unquestioning believer.⁴²

In England, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was one of the earliest to engage in High Criticism. Schlossberg explains that Coleridge opposed “the idea that the Bible was handed down from God as a ready-made primer that was protected from any error and therefore to be interpreted literally, a view for which he invented the term *bibliolatry*. Yet he was far from passing over to the other side, for he continued to uphold the Bible

as the reliable guide to faith and life” (145). Schlossberg goes so far as to suggest that “when the flood of German scholarship and Darwinian philosophy began to run high after the middle of the century, there were people prepared by Coleridge’s thinking to keep the ship on an even keel” (153). While Coleridge may have offered fair warning to the Victorians, his reputation certainly suffered because of his engagement in Higher Criticism. Overall, the fallout from Higher Criticism was extensive. Alister McGrath suggests that “there is no doubt that growing concerns over the intellectual credibility of Christianity were a major contribution to its fading appeal. The growing influence of biblical criticism, a persistent failure on the part of the clergy to engage with the troubling issues of the day, and the rise of Darwinism all undermined the potency of faith. Perhaps the erosion of the Christian faith in later Victorian Britain is attributable not to its diminished appeal to human reason but to its failure to capture the *imagination* of its culture” (113). Religious faith and the potential loss thereof were thrust to the fore of Victorian thought. Butler suggests that “throughout the [Victorian] period the question of faith is subtly (as well as unsubtly) present in an ambivalent way in most discourse, especially literary discourse” (86).

IV. Blinded by the Light: Mistaken Belief in

“The Devil’s Funeral,” “Doubt,” and “There Was No Place Found”

The poetry of Coleridge unmistakably invokes contemporary debates about faith and doubt. While some of her poetry may indeed be a conscious response to her great-great-uncle, a more immediate and potentially more relevant connection can be made to her own social setting. Through *Fancy’s Following*, Coleridge does not directly reference the power struggle among various established Christian denominations. She

does, however, explore shifting levels of belief, which were believed to have accompanied the decline of the Anglican Churches oligarchy. Doubt and the fear of doubt provide the pivotal topic of much Victorian discourse. Lance St John Butler comments that “the discourse of faith, with its attendant discourse of doubt, is almost inescapable during the period. Especially in the 1870s and 1880s Christian language and structures in response to what may be termed the dilemma of religion (how to allow it to die without allowing Christ to die or evil to be ignored) are widespread” (143). Moreover, David J. Gordon argues that “in the emerging Victorian age, the characteristic effort of leading literary figures to preserve Christian morality without subscribing to Christian theology or doctrine was frequently anxious, often resulting in a compromise that may be better described as a conflict. Doubt soon came to play a major role in nineteenth-century literary and philosophical discourse. [. . .] Doubt, the antithesis of faith, had the advantage of conveying uncertainty rather than dogmatic unbelief, and allowed for, indeed encouraged, the expression of conflicting thoughts and feelings” (25).

In *Fancy's Following*, Coleridge suggests that faith and doubt are both essential to Christian understanding. Though Coleridge does not advocate disbelief, she suggests that it is necessary to question and explore one's faith in order to avoid platitudes and misinformed beliefs. For Coleridge, both a lack of faith and mindless faith are equally detrimental. By presenting the negative aspects of atheism and enthusiasm, Coleridge's poems “The Devil's Funeral,” “Doubt,” and “There Was No Place Found” explore the nature of doubt not as a negative, as it was seen by many Victorians, but rather as a necessary component of faith. For Coleridge doubting or questioning one's faith is necessary because it is the only way to ensure that one does not adopt false faith or

become complacent in their beliefs. The purpose of doubt is not to deny faith but rather to challenge belief with the end goal of establishing the nature of divinity while acknowledging that humans lack the necessary capacities to fully comprehend the divine.

“The Devil’s Funeral” and “Doubt” suggest that adhering to a fixed conception of God is an ineffective and undesirable form of faith. In the poems blind faith exists in tandem with atheism, with both ideologies being forms of mistaken belief. Because humans cannot fully grasp divinity, clinging to a fixed system of belief becomes dangerous because any fixed system is necessarily a misplaced or misunderstood faith. The human potential towards misinterpreting the divine is addressed in “The Devil’s Funeral,” which was written in 1890:

The Devil is dead, good people all!
Who are the bearers that bear the pall?
One of them thinks he has slain God too,⁴³
With the self-same sword that Satan slew.
One of them thinks he has saved God’s life,
The Devil was ever the God of strife. (1–6)

In “The Devil’s Funeral,” religion itself becomes the rampart of the devil, as the servants of God essentially liberate the Devil and destroy the confines of Hell. Through its description of Satan’s pallbearers, “The Devil’s Funeral” takes to task those who rely too heavily or too little on faith in God. The poem further suggests that religion supports the Devil by positing that: “He forged his coffin before he died. / ‘Twas made of gold that was seven times tired: // The glittering golden words of those, / Who counted themselves his chiefest foes” (13–16). Essentially, Coleridge here rewrites the proverb that the road

to hell is paved with good intentions. In this context, supporting Satan does not necessarily entail evil or bad intentions but rather a misunderstanding of God. Those primarily responsible for tending the Devil are atheists and the unquestioning devout. In the context of *Fancy's Following*, the denial of faith carries the same consequences as the miscomprehension of faith. Coleridge ties these two seemingly incompatible metaphysical states together because both lack the type of introspection that negative capability affords and both rely on the assumption that it is possible for humans to definitively understand and interpret the divine.

Following William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Coleridge instead suggests that humans are fully capable of misperceiving the divine and, as a result, are subject to forming detrimental conclusions about the nature of good, evil, and proper conduct.⁴⁴ Melanie Bandy suggests that both Blake and Shelley “believed that the perceiver is not simply a passive recording instrument but to a large extent creates, through the quality of his [or her] perception, the nature of the outer world. He [or she] projects preexisting schemata onto the things he [or she] perceives around him [or her] and by and large sees things as he [or she] *expects* to see them” (12). “The Devil’s Funeral” illustrates this quandary. Though they are likely not aware that they are doing so, the devil’s pallbearers attain their position precisely by misperceiving their actions as being in accord with the will of God. Yet “The Devil’s Funeral” moves beyond simply suggesting that human perceptions of the Devil are miscalculated:

Where will you bury him? Not on earth!

In poison flowers he would come to birth.

We will not cast him into the sea.

The winds and the waves would set him free.
Lay him out straight on the funeral pyre!
All his life he has lived in fire.
And lo! as the crackling flame burns bright,
Satan transformed to an angel of light,
That he may work more utter woe
Than ever he worked when he dwelt below. (17–26)

Were we to follow a Blakean reading, the transformation of Satan into an “angel of light” would suggest the inability of humans to fully comprehend the divine—Blake’s angels exhibit intolerance and dogmatism that parallel the faith of enthusiastic⁴⁵ believers, while his devils have access to divine insight and true spirituality.

Though Coleridge works from the same philosophy, “The Devil’s Funeral” revises Blakean imagery. Coleridge’s Devil enacts the reverse of the transformation presented in the fifth Memorable Fancy of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Unlike Blake’s Devil in *The Marriage*, who is ultimately benign, Coleridge’s Devil is devastating both as an angel of light and as Satan, and ultimately parallels a more extreme version of the angel in the fourth Memorable Fancy. While it is possible to assume here that the viewers’ perceptions are tainted and that the transformed Satan is still misperceived, the question arises as to why Coleridge never shows the “true” image of the angel of light. *Fancy’s Following* suggests that is impossible to definitively interpret the divine, as Satan’s transformation suggests. The speaker in “The Devil’s Funeral” demonstrates an inability to move beyond misperception that clearly counters the comparative optimism that Blake and, to a lesser extent, Shelley read into the human

condition. Where both Romantic authors believe that most if not all evils could be eliminated, the speaker of “The Devil’s Funeral” demonstrates no such optimism. Here both angel and devil exist as threats to the state of the human soul, at least in part because both states suggest extremes in good and evil. In Coleridge’s poem, the polarity of good and evil make both states equally dangerous.

In addition to questioning the desirability of fixed notions of good and evil, in *Fancy’s Following*, Coleridge complicates traditional associations of light and darkness with good and evil, respectively. The most explicit expression of the association between darkness and light comes through in “Doubt,” which was written in 1892. Coleridge taps into the religious commonplace where doubt is the equivalent of living in darkness. However, in “Doubt” darkness describes not only a lack of faith but also misplaced faith:

Two forms of darkness are there. One is Night,
When I have been an animal, and feared
I knew not what, and lost my soul, nor dared
Feel aught save hungry longing for the light.
And one is Blindness. Absolute and bright,
The Sun’s rays smote me till they masked the Sun;
The Light itself was by the light undone;
The day was filled with terrors and affright.
Then did I weep, compassionate of those
Who see no friend in God—in Satan’s host no foes.

Much like “The Devil’s Funeral,” “Doubt” explores the effects of refusing belief and of blindly accepting belief. Coleridge uses night, the first form of darkness, to clearly

indicate a lack of faith by tapping into standard religious imagery, as the speaker becomes more animal than human through his/her lack of a soul. In discussing the first form of darkness, Coleridge draws on imagery strongly reminiscent of Lord Byron's "Darkness." Accordingly, life becomes a meaningless waste that is primarily characterized by suffering and dread. More explicitly than Byron, Coleridge shows that those living in true darkness are living without God. Biblical associations, which Coleridge also draws on, equate God with the light. As, for example, does the second book of *Samuel*: "for thou art my lamp, O LORD: and the LORD will lighten my darkness" (22.29). Conversely, through the second form of darkness, Coleridge suggests that dogmatic belief in God can be equally detrimental as the loss of God. Traditional associations between good (and God) and light are pushed to the extreme, showing the fallibility of excess faith. Excess can be read either as the assumption that faith in God will always trump evil or simply as misplaced faith that weakens one's ability to perceive the power of evil and causes one to see "in Satan's host no foes." Coleridge's depiction of the light, or God, suggests that it is impossible to understand God fully.

The imagery of light and darkness is repeated in "There Was No Place Found," which explores doubt through the vehicle of journey poems, where the speakers travel the long road of life that moves towards death. A traditional example of the journey poem can be found in Christina Rossetti's "Up-Hill," where the two speakers reinforce the belief that heaven will provide a place of rest at the end of the long journey of life. None of Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's poems, however, provide the comfortable, easy answers favored in Victorian Christian conceptions of heaven; rather Coleridge's poems take the darker road that was originally associated with the journey motif. The origin of the

journey motif can be found in the Gospel of Matthew, where Christians are called to walk a straight and narrow path to get into heaven; Matthew explicitly warns that following the path will not be easy: “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (*King James Bible* 7.13–14). The idea of walking the path to heaven was adapted into literary form in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), which remained popular well through the Victorian era. Much as Nesbit does in “New Year Song” and Tomson does in “Evening” and “On the Road,” Coleridge enacts yet another variation on the journey to heaven theme, in that she removes the reward that should lie at the end of the road.

In “There Was No Place Found,” written in 1885, Coleridge presents a speaker who finds no absolute comfort in the notion of heaven. The speaker ponders his/her destination after life ceases, but where Christian devotional poets, such as Rossetti, provide reassuring if somewhat rote answers, the speaker of Coleridge’s poem is ultimately left displaced:⁴⁶

One night, as dreaming on my bed I lay,
I saw the whole world die and pass away.
Young men and old, true lover and fair maid
Passed, in an endless passing, unafraid.
And as they went, each to his radiant home,
They hailed me after, calling to me—‘Come!’
Some sought a land of living light, where none

Remembers more the shining of the sun.
Some sought a land of living light, and there
Longed for the dark, to hide their bright despair.⁴⁷

While all the individuals pass into a heaven-like state, as characterized by the “land of living light,” all are not equally satisfied with what they find. Coleridge references imagery similar to that in “doubt,” where some individuals are consigned to life without memory of light and where others are subjected to intense light that provides no comfort or joy. “There Was No Place Found” presents a two-fold critique on the Victorian view of Christian afterlife, such as the one found in a number of Rossetti’s poems, where all believers are guaranteed to rest peacefully until their judgment, at which time they will be reunited with God in heaven.

While being denied entrance into heaven can obviously be linked to a sense of doubt or dread, the act also references a major point of concern and of contention for the Victorians. The concept of entering heaven through the narrow gate, with its strict rules and regulations and with its suggestion of an unyielding God, was one that many Victorians questioned and ultimately rejected. Michael Wheeler suggests that “the indefinite nature of New testament teaching on the future life, which is reflected in the Book of common prayer, allowed Victorian preachers and poets considerable latitude of interpretation, and the idea of heaven as a blessed home or country in which friends and loved ones meet is the most characteristic of the age” (11). As the Bible transformed into a text that was open to interpretation and as England moved further and further away from belief in and the acceptance of the monarch as divine authority, images of a punishing God who sorted the saved from the damned became less palatable to the

Victorian public. Meknyk suggests that “most Victorian Christians continued to believe in Hell, though after mid-century some became increasingly uncomfortable with the doctrine of eternal punishment” (84). Rosman also suggests that “the debate about hell was triggered by the emergence of new critical approaches to the Bible.” She explains that “scholars suggested that biblical pictures of hell were the product of primitive thought and had no place in modern religion” (269). Moreover, as heaven was characterized as a welcoming home where mortals were reunited with God, their father, the road to heaven became comparatively wider.

Coleridge also departs from contemporary norms in her depiction of hell. Rosman posits that “late Victorian Christians were less willing than their predecessors to define what happened to those who did not accept Christ. Some writers suggested that non-believers would simply be annihilated, rather than eternally punished, while a few went so far as to propose that all would ultimately be saved” (269). She goes on to say that “notwithstanding this growing unease, the old idea of hell as a place of divine punishment was not easily jettisoned. Fear of hell had long been seen as God’s chosen means of preserving society from immorality. Belief in hell fire motivated much evangelistic endeavor” (270).⁴⁸ In “There Was No Place Found” Coleridge inverts contemporary depictions of heaven and hell; while she depicts heaven as a place of rejection and suffering rather than a welcoming home, she paints hell as the place that most would consider home:

At last I lay upon the ground alone.

No voice; the empty silence cried—‘Begone!’

Then I arose and turned about to flee.

On either hand there was no place for me.
The shining ones said sadly:—‘All too late!
None enter Heaven but through the narrow gate.’⁴⁹
The fiery ones said sadly:—‘All too fast!
There is no need of Hell, while Earth shall last.’

The idea of hell existing on earth was not unique to Coleridge. Lance St John Butler’s discussion of Victorian doubt provides a possible context for Coleridge’s view of hell on earth. Butler explains that “a key to the Victorian conception of ‘hell-on-earth’ can be found in [William] Blake’s phrase ‘dark Satanic mills’, for there is an inextricable interweaving of the physical with the moral or spiritual in the nineteenth-century idea of internalization that is well caught in Blake’s collocation of the devil and the factory. It is sometimes not quite clear whether the earth has become hellish because of industrialization or whether industrialization is a kind of punishment for, or a metaphor of, the spiritual condition of Victorian humanity” (30).⁵⁰

Blake was hardly the only writer to equate the imagery of industry with hell. Michael Wheeler explains that “during the Industrial Revolution reality began to exceed the bounds of the imagination, even in the most dramatic visual or poetic versions of hell. This theme was taken up by social commentators on the appalling squalor of the urban slums in the 1830s and 1840s, and by the end of the nineteenth century had become conventionalized” (198). In addition to cropping up repeatedly in Blake’s poetry, the use of hell as a metaphor for industrialization shows up in many social problem novels, including those by Charles Dickens. Poetry condemning child labor, such as Caroline Norton’s *A Voice from the Factories* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the

Children,” also equates industrialization with hell. A necessary part of the conception of hell on earth, as Butler suggests, is that “behind it all, of course, is the question of the whereabouts of God in this sorry scheme of things entire” (30). That is, the issue, which Blake conquered almost a century earlier, becomes how and why God would allow evil and suffering to exist.⁵¹ Blake’s answer, of course, was that the concepts of evil are simply the result of misunderstanding and repressing natural desires. Coleridge does not adopt Blake’s philosophy wholesale; rather, she develops her own system of thought, largely through her gothic poems.

Coleridge’s insistence that all beliefs must be questioned represents a form of negative capability. Accordingly, for Coleridge, humans must question their faith not to disprove it—Coleridge clearly denounces atheism. Rather, she advocates questioning in order to identify and reject the formation of mistaken interpretations of the divine. “Doubt” attacks enthusiastic, unquestioning believers and nonbelievers, suggesting that neither state is desirable and suggesting that the exploration of faith, such as the one undertaken in *Fancy’s Following*, is representative of a healthy belief system. Those who deny the existence of God are susceptible to immorality; Coleridge here retains traditional Anglican views that the faithless lack guidance. Both “the Devil’s Funeral” and “Doubt” align the faithless with soullessness. Additionally those who are blind, as “Doubt” suggests, or more generally, those who demonstrate blind acceptance of their beliefs are equally prone to folly. That both extremes are negative suggests that while faith is essential, questioning of specific tenets of faith is equally essential. While Coleridge tends to favor a Christian based exploration over non-Christian belief systems, her insistence on questioning all aspects of belief is in keeping with a Keatsian

philosophy. Accordingly, Coleridge's explorations of doubt work to strengthen rather than weaken systems of Christian thought. Unlike Tomson and Nesbit, Coleridge does not seek to make radical changes to a Christian religious tradition; she is not attempting to relocate the basis for belief in a socialistic vision of Liberty as Nesbit does or in a folk-based naturalistic tradition as Tomson does. Neither, however, does Coleridge advocate the unquestioning devotion expressed by Rossetti. Instead of shifting the loci of belief, Coleridge shifts the levels of belief. While "The Devil's Funeral" and "Doubt" discuss atheism and enthusiasm, which display extreme levels of disbelief and belief, respectively, the speakers in both poems apparently sit comfortably beyond either state and are thus able to present an informed discussion of both states.

V. Being in Uncertainties: The Benefits of Doubt in

"The Witch," "Master and Guest," and "The Other Side of a Mirror"

Though questioning and doubt may ultimately lead to purer faith, that faith lacks the surety and comfort provided by firm conviction. Through a series of implicitly religious gothic poems, Coleridge reveals the difficulties that accompany states of doubt. In *Fancy's Following*, doubt is given expression particularly with respect to conceptions of the afterlife.⁵² Through her gothic poems, Coleridge explores the ramifications of doubt and its relationship to disbelief. Historically, gothic literature was used to express religious fears, particularly, in England, to address the challenge that non-national religious posed to Anglicanism. The tradition began with one of the earliest gothic novels, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otronto*, and continued most famously through M. G. Lewis's *The Monk*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Mark

Canuel explains that “advocates on both sides of Catholic emancipation [. . .] saw the genre as an appropriate way of heightening the villainy of their opponents” (512). While writers used elements of the gothic to attack certain religious institutions, Canuel also suggests that gothic literature was employed to lay attack against institutional religion wholesale. He suggests that “the gothic novel in early instances demonstrates an overwhelming interest in the way that a confessional or inquisitorial mode of government produces a particular structural relationship between the beliefs of individuals and the formation of social groups” (516). He suggests, then, that gothic novelists explore the potential negatives that accompany a totalitarian religious institution, such as the Anglican Church, which demands the exclusive allegiance of the nation.

Though she is not concerned directly with nationalism, Coleridge does use her gothic poems to explore religious belief. Coleridge’s favoring of negative capability, which necessarily entails individualized belief, directly counters the formation of nationalized religion to which all individuals must adhere. Her use of the gothic, then, aligns with the tradition that Canuel identifies. In her gothic poetry, Coleridge focuses on privatized expressions of doubt and dread. “The Witch,” “Master and guest,” and “The Other Side of a Mirror” depict instances where an external force, generally a reflection of the individual subject, forces the subject to rely on his/her faith. In all three instances, the subjects are left in an unresolved moment of spiritual crises that illustrates the need for faith while simultaneously expressing the fragility of faith. Moreover, through the use of doubling, all three poems emphasize not only the individualized nature of belief but also how the individual can undermine his or her own faith.

Written in 1892, “The Witch” stands out from Coleridge’s other poems in that it

is one of the few where there are two speakers—the initial female speaker and the concluding nonsexed speaker. The identities of the speakers are not clearly established, making it impossible to definitively identify either character as the witch. Nonetheless, Chapman and McGowran agree that the first speaker is the witch and that she is an echo of Geraldine from *Christabel*. McGowran suggests that “the threatening ‘richly clad’ ‘damsel bright’ of *Christabel* gives way to a figure who is more plaintive, more child-like” (“Restless Wanderer 187). She says further that “Mary adopts the fairy-tale strategy of metamorphosis in her poem, turning a ‘lamia figure’, a ‘sorceress’, into a little white maiden, managing to make a gesture in the direction of ‘things not being quite what they seem’, without losing the possibility of duplicity from the witch” (“Restless Wanderer” 187). Chapman takes this reading even further by suggesting that Geraldine, “the lamia from *Christabel*,” stands in as the witch, who “attempts to seduce Christabel,” the second speaker in the poem (24–25).⁵³ Though they do not explore the issue, the “whiteness” of the maiden, when read against Victorian color symbolism, suggests that the maiden is an innocent, angelic figure. Yet, like the angel in “The Devil’s Funeral,” who becomes an angel of woe, the maiden disrupts the life and faith of the second speaker.

While it may be a response to *Christabel*, “The Witch” reflects another variation of the journey to heaven theme that Coleridge explores in *Fancy’s Following*. The poem’s first speaker—a woman—describes finding a location presumably unvisited by her, though she has “Wandered over the fruitful earth” (5). Why she is traveling or where she is going the reader ultimately does not know. “The Witch” provides no specific destination for the first speaker and no final location of the second speaker; however, the language used in the first two stanzas reflects that of a traditional journey to heaven

poem. In many ways, “The Witch” follows the tradition more completely than “There Was No Place Found,” but both poems critique the suggestion that suffering will result in heavenly reward. In “The Witch,” the first speaker’s description of her journey focuses on the difficulty of her travels:

I have walked a great while over the snow,
And I am not tall nor strong.
My clothes are wet, and my teeth are set,
And the way was hard and long.
I have wandered over the fruitful earth,
But I never came here before.
Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door!
The cutting wind is a cruel foe.
I dare not stand in the blast.
My hands are stone, and my voice a groan,
And the worst of death is past.
I am but a little maiden still,
My little white feet are sore.
Oh, lift me over the threshold, and let me in at the door! (1–14)

In particular, the references to having “walked a great while” over a “way [that] was hard and long” echo the language of journey to heaven poems. These poems tend to emphasize the tedium of life and to suggest that the only purpose to living is to find the proper path and follow it to heaven.

The journey theme coupled with the woman’s admission that “the worst of death

is past” places the threshold at the liminal position between life and death. Central to Chapman and McGowran’s readings of “The Witch” is the location of the threshold over which the first speaker begs to be lifted. They reach different though compatible conclusions on the location of the threshold. McGowran allows that the poem contains ambiguous references but makes the suggestion that the latent eroticism in the stanza indicates the threshold to be that of awakening sexuality; she adds that “whether this union is between two women, or a man and a woman is never revealed” (“Restless Wanderer” 188). Chapman too focuses on the eroticism of the poem. Building upon Angela Leighton’s casting of “The Witch” as a love poem, Chapman suggests that Coleridge herself is bound up in the poem: “the witch who desires to cross the threshold is, as a quintessential wanderer, a figure for Anodos and therefore the signature of the poet herself.” As such, according to Chapman, “crossing the threshold entails entering into the predecessor’s poem [*Christabel*].” The crossing of the threshold, for Chapman, “is another kind of deviation: the secret script of incestuous female desire” (125). While Chapman and McGowran’s conclusions are not entirely convincing, their readings usefully contextualize Mary Elizabeth via Samuel Taylor. However, despite the echoes of the threshold and the hearth-flame in “The Witch” and *Christabel*, it is too limiting to read Mary Elizabeth’s poem only as a direct response to Samuel Taylor’s poem. As I have already suggested, doing so calls into question the ability of the former to stand alone as a poet in her own right; moreover, it limits the play of meanings in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s writing.

Though Chapman and McGowran suggest that “The Witch” is a poem of awakening sexuality, it can also be read as a poem of spiritual discovery. By relocating

the threshold in the liminal space between life and death, the poem stands as an individual's confrontation with mortality. For the second speaker, this confrontation leads to a state of uncertainty. The religious undertones do not conflict with the eroticism suggested by the poem and emphasized by Chapman and McGowran; religion and eroticism are often found in tandem in religious and devotional poetry, most notably, in Rossetti's religious poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and arguably in the *Bible*, particularly in the Song of Solomon. Additionally, Wheeler explains that "Philippe Ariès, a leading authority on the history and sociology of death, characterizes the post-Romantic deathbed as being charged with emotion and sexuality" (35).

The final lines of the poem and the second speaker's tone of profound loss suggest that something more is at stake here than the loss of a stranger's life:

Her voice was the voice that women have,
Who plead for their heart's desire.
She came—she came—and the quivering flame
Sank and died in the fire.
It never was lit again on my hearth
Since I hurried across the floor,
To lift her over the threshold, and let her in at the door. (15–21)

This poem can be read as the second speaker's confrontation with mortality via the death of the first speaker. McGowran suggests that "the crossing of the threshold in 'The Witch,' which is described in terms which convey urgency as well as desire, is qualified by the hint of some sort of sacrifice" (Restless Wanderer 189). The sense of sacrifice that

accompanies the first speaker's death hinges around the faith of the second speaker. Faced with the woman's physical weakness and death, the second speaker is unable to retain his/her faith, which is challenged by the death of the first speaker.⁵⁴ Rather than ending with the affirmation that the woman has gone to eternal rest, the second speaker and the reader are left to sort out the nature of mortality and are faced with the fact that they cannot definitively know the first speaker's destination. The second speaker's faith suffers as a result, as the loss of the hearth flame suggests. Far from providing comfort or joy, the white maiden leaves her host in the dark, literally and spiritually.

In the process of questioning the nature of mortality, through the gothic poems such as "The Witch," "Master and Guest," and "The Other Side of a Mirror," Coleridge further explores the darkness of doubt. Written a year before "The Witch," "Master and Guest" depicts a similar sexually charged, sinister meeting between two individuals, who, in the latter poem, are clearly identified as being male and female. However, unlike "The Witch," where paradoxically the seemingly weak visitor exerts a profound force over the second speaker, the power dynamics in "Master and Guest" are explicit; the Master and the Guest are clearly one and the same:

There came a man across the moor,
Fell and foul of face was he.
He left the path by the cross-roads three,
And stood in the shadow of the door.
I asked him in to bed and board.
I never hated any man so.
He said he could not say me No.

He sat in the seat of my own dear lord.

“Now sit you by my side!” he said,

“Else may I neither eat nor drink.

You would not have me starve, I think.”

He ate the offerings of the dead.

“I’ll light you to your bed,” quoth I.

“My bed is yours—but light the way!”

I might not turn aside not stay;

I showed him where we twain did lie.

The cock was trumpeting the morn.

He said: “Sweet love, a long farewell!

You have kissed a citizen of Hell,

And a soul was doomed when you were born.

“Mourn, mourn no longer for your dear!

Him may you never meet above.

The gifts that Love hath given to Love,

Love gives away again to Fear.”

Where the woman in “The Witch” remains passive throughout the exchange, the male guest has no qualms about giving orders once he has been invited inside. The female speaker in “Master and Guest,” however, exhibits a resignation and passivity similar to the second speaker in “The Witch.” Both speakers baldly report crucial, sexually charged visitations while leaving out any motivation for or reflection on the story they tell. In both “The Witch” and “Master and Guest,” the underlying question is why the visitors

are let into the home. The woman's admittance of the Guest is all the more puzzling, since she states prior to his admittance that he is "fell and foul of face," unlike the first speaker of "The Witch," who leans more towards pitiable than distasteful.

Within its obvious gothic overtones, "Master and Guest" contains an implicit religious engagement. Like the second speaker in "The Witch," the woman in "Master and Guest" is in the process of coming to terms with the ramifications of mortality, in the latter case through the loss of her husband. The husband's death leaves a physical absence that is filled by his double, the "citizen of Hell." Given the alignment of the first speaker and of the Guest with the onset of despair, both "The Witch" and "Master and Guest" can be read as commentaries on the nature of doubt, despair, and disbelief. Coleridge's poems suggest that in order for doubt to fester, the individual has to succumb to and welcome its appearance, as a critical aspect of both poems is the invitation of foreboding visitors into the home. The physical location of the home points to the extremely privatized nature of religious faith.⁵⁵ In "The Witch" and "Master and Guest" the loss of firm faith leads the speakers to a spiritual crisis from which the poem shows no recovery. In both cases, doubt turns from a state of religious inquiry into a state of religious loss. Both poems remain firmly in the gothic tradition because they never resolve the tension between faith and doubt. In both cases, the reader is left with characters who question their actions and their mortality.

Coleridge explores the onset of doubt in a much earlier poem, "The Other Side of a Mirror," which was written in 1882. Out of all of Coleridge's poems, "The Other Side of a Mirror" is the most well-known. Though it was written almost ten years prior to "The Witch" and "Master and Guest," "The Other Side of a Mirror" uses the technique of

doubling via the mirror devise, though it differs from the later doppelgänger poems by having only one character. “The Other Side of a Mirror” similarly explores the dark side of doubt by having the subject confront her own mortality and spiritual significance. Though the poem has religious overtones, it is most often read as a feminist lament. The most widely known and most controversial reading of Coleridge’s poem is by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which uses “The Other Side of a Mirror” as a cornerstone for its discussion of the difficulties nineteenth-century women faced as writers.⁵⁶ Setting the poem within a history of feminist poetics and against a history “authored by a male God and by a godlike male,” they read the poem as a woman’s attempt to come to terms with the monstrous realities that circumscribe women writers (15). Furthermore, they argue that “what this poem suggests is that, although the woman who is the prisoner of the mirror/text’s images has ‘no voice to speak her dread,’ although ‘no sigh’ interrupts ‘her speechless woe,’ she has an invincible sense of her own autonomy, her own interiority; she has a sense [. . .] of the authority of her own experience” (16). At the most basic level, this reading is problematic because of its identification of author as subject/narrator despite the fact that Coleridge wrote from a variety of points of view. Christine Battersby argues against Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s “suggest[ion] that this poem acts as a mirror in which the author looks deep into male-inscribed literary traditions” by taking issue with their reliance on a dual identity where Coleridge becomes both author and speaker (253). This “dual identity” is particularly problematic because aligning the author with the subject removes any agency that the author has, as the subject in question is overwritten by the reflection which she wishes to stifle.

Setting aside the discussion in *Madwoman in the Attic*, Alison Chapman and Christine Battersby examine “The Other Side of a Mirror” through the lens of Coleridge’s relationship to George MacDonald’s fictional hero Anodos, and Battersby additionally reads the poem through the lens of Plato’s use of anodos as “the passage of rebirth into pure being” (255). Battersby argues that:

trapped by the position of monster and hermaphrodite, Coleridge cannot position herself alongside Macdonald’s Anodos; but neither can she see herself as the high-white princess who acts as the object of [Anodos] the lover’s quest. The poet uses a non-idealized image of a female flesh-and-blood body as a counter to a metaphysical tradition that finds truth in art, and in the deathly whiteness and purity of unchanging Platonic universals or forms. The woman in Coleridge’s glass is not even a ‘shadow’ (the evil attendant of sexual desire in MacDonald’s novel), but the ‘shade of a shadow.’ Indeterminate to the end, she remains caught between desiring desire and Platonic negation. (261)

Through this view, by virtue of her gender, Coleridge is denied both the purity of Platonic transcendence and also the impurity of sexual gratification. Leaving out the discussion of Platonism, Chapman examines many of the same elements of MacDonald’s story. Chapman compares Coleridge’s “wild woman, who silently shows her ‘unsanctified distress’ through the ‘hideous wound’ of her mouth” to the character “Anodos’s black, malign shadow which dogs him on his journey around Fairy Land” (122). She continues the comparison, saying that Coleridge’s “speaker’s shadow or mirror image is a malign influence, one which she fears will continue to haunt her after

its passing to remind her of the kinship. Anodos, however, associates losing his shadow with death: ‘I have a strange feeling sometimes, that I am a ghost’” (123).

While these readings provide a useful context, we should also consider the possibility that the woman in the mirror is struggling not only against the ways her life has been contorted by the social constraints placed upon her because of her gender but also against temporal constraints placed upon her by her mortality. Certainly it is important to note the feminist tone of the poem; however, the religious underpinnings are equally significant. Like the speakers of the later poems “The Witch” and “Master and Guest” the speaker must confront the physical limitations of her life:

I sat before my glass one day,
And conjured up a vision bare,
Unlike the aspects glad and gay,
That erst were found reflected there—
The vision of a woman, wild
With more than womanly despair,
Her hair stood back on either side
A face bereft of loveliness.
It had no envy now to hide
What once no man on earth could guess.
It formed the thorny aureole
Of hard, unsanctified distress.
Her lips were open—not a sound
Came through the parted lines of red.

Whate'er it was, the hideous wound
In silence and in secret bled.
No sigh relieved her speechless woe,
She had no voice to speak her dread. (1–18)

The mirror image or double becomes a necessary means through which the speaker can recognize her true condition, both physically and spiritually. To this end, Barbara T. Gate's discussion of *Wuthering Heights* usefully illuminates Coleridge's poem. Of the scene prior to Catherine Earnshaw's death, Gates suggests that "Catherine is shocked when she sees her own reflection because she seems to understand what Yorkshire folklore dictates: that sick people should never look at themselves in a mirror. If they do, their souls may take flight from their weak bodies by being projected into the mirror, and this can cause their death." Both the speaker and Catherine initially have difficulty recognizing the reflection as their own. In Catherine's case, there is marked distinction between her normal appearance and her appearance after her fasting and subsequent illness. Though there is no physical cause for the change in the appearance of the poem's speaker, as "conjured" suggests, the effects are still the same. The speaker is confronted by an image of her true condition. Though the speaker of the poem may not be as close to death as Catherine is at the time of her confrontation, the speaker must still come to terms with her mortality.

Moreover, though Chapman does not pursue the relevance of Anodos's association between his shadow and death, the association can be adapted to suggest that the image in the mirror represents the woman's vision of death, which clearly frightens her. Coleridge's use of the dying flame supports this interpretation:

And in her lurid eyes there shone
The dying flame of life's desire,
Made mad because its hope was gone,
And kindled at the leaping fire
Of jealousy, and fierce revenge,
And strength that could not change nor tire.
Shade of a shadow in the glass,
O set the crystal surface free!
Pass—as fairer visions pass—
Nor ever more return, to be
The ghost of a distracted hour,
That heard me whisper:—'I am she!' (19–30)

“The Other Side of a Mirror” describes one of the earliest appearances “the dying flame of life’s desire” in Coleridge’s poetry (20). Unlike the apparent reticence of the woman in “The Witch,” whose flame burns out, the woman in “The Other Side of a Mirror” will not pass quietly. Battersby notes that “via a series of contraries that typify the movement of the poem, it becomes impossible to tell whether desire will or won’t die out. The desire is positioned as indeterminate: linked both to the ‘dying flame’ and to the ‘leaping fire’” (260). The flame begins to die because its hope is gone. Where previous readings suggest that hopelessness results from the woman’s inability to act as she chooses due to gender constraints, given the spiritual questioning of the volume, hope in “The Other Side of a Mirror” can also be read as religious hope. The “thorny aureole / of hard, unsanctified distress” suggests a Christian reference to Christ’s crown of thorns, which he

bore prior to his own death (11–12).

Coleridge uses the gothic tradition in “The Witch,” “Master and Guest,” and “The Other Side of a Mirror” to explore the darker aspects of mortality. Rather than attempting to quantify heaven and hell as known variables, she explores the terror and dread that accompany the unknown. In “The Witch,” “Master and Guest,” and “The Other Side of a Mirror,” she explores extreme dimensions of religious doubt and existential dread. In so doing, she neither reaffirms nor denies the validity of doubt and its accompanying suffering. Yet doubts prevalence in the volume through these and other poems suggests that doubt is a common condition of religious exploration. Moreover, doubt is a necessary component of negative capability in that it prohibits the formation of hard and fast “truths” that ultimately may or may not actually be true. However, because of its nature, doubt may lead to spiritual crises, as demonstrated by the speakers of the three gothic poems discussed here. As the mirror images suggest, doubt is an aspect of self-reflection, which in turn, is a necessary part of spirituality. Despite the fear that is associated with the state of doubt, it is necessary for religious awareness.

VI. Dust to Dust: Accepting Mortality in “Self-Question”

Though Coleridge explores the potential negative ramification of the doubt that accompanies negative capability, she does not advocate the dark side of doubt. For Coleridge the issue is the ability, or lack thereof, to accept one’s mortality. In “Self-Question,” the final poem of the volume, Coleridge at once summarizes and dismisses the fears that the volume explores in the previous forty-seven poems. “Self-Question” continues an exploration of morality and doubt, suggesting that ultimately the issue is one of contentment, or rather the lack there of:

Is this wide world not large enough to fill thee,
Nor Nature, nor that deep man's Nature, Art?
Are they too thin, too weak and poor to still thee,
Thou little heart?
Dust art thou, and to dust again returnest,⁵⁷
A spark of fire within a beating clod.⁵⁸
Should that be infinite for which thou burnest?
Must it be God?

The speaker of this poem questions first why one cannot be content with the life one has been given. Without trivializing them, the speaker dismisses the fears of the previous speakers, primarily those speaking in the gothic poems, who suffer crises because they are malcontent and yearn for the definitive nature of the hereafter. The speaker of "Self-Question" asks why immortality (i.e. an infinite "spark of fire") would be desirable in the first place. Behind these questions exists a partial Wordsworthian philosophy where nature can lead to peace and an understanding of the divine. Departing from Wordsworth, however, Coleridge adds art to nature, suggesting they are one and the same.⁵⁹ The speaker of this poem questions not only a specifically Christian explanatory framework for human existence but also any faith-based system that promotes belief in some sort of hereafter instead of focusing on the here and now. Despite its seeming irreverence toward the sufferers of the previous poems, "Self-Question" does not dismiss the importance of that suffering. It merely seeks to explore the cause of suffering, suggesting in the process that worrying about the afterlife is fruitless because there is no guarantee of any life beyond the current one. That the questions ultimately remain unanswered

suggests that there are no answers available. The insistence on questioning all aspects of belief, doubt, and lack of belief enacts a form of negative capability that is supported by a volume that concludes with more questions than answers.

Ultimately, then, while Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's work has traditionally been read primarily via her gothic poetry as a description of a woman struggling to come to terms with a male dominated literary tradition, this reading can and should be expanded to accommodate the plurality of voices and viewpoints that *Fancy's Following* presents. Indeed, the volume not only struggles with literary traditions, as critics rightly have agreed, but also with Christian religious traditions. Coleridge does not seek to destroy Christian traditions; rather she seeks to explore the levels of belief held by those who subscribe to Christianity. By focusing on the repercussions of blind faith and of disbelief, *Fancy's Following* suggests that doubt is a necessary component of faith. The volume, then, attempts to accommodate Victorian discourse and Victorian fears by attempting to understand the nature and function of doubt. Through her gothic poems, which contain an implicit religious engagement, Coleridge explores the darkness that accompanies doubt, and through her explicitly religious poetry, she attempts to show the futility that comes with religious certainty. Her exploration modernizes the nature of religious belief in order to accommodate the various challenges that religious faith faced in the late-Victorian era.

Chapter Three

Songs of Freedom: Intersections of Christianity and Socialism

in E. Nesbit's *Lays and Legends*

Scholars who address the works of E. Nesbit are generally drawn to her children's literature or her novels. Angela Leighton's comment about Nesbit's poetry is representative of the strain of critical attention it has received. Despite including Nesbit's poetry in her anthology *Victorian Women Poets*, Leighton clearly places it in secondary position to her fiction: *Lays and Legends* "was well received, and encouraged Edith to believe (wrongly in fact) that her real gift was for poetry" (Leighton and Reynolds 572).⁶⁰ While she is not as dismissive of Nesbit's poetry, Margaret Elizabeth Strickland agrees that Nesbit's children's literature is given precedence "in spite of Nesbit's ambitions to be a poet" and despite the fact that "in her heart, Nesbit longed to be a poet most of all" (288; 289). Though her poetry may be overlooked today, Nesbit placed greater value on her poetry than on her other works. Julia Briggs quotes Nesbit as saying "only my socialist poems are *real me*, and not drama" (71). Briggs posits that Nesbit's preference for poetry may have been related to her desire for literary prominence: "though Edith enjoyed the success her children's stories had brought her, she also resented it somewhat, disliking the way they threatened to eclipse her achievements as a poet and a novelist [. . .] Since children's books [. . .] had no status as serious literature, to earn popularity in such a genre could be regarded as more of a slight than a compliment" (260). Perhaps ironically, Nesbit's children's literature very much eclipses her poetry and her novels today, though now the genre is generally held in higher esteem than it was in her time.

Regardless of her preference, Nesbit has attained celebrity as a children's author

and has a growing reputation for her adult fiction in scholarly and, increasingly, in popular circles. This reputation is due at least in part to the fact that her prose output far exceeds her poetic output in terms of quantity if not quality. Nesbit kept up a regular rotation of magazine writing, including fiction and nonfiction, in addition to her poetry, which was frequently sidelined as a result of time constraints and a lack of discipline.⁶¹ In an attempt to reconcile Nesbit's voluminous prose output with her poetic ambitions, Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow suggest that though she preferred poetry, she was forced to turn to prose because "the considerable rewards from writing fiction superseded her aspirations to be a poet, although she continued to publish volumes of poetry into the twentieth century" (738). Nesbit herself confirms this view in a letter to Olive Hill that was dictated⁶² on 17 March 1924, almost 3 months before her death: "I'm so *glad* when anyone likes my poetry. It is really what I should naturally have done, that and *no* prose, if I had not had to write for a living" (qtd. in Briggs 392). Indeed, finances played a major role in Nesbit's literary priorities. A few months after becoming pregnant, she married Hubert Bland, a frequently unemployed journalist and a notorious philanderer. Later, her friend Alice Hoatson moved in with the family after becoming pregnant by Bland. Nesbit was the primary financial provider for the household, which included Bland, Hoatson, up to five children,⁶³ and a variety of admirers and lovers of Nesbit and/or Bland. Briggs paints the house as having a revolving door policy, where friends and close acquaintances were always welcome.⁶⁴ Briggs also suggests that the Bland household regularly lived just beyond their means; this, coupled with the sheer number of people the household supported, ensured that Nesbit had to favor financial gain over her predilection for the literary honors, which could only be achieved, at least to her mind,

via her poetic output.⁶⁵

While her poetry tends to be dismissed as being overly sentimental and dated,⁶⁶ the political agenda behind many of her poems, particularly those from her 1886 *Lays and Legends* and her 1908 *Ballads & Lyrics of Socialism, 1883–1908*,⁶⁷ remains sophisticated and meritorious of study because it exemplifies one of the ways in which religion was restructured and revitalized at the end of the nineteenth century. Unlike Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, who attempts to revise Christianity by accommodating doubt, Nesbit revises religion by merging essential tenets of Christianity and socialism. In its manipulation of religious language and ideology, *Lays and Legends* takes advantage of the privileged position of Christianity in Victorian England and attempts to revise and reappropriate its power. The poems that I focus on charge the readers to strive for social leveling and to reevaluate their lives according to Christian morality, though not in accordance with Christian worship. Nesbit denounces the power structure inherent in Christianity, and she uses the gothic to show the danger of denying all people power and equality.

Lays and Legends holds to a Fabian Socialist agenda in its structure via its combination of socialist, secular, and pseudo-religious poetry. More specifically, the volume relies on a system of Christian ethics and methodology in order to direct its readers towards a socialist agenda.⁶⁸ Christian ethics, as developed from the Christian Socialist belief system, hold that all individuals are equal under God and, as such, should be treated with mutual care and respect. In the Christian hierarchy, regardless of the denomination, God exists above humans, but he created humans in his own image.⁶⁹ Because of their inherent divinity, Christians are morally bound by Biblical teachings to

tend to each other's physical and spiritual needs. Nesbit's poetry builds upon the idea that humans are morally responsible for the well-being of others, though in *Lays and Legends* this responsibility does not stem from a Godly edict but rather from the human desire for the attainment of Liberty.⁷⁰ In *Lays and Legends*, Liberty replaces God as the ultimate authority. Liberty, in this case, is not a power that rules over people, as the traditional Christian God does, but rather a power that runs through people.

Lays and Legends opens its socialist agenda with two poems, "A Last Appeal" and "A Choice," that evoke a sense of brotherhood and shared Christian responsibility to maintain the well-being of all humans. Accordingly, all individuals are ethically bound to improve the physical and spiritual condition of their neighbors until all individuals attain the same quality of life. Perhaps uncharacteristically, given Christianity's original tenets, the idea of God provides no hope in *Lays and Legends*; rather, hope comes from the belief that all people will one day live in freedom and equality. Similarly, the promise of an afterlife, which the Anglican Church often used to provide hope for those who suffered, is denied in *Lays and Legends*. In this schemata, death is the end of physical and spiritual existence rather than a passage to an afterlife, and any retribution or reward that Victorian Anglican Christianity assigns to heaven, *Lays and Legends* reassigns to earth. Reworking Christian songs that trace life as a journey of suffering which ends with ascension into heaven, "New Year Song" and "Until the Dawn" suggest that suffering will either be ended through a finite death or through life governed by liberty. Liberty largely supplants any sort of traditional God figure, while humans are endowed with divine grace and powers, which will help them make liberty a reality on earth. In addition to making a macrocosmic social appeal to Christian responsibility,

Lays and Legends works microcosmically within the family by making an appeal to parental responsibility. “Dead to the Living,” “Baby’s Birthday,” and “Children’s Playgrounds in the City” appeal to the reader to change the world for the sake of the children. Crossing the volume’s appeal to Christian ethics and parental ethics is a complex relationship between violence, hope, and death.

I. Victorian Socialism: The Fabian Society and Christian Socialists

Though the volume nowhere explicitly identifies itself as being either Christian or socialist, Nesbit’s understanding of both Christianity and socialism are inherent in the volume. Because of her participation in the Fabian Society, Nesbit’s relationship to socialism is much more clear-cut than her relationship to Christianity. She was born Anglican, though she turned away from the church. At the turn of the twentieth century, after the death of her son Fabian, she was accepted into the Catholic church; however her ability and willingness to adhere to Catholic practices was compromised by her lifestyle.⁷¹ Written before her conversion, *Lays and Legends* does not specifically or uniformly engage with a particular branch of Christianity; however, some of the poems implicitly address Catholicism. The reference to the cross and priestly abstention in “Absolution” specifically mark it as a critique of Catholicism. “Tekel,” the volume’s opening poem, most likely critiques Catholicism as well, as the titular character is a Roman who struggles against decadence and lechery, both of which were conditions that were commonly used to stereotype “popish” religion.

While Nesbit’s relationship to religion may be tenuous, her relationship to socialism is not. As a long standing member of the Fabian Society, which published *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908*, Nesbit had a vested interest in the

achievement of Liberty, and it is through her membership to the Fabians that we can best understand her relationship to Christianity. The Fabian Society's origins can be located in Thomas Davidson's Fellowship of New Life, which sought to improve society by improving the knowledge and morals of the individuals who constitute the society. The founding Fabians were members of the Fellowship who splintered off to form the Fabian Society in January of 1884.⁷² Along with her husband, E. Nesbit was one of the original members of the Fellowship and of the Fabians after the split.⁷³ During Nesbit's time, the group included many prominent social activists and a fair number of literati; it also boasted a membership that was almost exclusively and notoriously drawn from the middle-class.⁷⁴ Well-known Fabians include Frank Podmore and Edward R. Pease, who were both founding members of the Society; George Bernard Shaw; Annie Besant, who helped publicize the Fabians; Sidney and Beatrice Webb; and H. G. Wells, who spent a short period with the group.

The program of the Fabian Society varied in specifics, depending on when particular statements were published and by whom they were written. However, the general Fabian program involved educating the masses and seeding socialist ideals into already existing social, political, and religious organizations.⁷⁵ McBriar explains that "taking a broad interpretation of the meaning of Socialism and having an optimistic belief in their powers of persuasion, the Fabians thought that most organizations would be willing to accept at least a grain or two of socialism. It was mainly a matter of addressing them reasonably, with a strong emphasis of facts, diplomatically, with an eye to the amount of socialism they were prepared to receive, and in a conciliatory spirit" (95).⁷⁶ The Fabians inherently believed that Socialism would be less threatening if it could be

related to ideologies that people were familiar with. Nesbit applies this methodology in *Lays and Legends*, as well as her other non-socialist volumes. She incorporates Fabian practice by threading socialist poems through a volume that addresses romantic and domestic concerns, which would be marketed to a wider reader base than would a volume of socialist poems alone. *Lays and Legends* adopts the Fabian program through its planting of socialist thought into the comparatively fertile ground of Christian faith.⁷⁷

While the Fabians debated and theorized wide-sweeping social, economic, and political reforms, they were particularly subdued when it came to the issue of religion. McBriar comments that the Fabians consciously avoided statements concerning philosophical matters: “as a general rule, it was the practice of the Fabian Society to disavow any distinctive philosophy.” He continues to say that “the attitude of the Society always has been that these matters were the private concern of its individual members” and that “certainly a very wide range of belief and disbelief was to be found in the Society, where atheists co-operated on practical political issues with ardent churchmen, materialists (Marxists and other) with idealists, all varieties of Christian denominations (from Quakers to Roman Catholics) with militant Rationalists” (146). In part, the lack of a solid philosophical doctrine helped solidify what might otherwise have become a schismatic organization. By avoiding a specific religious identity, the Fabians would also eliminate a potential impediment to their desire to infiltrate pre-existing groups, vis-à-vis religious conflict. Despite their own lack of religious identity, many Fabians did associate with religious groups. Peter d’A Jones suggests that “next to the ILP, the Fabian Society was the socialist group that received most aid and encouragement from Christian Socialists and with which they had the deepest relationship” (449). He also

points out that a number of executive and non-executive members of the Fabian Society were also Christian Socialists (450).

My concerns here are not necessarily with the group that identified themselves as Christian Socialists;⁷⁸ however, I do want to take some time to review their philosophies for the bearing they have on Nesbit's poetry. Nesbit engages with the Christian Socialist beliefs that all humans must be morally respectful and that since all people are sacred they must not be left to suffer. While many nondenominational socialist organizations sought varying levels of wide-spread social, political, and economic changes, the Christian Socialists were concerned less with political and economic institutions than they were with human relations. The degradation of the lower and working classes was seen by the Christian Socialists as the fallout of humans failing to treat each other with the moral respect God's creatures deserved. Blame was placed not only on the upper and middle classes who failed to meet the physical and spiritual needs of the lower and laboring classes but also on those of the lower and laboring classes who failed to tend to their own spiritual well-being and who neglected their accountability to others of their class. Their lack of a political agenda naturally served to distance the Christian Socialists from some of the more radical socialist reform groups. Norman suggests that "it was, indeed, this very emphasis upon the spiritual condition of men which made secular Socialists skeptical of the political seriousness of the Christian Socialists" (6). Though Christian Socialists truly intended to improve the conditions of the poor, their plan for doing so was intentionally conservative and sought to treat the symptoms of class stratification and social suffering rather than trying to eliminate the institutions causing stratification and suffering.

While they may not have been popular with all groups, that does not mean that all secular socialist organizations boycotted the Christian Socialists. Far from it. As both socialism and Christianity worked towards the overall betterment of the human condition, their overall missions clearly intersected, with the main difference being where one locates one's authority (i.e. in God or in the people). Christian Socialists relocated the basis of their teachings from the Anglican church to examples of human divinity in the Christian *Bible*. Jones suggests that Christian Socialists used the doctrine of Divine Immanence to argue "that God's presence everywhere, in nature and in man, destroys the artificial distinction between the 'sacred' and the 'secular' worlds, sanctifies the material life, and supports the socialist call for a Kingdom of God *on earth*" (86). Calling for a Kingdom on earth was an essential public relations move aimed at believers and nonbelievers, as the Christian doctrine promoting acceptance of one's suffering in exchange for heavenly reward lead to large scale lambasting and malignment of Christian faith. Moreover, this ruling provided a Christian justification for socialism: if all people were sacred then they all must be helped. Much of Nesbit's socialist poetry builds upon this tenet, which I label as Christian ethics. The idea that humans are divine did not, of course, originate with Christian Socialists, nor with the Victorians for that matter, but it was picked up upon by Christian and non-Christian socialist organizations in the Victorian era, as Nesbit's poetry exemplifies.⁷⁹ Stanley Pierson suggests that even for non-Christian socialists, this move was useful because it reduced the power of a divine figurehead by relocating divinity in humans (21–22). Moreover, the suggestion that all humans are divine implies that humans should be respected, much as divine figures traditionally were respected under Christian (and other) religious philosophies.

While Christian practice had much to gain by revising itself through socialist philosophy, socialism had as much to gain by packaging itself as a Christ/Christian-sanctioned belief system. As her poetry testifies, Nesbit recognized the benefits of comingling Christianity and socialism. Despite the fact that they were a bit mismatched, Christianity was essential as the face of socialism; as Jones suggests, “the revival of Christian socialism in late-Victorian England helped to advance the interests of the socialist and labor movements in general by breaking down prejudices, especially on the part of religious people, against the idea of socialism. The Christian socialists helped to make socialism more respectable” (457). While many scholars concede that the church did not enjoy the same level of public sway as it did prior to the Industrial Revolution, the amount of influence that religion lost is not exactly possible to measure. Socialist appropriations of Christian rhetoric, then, served two purposes. For those Christians who remained faithful to the church, this rhetoric would provide a nice veneer for potentially unsightly teachings, as Jones points out. Moreover, for those who lost touch with their Christian faith, socialism could easily fill the place of religion, as its use of Christian dialect suggests. Pierson and Jones both seem to agree that socialism’s engagement with Christian traditions was more than just an attempt by the Anglican church to improve its own marketability. Jones notes that “on the whole British socialism (and still more the British labor movement) bore a distinct coloration of ‘religion,’ however ill-defined and untheological that religion might be” (4). By reappropriating its language, socialism could easily fill the void left in Christianity’s wake. The problem, of course, would be reaching the masses and locating socialistic teachings within an accessible medium.

Because of its cultural proliferation, primarily through the popularity of the *Bible*, the language of Christianity was familiar to most Victorians, even if they were not church-going Christians. The uses of this language, then, were two-fold: socialist Christians sought to modernize religion by integrating it with socialistic agendas, and socialists who were not necessarily religious sought to make their own philosophies palatable to the general public and appropriated Christian rhetoric to do so. Jones comments that “although a noticeable characteristic of the socialist and labor movement was its ‘religiosity’ (the use of Christian rhetoric became especially marked after the formation of the Independent Labour Party in 1893), the relationship between socialism and Christianity in Britain in the eighties and nineties was nevertheless ambiguous” (4). He goes on to suggest that “some of its ambiguity was age-old, historical, and inescapable, inherent in the very nature and function of religion and its enigmatic role as a force in human society. The rest of the uncertainty derived from ‘local’ sources—the alienation of the urban masses, the establishment of a minority church, the injection of social ‘class’ into all aspects of Victorian life, the unsettling background provided by uneven economic expansion, continued population growth and the accompanying structural changes, and so on” (4). To this I would add that the generality of each individual philosophy, or each set of philosophies, could only compound the problem. In nineteenth-century England, Christianity was undergoing fundamental changes as various sects broke off and tried to accommodate industrial and scientific developments. All denominations sought to enfold the newly formed urban masses, and most needed to meet the challenge of Darwinism. For similar reasons, socialism too came in a variety of flavors, depending on what program of social reform the group advocated and on the

level of rejection, revision, or incorporation of religious beliefs the program advanced. The nineteenth century, particularly as it drew to a close, gave birth to a number of socialist groups with varying programs, agendas, and methodologies.

II. Fighting for Equality: Christian Ethics in “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice”

Nesbit’s engagement with Christianity and Christian Socialism can be seen in her poems “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice,” which were originally published in *Lays and Legends* and which were reissued in *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908*. Both poems build off the Christian Socialist beliefs that all people are morally bound to strive for social equality and that eliminating social suffering on earth is essential. To the pacifistic Christian Socialist teaching Nesbit marries Old Testament and apocalyptic Biblical imagery, which gives urgency to the attainment of equality because choosing to fight for or against equality becomes a choice of life or death. In “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice” the reader is given only two options: fight for equality or die while obstructing the fight. Though Christianity obviously denounces murder, Nesbit is able to retain her engagement with the Christian Socialists by casting the terms of her genocide in Old Testament Biblical imagery. By so doing, Nesbit throws the weight of Godly edict behind the movement for social equality, which allows her to retain a sense of morality and justice while essentially advocating the execution of anti-socialists. Moreover, she adopts Biblical metaphors that most, if not all, of her readership would have been familiar with, which lends legitimacy not only to her cause but also to herself as a poet by placing her in a long-line of visionary writers. For her predecessors she takes the Old Testament prophets, who presented their Biblical teachings to lead past generations of Christians, and more immediately, her Romantic predecessors, such as

William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, who shared her concerns and, to an extent, her methodology in addressing the complex relationship between social equality and religious responsibility, though they were much more explicit in their rejection of Anglican faith.

In order to support its argument against social stratification, “A Last Appeal” depends upon an assumed sense of Victorian morality and virtue. Though the poem relies on Christian values, Nesbit does not explicitly identify with a particular denomination. This is a tactical move because while the poem does evoke God, it does not specify a single conception of God, and thus avoids alienating any readers who hold a particular orthodoxy. The poem begins by stating that because of their shared nature, men should be treated equally.⁸⁰

Knowing our needs, hardly knowing our powers,
Hear how we cry to you, brothers of ours!—
Brothers in nature, pulse, passions, and pains,
Our sins in you, and your blood in our veins.
First in your palace, or last in our den,
Basest or best, we are all of us men!
Justice eternal cries out in our name,
What is the least common manhood can claim? (1–8)

Nesbit engages with Christian ethics, which are introduced through the line that reads “Our sins in you, and your blood in our veins.” In view of Christian mythology, this line can be read as a reference to a shared descent from Adam and Eve, who were made in God’s image, and subsequently a shared birthright of Original Sin. For the Victorians, a

viable way of making amends for Original Sin was to donate time and money to bettering the lives of the poor and the working classes. Gerald Parsons explains that “poverty [. . .] performed a necessary social function, offering the better off opportunities for the practice of Christian charity and the poor the opportunity for patience, humility and gratitude. Even the practice of charity, moreover, was to be directed towards the deserving poor, whose poverty was identifiably not the result of their own improvidence, intemperance or indolence. Much poverty, it was confidently claimed, was in fact the result of precisely such personal failing, and hence a recompense for sin” (43). To this extent then, the rich were complicit in enforcing poverty for their own spiritual well-being.

Rhetorically, “A Last Appeal” associates original sin with the greed of the wealthy and causally locates the sins of the poor in the materialism of the rich. The poem suggests that the poor cannot help but live in sinful conditions as a result of the lifestyle forced upon them. The narrators drive this point on in the third verse:

Give us our share of our food and our land:
Give us our rights, make us equal and free—
Let us be all we are not, but might be.
Our sons would be honest, our daughters be pure,
If our wage were more certain, your vices less sure—
Oh, you who are forging the fetters we feel,
Hear our wild protest, our maddened appeal— (26–32)

Nesbit revises the nineteenth century commonplace that poverty is the result of laziness on the part of the poor, instead suggesting that poverty is the result of laziness—and

corruption—on the part of the wealthy. Her revision is in keeping with Fabian and Christian Socialist teachings, which take their cues from ethical and historical conditions. The poem suggests that any “vice” on the part of the working class is an unavoidable, inherent part of their living conditions. To say this another way, the origin of vice is not internal (i.e. the working class members suffer from a naturally immoral character) but is instead external (i.e. immorality is forced upon them). This pronouncement depicts the poor as meritorious of salvation, and it places the onus of salvation of the worker and the wealthy on the land owner and the factory owner.

Historical precedent dictated that in Britain, under the agricultural economy, the wealthy heads of households and farmsteads were ethically bound by the Anglican Church to present themselves as proper moral examples to their servants and tenants. Under an industrial economy, this practice became antiquated as city-dwelling and factory-working increased. However, in grouping merchants and bankers with the landowner, “A Last Appeal” extends the responsibilities of the landed gentry under an economic system of agriculturalism to the newly rising middle-class gentlemen,⁸¹ thus placing responsibility for the moral well-being of the workers onto the factory owners. “A Last Appeal,” then, gives both moral and ethical responsibility for the poor and laboring classes to the newly minted moneyed-classes and to the aristocracy. Though the poem is concerned with financial and physical circumstances, it also suggests that the “desolate soul” of the masses is in danger (16). The poem questions:

Have we earned only such pitiful dole

As just holds worn body to desolate soul?

When that soul is bewildered each day and perplex

With the problem of how to get bread for the next,
Is it better to end it, as some of us do,
Or to fight it out bravely, still calling to you

‘Food that we make for you,

Money we earn:

Give us our share of them—

Give us our turn’? (15–24)⁸²

By positing the choice between life and death as a moral question, “A Last Appeal” addresses the moral predicament the poor are placed in: they are not given sufficient goods to sustain life but they are told that “end[ing] it” is a sin. Barbara T. Gates explains that the Victorians held a particular fear of and fascination for suicide. She suggests that they “believed suicide to be immoral.” She also posits that “if both religious and non-religious people condemned suicide, then condemnation was tied to the Victorian question of the will.” The workers’ contemplation of suicide as a viable option illustrates the extreme state of desperation to which the workers have been driven. The poem carefully addresses concerns about the moral condition of the working class by narrating the workers’ concerns for their own moral condition. Moreover, the poem takes pains to show that the poor are not looking for free handouts but only for what they have earned. Both of these issues would need to be addressed in order to counter the Victorian stereotypes that associated moral failing, such as laziness or lechery, with poverty and in order to prove to the reader that the poor are indeed worthy and deserving of help.

“A Last Appeal” speaks not only to the stereotype that poverty resulted from laziness and immorality but also to the promise of heavenly reward, which was often

used to pacify the poor. The Anglican church promised heavenly reward to the poor in exchange for contentment with earthly suffering. While the promise may have initially been made in good faith, throughout the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the Anglican Church was derided for its failure to act in the best interests of the poor,⁸³ particularly since many dissenting churches grew out of and supported working- and middle-class communities. In “A Last Appeal,” the promise of the Anglican Church is nullified, as the narrators suggest that reward will be given on earth instead of in heaven. Moreover, in the absence of voluntary change, the poem suggests that God will take steps to help rectify inequality in the world of the living rather than reserving reward for the afterlife:

Hear us, and answer, while Time is your friend,
Lest we be answered by God in the end;
Lest, when the flame of His patience burns low,
We be the weapon He shapes for His blow—
Lest with His foot on your necks He shall stand,
And appeal that you spurned be new-born as command,
And thunder your doom, as you die by the rod
Of the vengeance of man through the justice of God. (37–44)

Drawing on apocalyptic imagery, “A Last Appeal” explicitly engages in religious justifications of class stratification in order to implicitly challenge those justifications. In the poem, God clearly supports reward on earth. The poem closes with the promise that the masses are not dependent on those who have been blessed with fortune and also closes with the righteous threat that God will rain violence down upon those who oppose social and economic equality.

Through her use of violence, Nesbit ventures into anarchist territory. Though Nesbit's primary associations were always with the Fabian Society, Angela Leighton states, in 1884 she "was also drawn into the anarchist group surrounding the Russian exiles Kropotkin and Stepniak" (Leighton and Reynolds 571).⁸⁴ Moreover, many early Fabians were members of anarchist groups, despite the fact that the two systems of thought eventually became incompatible.⁸⁵ The goal of Victorian anarchists was to eliminate government entirely. April Carter explains that "Anarchy means literally 'without government', and the lowest common denominator of anarchist thought is the conviction that existing forms of government are productive of wars, internal violence, repression and misery. The critique of government extends to liberal democratic governments as well as to the more frequently criticized dictatorships" (14). Though the Fabians believed that the political structure of their government was faulty, they did not advocate the complete destruction of government, and instead held faith that democracy would ultimately lead to true equality. Moreover, the Fabians were not advocates of revolting against government; their belief in the evolution of democracy was inherently peaceful and based on education.

Though Anarchists advocated a society that was not bound by government, they still valued equality and morality. George Crowder explains that "'Anarchy,' in the sense in which it is the goal of anarchists, means the absence of a ruler or government, and this should be distinguished from the more common sense of 'anarchy' as the absence of order." He goes on to clarify that "an ordered society without coercive government: this may be taken as a working definition of anarchism. Anarchists reject law made and imposed by governments, but that does not mean they reject rules of morality or

prudence. The anarchist society will be ruled not by coercion—force, or the threat of force—but by prudential and, especially, moral rules, self-imposed by its individual members” (1). Despite their different goals, for the most part, both anarchists and Fabians hoped to achieve their ends peacefully. Though conceptually anarchy is opposed to violence, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, some anarchist groups advocated violence as a means of overthrowing government rule and attaining Liberty. Crowder suggests that “the anarchist reputation for violence is due largely to the terrorist activity carried out in the name of anarchism during the period of ‘propaganda by deed’ (about 1880 to 1910), but this tendency reflected the views of only some anarchists. Others, arguably more faithful to the fundamental principles of anarchism, repudiated violence in favour of progress through education and personal moral renewal” (1). Nesbit draws upon what Crowder identifies as “terrorist activity” in “A Last Appeal.”

Associations with anarchy in “A Last Appeal” are complicated by the fact that the poem retains the language of divine retribution and vengeance—any and all damage done will be in keeping with God’s will, thus allowing for a perverse moral justification. However, divinity in “A Last Appeal” is more of a vehicle than an end in and of itself. The poem pronounces the power of God but immediately reclaims the power of God as the power of the people: “Lest, when the flame of His patience burns low, / We be the weapon He shapes for His blow— (39–40). Nesbit’s use of God at once justifies violent revolt—i.e. God said we should do it—while underscoring the fact that the people are the active agents of divinity. Logically and strategically, relocating the human as divine eliminates the possibility of divine hierarchy and of any argument that relies on pre-ordinance to suggest that class stratification is Biblically ordained. Thus, Nesbit places

the burden of change on the shoulders of the people. And yet the poem attempts to justify violence by suggesting a reversal of power somewhat based on the Biblical teaching that the first shall be last and the last shall be first. “A Last Appeal” revises the teaching, however, to say that the poor will be rich and the rich will “die by the rod.”

Though it clearly runs counter to anarchist thought, replacing one corrupt ruling group with another noncorrupt ruling group is in keeping with the teachings of the Fabian Society. Their end goal was not mass leveling of all classes so much as it was gradually easing the plight of the poor with the eventual outcome being a significant reduction in if not quite a complete elimination of class stratification. The Fabians were sharply criticized by other socialist organizations for their hesitance to radically and immediately restructure the government. The argument goes that the desire to transform power and moderately revise ruling bodies would not eliminate social problems and inequalities but rather would perpetuate them; the difference, of course, would be with respect to who is in charge. Nesbit’s response to this line of argument suggests that attention to moral duty would indeed destroy social ills and that the new ruling class would be tempered by “the justice of God.” Because those who abuse power will be destroyed, at least metaphorically, instead of shifted to a lower class, “A Last Appeal” calls for a true leveling of power, unlike the reversal of power called for in the New Testament. Rather than erecting a new lower class, “A Last Appeal” simply eliminates class stratification by eliminating those who constitute the nouveau poor. In so doing the poem suggests that it is indeed better to be dead than to be poor.

The impetus for equality and the sheer force of the masses introduced in “A Last Appeal” carries over to “A Choice,” which warns against the coming of a metaphorical

flood that will wash the earth clean. Much like the Biblical flood, the metaphorical one results from human corruption—specifically, human greed and laziness. In both cases, the flood acts as a metaphor for cleansing and redemption. However, unlike the Biblical flood, which was sanctioned by a vengeful Old Testament deity, Nesbit’s flood consists primarily of a human tide, which can be dispersed through cooperation and through achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people,⁸⁶ or in other words, by following what John Stuart Mills in *Utilitarianism* calls “the ethics of utility”.⁸⁷

THE flood of utter change is loosed. A space
Is ours yet, for its coming to prepare.
Shall we build dams with cautious, clumsy care,
Or stand with idle hands and frightened face,
And so be whirled all broken from our place,
And perish with the dams we builded there?
Or shall we dig a broad, deep channel, where
Most fields may feel the flood’s benign embrace?

Thus turned ’twill be a calm majestic flood
Of plenty, peace, and fertilizing power,
Whose banks fresh flowers of love and joy shall deck.
Oppose it: at the inevitable hour,
Tumultuous, black with ruin, red with blood
’Twill come—and you shall have no chance but wreck!

“A Choice” relocates the apocalyptic power of the Biblical flood in human agency and

combines it with utilitarianism to suggest that change is inevitable and resistance is futile. Utilitarianism, initially derived from the teachings of Jeremy Bentham, advocated a society that was structured to provide the greatest good to the greatest number of people. Schlossberg explains that in his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789), Bentham “argued that the two great springs of human action were the contrary principles of pleasure and pain; human motivation consists in doing what one can to enhance the first and avoid the second. A society that conducted its affairs wisely would further the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people by increasing pleasure to the maximum and decreasing pain to the minimum” (187).

The call for “plenty, peace, and fertilizing power, in “A Choice” echoes the Utilitarian’s call for a sharing of prosperity among all classes. The poem presents no option for or possibility of stopping the movement toward equality; the only choice is how to deal with it. Accepting changes for equality will allow for the peaceful transformation that the Fabians promoted. Indeed, the scene “of plenty, peace, and fertilizing power” was what many Fabians expected of socialism (10). However Nesbit defies Fabian thought through the poem’s suggestion that a violent transformation will be enacted if the dominant capitalistic social structure attempts to avoid change.

Both “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice” present the opportunity to achieve a utopia through radical social leveling. However, in both poems, counter to a utopic society runs the possibility of an apocalyptic society, if socialism is not really accepted. The poems rely on the assumption that social change is inevitable and that social equality will be achieved regardless of the cost. Yet Nesbit is not advocating violence here so much as warning against it, with the obvious suggestion that violence is unnecessary and

undesirable. Through her warning, Nesbit casts herself into the role of a prophet warning against the consequences of continued social injustice. Louis Martz explains that “The Biblical prophets spend a great deal of time—indeed, most of the time—denouncing the misdeeds of the unjust at the present moment, evils that derive from the people’s worship of false gods. Prophecies of the future appear, but these are often prophecies of the disasters that will fall upon the people, or will continue to fall upon them, if they do not mend their unjust ways. The Hebrew prophet is a reformer: his mind is upon the present. But then he also offers the consolation of future good, the possibility of redemption, if the people give up their unjust ways and return to worship of the truth” (3–4). In both “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice” Nesbit adopts this role by suggesting that those who resist social change will be the origins of violence upon themselves and that they will be forced to pay for their refusal to fulfill their moral responsibility to those who are forced to live in poverty.

The threat of violence in “A Choice” and in “A Last Appeal” is noteworthy because of its sharp contrast with the rest of the poems in *Lays and Legends*.⁸⁸ In “A Choice” and “A Last Appeal,” Nesbit clearly draws on the righteous fury of the Old Testament Biblical God to construct a radical social vision. Nesbit evokes an all-powerful, punishing figure who is more akin to gothic nightmares than religious consolation. Though she does not explicitly identify with any particular religion, her use of the *Genesis* flood and of the Christian Gospel teaching that the first shall be last and the last first would not fail to resonate with Christians. Despite the long-standing debate about the compatibility of Christianity and socialism, Nesbit’s appropriation of religious materials is a tactical rhetorical move. First, as I have already discussed, it serves to

neatly package statements that would otherwise seem foreign and hostile to most individuals. Christianity's compatibility with socialist values, even if it is only superficial, is important in terms of marketability. Second, having divine sanction gives the ultimate authority to the argument of the poems. In evoking Christian ideology, Nesbit taps into a well-established rhetorical device that gives strong ethical backing to an argument that most Victorians would deem unethical (i.e. killing one's oppressors); to this end, "A Last Appeal" and "A Choice" fit the Old Testament Biblical pattern of punishing those who defy God's will. Building on the theme of vengeance that runs through the Old Testament allows Nesbit to cast the poor and working classes as victims who need to be avenged for the wrongs done upon them. Accordingly, Nesbit creates a God who values equality and who punished those who promote inequality. Finally, Nesbit's use of Christian rhetoric serves to underscore the moral dimension of the issue. In both poems, physical violence is a last resort that would be brought on by a refusal to fulfill a moral obligation. Nesbit allows for the possibility of a society built on love, mutual respect, and equality, which is in keeping with the New Testament shift away from vengeance and to the forgiveness promoted by Christ's example in the Gospels. Both poems present willing equality as a better alternative to physical force, yet both present the use of physical force as a better alternative to compliance with an unethical social system.

III. Worshiping Liberty: Rewriting Divinity in "New Year Song" and "Until the Dawn"

Though I would suggest that Nesbit uses Christianity as a vehicle for making radical philosophies palatable, she also engages with Christianity by rewriting it in

socialist rhetoric, thus creating a deliberate tension between the two philosophies. In other words, rather than simply using Christian rhetoric as a veneer for socialism, she retains core Christian principles and revises them so that they extoll morality without requiring divine authority.⁸⁹ “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn”” duplicate common songs of religious praise while doctoring them to balance their sacred content and with their social content. Though they retain the language and imagery of devotional songs, the poems shift the focus of praise from a Christian God to Liberty.⁹⁰ A key alteration, for example, is the removal of the Christian divine figurehead which is replaced instead with Liberty or, alternatively, Freedom.⁹¹ In so doing, the volume draws on a standing literary and philosophical tradition of the deification of Liberty. Liberty, by its very definition, denies the authority of any single governing figurehead, be he/she/it divine or not.⁹² Rather than being a power over people, liberty is a power that runs through people. Moreover, liberty becomes the final goal all of the poems, as it simultaneously serves a political and spiritual function similar to heaven in a Christian schemata. Those who fight for liberty suffer the same doubt and trials as those who try to work their way into heaven; however, their eventual reward will occur when liberty is brought to earth. Where Christianity depicts a reunion with God happening in heaven, *Lays and Legends* suggests that a “heavenly” reunion will instead happen on earth.

“New Year Song,” which was collected in *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908*, follows suit with poems like Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s “There Was No Place Found” and “The Witch” and Graham R. Tomson’s “Evening” and “On the Road,” in that it reconfigures the metaphor that the trajectory of life is a journey which ends in the achievement of heavenly consolation. Unlike conventional uses of the metaphor, such as

in Christina Rossetti's "Up-Hill," where the speaker is comforted and assured entry into heaven, in "New Year Song," there is no consolation, and one hill just leads to another:

WE climb the hill; the mist conceals

That valley where we could not stay;

Surely this hill's crest, gained, reveals

The glory of the sunlit day.

The hill is climbed. Still shadow-land—

Still darkling looms another hill.

We dare not stop or think of rest,

This one hill may be all that lies

Between us and our souls' desire—

The splendor of the eastern skies. (1–12)

The movement of the speakers is governed as much by the desire for future rest as it is by the need to escape past suffering. The speakers are driven on almost involuntarily by their need. Despite the obvious despair of the speakers, they do not quit because of the possibility that the next hill may bring relief. In other words, they retain hope, albeit a desperate hope. Traditionally, in this type of journey poem, the end of the road is heaven or some conception thereof, the eventual attainment of which keeps those who suffer pacified. "New Year Song" keeps to the traditional pattern, in that the speakers are indeed accepting of their situation and willing to keep fighting for their promised goal. In the Victorian period, the Christian depiction of life as a journey towards a rewarding afterlife was quite useful in keeping the working classes and the poor accepting of, if not quite satisfied with, their lot in life. As Julie-Marie Strange comments, social reformers

frequently manipulated the traditional view of the rewarding journey of life: “this depressing vision of life as a slow and bitter journey towards the saving grace of death was an effective rhetorical strategy for reformist and socialist writers. The flipside of this device was that the working classes, especially the poor, could also be portrayed as indifferent to death, even to the point of callous neglect” (33). Indeed, many of Nesbit’s speakers are ambivalent about death.

In keeping with *Lays and Legends*’ revision of religion, the end of the road in “New Year Song” is liberty. Nesbit reworks the journey poem format to accommodate her deification and glorification of Liberty, which encompasses both God and heaven inasmuch as these terms are applicable. Since there is no afterlife, the poem proposes that liberty will eventually be achieved in the here-and-now. Despite the up-hill struggle, the poem refrains from questioning *if* liberty will be attained and instead questions *when* liberty will be attained. As days turn into years, the poem ends with a second admonishment for those who lose faith, and it presents the first and only mention of the word liberty in the poem:

Failure on failure! What! Tired out?
Too tired to live? Heart, dare you die
When this new year may bud and bear
Your longed-for flower of Liberty? (21–24)

Despite the patronizing goading of the speakers and their refusal to give up their struggle, the poem ultimately is one of little hope, as the speakers question if they can survive their ordeal. The individuals in “New Year Song” are trapped between two options: continue the seemingly insurmountable struggle for liberty or lay down and die. However, the

narrators of the poem obviously chide those who consider giving up, suggesting that the only true option for the faithful is to continue the journey.

The final poem of *Lays and Legends*, ““Until the Dawn,”” follows a format similar to “New Year Song.” ““Until the Dawn”” is one of the few poems that was revised when it was reprinted in *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908*; the title was changed to ““Until the Day Break . . . ”” though the poem was otherwise unchanged.⁹³ Nesbit’s poem echoes *The Song of Solomon*, which can be read as a love poem between God and his faithful believers. *The Song of Solomon* traces the marriage of two lovers through the stage of courtship to the development of a long term marriage. ““Until the day break”” references the sections of the *Song* where the lovers are apart and as a result suffer anxiety; the separation of the lovers occurs at night and their reunion at day. One Christian interpretation maintains that *The Song* represents the struggling that Christians experience as a result of being separated from God and the joy that will be felt when they are reunited with God at the dawn of a new day. ““Until the Dawn”” revises this interpretation so that the break of day will bring a reunion with Liberty rather than with a Christian God. Prior to that reunion, the faithful must live through the darkness of night, where they are disparaged with hopelessness and fear that they will not be united with Liberty:

When head and hands and heart alike are weary;

When Hope with folded wings sinks out of sight;

When all thy striving fails to disentangle

From out wrong’s skein the golden thread of right;

When all thy knowledge seems a marsh-light’s glimmer,

That only shows the blackness of the night;
In the dark hour when victory seems hopeless,
Against thy lance when armies are arrayed,
When failure writes itself upon thy forehead,
By foes outnumbered and by friends betrayed;
Still stand thou fast, though faith be bruised and wounded,
Still face thy future, still be undismayed! (1–12)

In a volume largely characterized by hopelessness and suffering, ““Until the Dawn”” provides a rare glimpse of hope through its ardent adherence to the eventual attainment of freedom on earth. The poem echoes *The Song of Solomon* through its acknowledgment of the struggle of day to day existence, of the fear and darkness that often accompany that struggle, and of the eventual triumph over doubt.

The first two verses of ““Until the Dawn”” follow many of Nesbit’s other socialist poems in the parallel they draw between darkness and a lack of equality. However, ““Until the Dawn”” retains a particularly Christian framework through its admonishment to wait faithfully for the coming of the light. The narrator’s appeals to stand strong and hold to one true faith in the face of those who doubt echoes edicts given to martyrs in any disparaged religion and, in fact, to any peoples who suffer:

While one true man speaks out against injustice,
While through men’s chorused ‘Right!’ clear rings his ‘Wrong!’
Freedom still lives. One day she will reward him
Who trusted in her through she tarried lone,
Who held her creed, was faithful till her coming,

Who, for her sake, strove, suffered, and was strong.
She will bring crowns for those who love and serve her;
If thou canst live for her, be satisfied;
If thou canst die for her, rejoice! Our brothers
At least shall crown our graves and say, 'These died
Believing in the sun when night was blackest,
And by our dawn their faith is justified!' (13–24)

The final two verses depict a rewarding Liberty, who will favor those who fought for him/her. ““Until the Dawn”” plays with the religious imagery of darkness and light that *The Song of Solomon* relies on, where light is associated with faith in or a connection to God, which is represented by the reunion that takes place between the two lovers. However, in ““Until the Dawn,”” the coming light is explicitly identified with the coming of freedom, as the Christian referent is removed. This removal allows for a retention of the religious symbolism that many Victorian readers would recognize, and possibly accept, while substituting what, for some readers, would be a preferable, nonreligious subject. Those who do not believe in heavenly reward can take some measure of comfort from knowing that earthly reward will eventually be achieved. As with Nesbit’s other socialist poems, ““Until the Dawn”” does not question if hope will come but rather asks when hope will come.

Much as with devotional Christian songs, the purpose of ““Until the Dawn”” is to comfort the faithful rather than to convert the nonbelievers. In fact, most of Nesbit’s socialist poetry aims to provide comfort to the faithful socialists, with “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice” being obvious exceptions. Where “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice” use

Christian Ethics and threats of violence to convince the reader to assist the socialist cause rather than attempt to hamper it, “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn”” comfort converts and encourage them to continue the struggle. Moreover, the latter poems work directly to modernize Christianity for an audience that would need to reconcile religion with technological, scientific, and social reform. By excising God from faith and replacing him with Liberty and by denying heaven in place of equality on earth, Nesbit fulfills a key need of religion—that is the necessity of knowing that some divinity will provide meaning for life and its suffering. In *Lays and Legends*, the purpose of suffering is precisely to make the divine real, or in other words, to make equality a reality.

IV. Family and Freedom: Parental Responsibility in “The Dead to the Living,”

“Baby’s Birthday,” and “Children’s Playgrounds in the City”

Both “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn”” provide fairly abstract rationales for continuing to fight for equality. However, Nesbit provides a more concrete rationale for fighting in her children poems, which present roughly the same argument that runs through “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn,”” namely that all people must fight for liberty. In “The Dead to the Living,” “Baby’s Birthday,” and “Children’s Playgrounds in the City” those who fight for equality are encouraged to do so because even if they do not see the end result of their struggles, their children will.⁹⁴ Where Christian faith advocated the maintenance of belief by offering heavenly reward, Nesbit argues for maintaining belief for the benefit of one’s offspring. For the Victorians, one of the functions of religion was to encourage morality. Christianity did this by offering heavenly reward to the devout and hellish punishment to the unethical. Because she removes the idea of divine judgment, Nesbit removes what for many readers would be the impetus to follow

socialism and strive for liberty. To this end, Nesbit replaces the impetus to strive for one's personal salvation with the directive to strive for the salvation of one's children.

Many of Nesbit's children poems are tinged with elements of the gothic through their tendency to associate childhood with death. Nesbit is not unique in drawing this association. According to James R. Kincaid, "The Victorian child helped redefine the gothic; but it's probably more important to note that the gothic defined the Victorian child. The child could contain and evoke the gothic sensation, and since 'gothic' had never been a formal or aesthetic matter anyhow, it didn't matter what was used to convey it. Gothic had always meant the production of a combination of conflicting sensations; it was reader-response from the get-go" (2). Nesbit's children, even those who live, exist under the constant shadow of death and the threat of being snatched away. As Leighton suggests, Nesbit here vocalized her own experiences of profound loss; however, Nesbit moves beyond simply expressing loss and uses the threat of loss to illustrate why power must be relocated from an almighty figure-head to all individuals. Accordingly, parents can only protect their children by fighting for the freedom that will afford them power. Here, too Nesbit engages with gothic aesthetics. Kincaid explains that in the gothic "the child is formulated as a victim, certainly, always about to be snatched away. That gives the adult something to do: protect the child and watch out for the monsters. It creates the paranoid anxiety necessary for gothic and not hard to locate in our child-centered world" (7). "The Dead to the Living," "Baby's Birthday," and "Children's Playgrounds in the City" sit under this gothic threat, with the children needing protection from suffering and inequality rather than a supernatural being.

"The Dead to the Living," which reappears in *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism*:

1883–1908, opens with the scriptural reference “work while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work,” which situates the poem alongside other Christian lamentations through its reference to a shared heritage of death. In the scriptural reference, night is generally equated with death. The opening lines of the “The Dead to the Living” confirm the poem as a parent’s lamentation for his/her dead child:

IN the Childhood of April, while purple woods
With the young year’s blood in them smiled,
I passed through the lanes and the wakened fields,
And stood by the grave of the child.
And the pain awoke that is never dead
Though it sometimes sleeps, and again
It set its teeth in this heart of mine,
And fastened its claws in my brain:
For it seemed so hard that the little hands
And the little well-loved head
Should be out of reach of my living lips,
And be side by side with the dead—
Not side by side with us who had loved,
But with these who had never seen
The grace of the smile, the gold of the hair,
And the eyes of my baby-queen. (1–16)

Though I want to move beyond it, it is useful to start with Leighton’s reading of the poem, which takes a biographical perspective; she says of the poem that “Nesbit

intriguingly turns an elegy on the death of a child into a poem of political hope for future generations, thus, in a rare combination, making a political statement out of a private, domestic and quintessentially female experience of loss” (Leighton and Reynolds 572). Nesbit’s numerous children poems have been attributed to her difficulty with birthing healthy children and her unconventional living situation. Leighton comments that “it is perhaps not surprising, given the unconventional reproduction of mothering in the [Bland] household, that E. Nesbit should have written such memorable and intense ‘baby’ poems as ‘O baby, baby, baby dear,’ ‘Haunted,’ and ‘The Dead to the Living’” (Leighton and Reynolds 573).⁹⁵

However, moving away from the biographical impetus for the poems opens the possibility that her children poems function in a similar vein to her quasi-religious poems—their purpose not only is not only to celebrate the life of the child but also to motivate the adult.⁹⁶ Significations of proper parenthood in “The Dead to the Living” combine with its oblique Christian referents to deliver a fairly radical vision of life that posits death as being preferable to a life devoid of freedom. As the poem shifts into the narrator’s vision, the focus moves away from a lamentation for the death of a child and into a discussion of navigating between hope and suffering:

Through their shut eyelids the dead looked up,
And without a voice they said :
‘We lived without hope, without hope we died,
And hopeless we lie here dead ;
And death *is* better than life that draws
Pain in, as it draws in breath,

If life never dreams of a coming day
When life shall not envy death.
Through the dark of our hours and our times we lived,
Uncheered by a single ray
Of such hope as lightens the lives of you
Who are finding life hard to-day ;
With our little lanterns of human love
We lighted our dark warm night—
But you in the chill of the dawn are set
With your face to the eastern light. (61–76)

Deviating from the scriptural reference, “The Dead to the Living” does not delineate dark (or blindness) and light (or sight) in terms of religious acceptance and hope for the coming of heaven. Instead, the poem posits the coming of an earthly glory in the form of Freedom, which here works synonymously with Liberty as a substitute for God. Where “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice” are largely directed to those who oppose equality and liberty, “The Dead to the Living” follows “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn”” in addressing those who are in a position to fight for equality; the narrator of “The Dead to the Living” has the choice to seek hope and to work for Freedom.

Much as with “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn”” the narrator of “The Dead to the Living” struggles with his/her faith. However, where “New Year Song” and ““Until the Dawn”” provide abstract comfort, “The Dead to the Living” presents a much more personal motivation in its call to arms, because the narrator is asked by the dead speakers⁹⁷ to leave behind his/her⁹⁸ child in order to pursue Freedom:

Freedom is waiting with hands held out
Till you tear the veil from her face—
And when once men have seen the light of her eyes,
And felt her divine embrace,
The light of the world will be risen indeed,
And will shine in the eyes of men,
And those who come after will find life fair,
And their lives worth living then!
Will you strive to the light in your loud rough world,
That these things may come to pass,
Or lie in the shadow beside the child,
And strive to the sun through the grass? (77–88)

In this passage, Nesbit rewrites *John 9*, where Jesus gives sight to a blind man. Through his faith in God, the blind man is made to see. In asking the speaker whether he/she will choose light or shadow, the dead speakers recast the religious parable not as a choice to retain faith in God but rather to retain faith in Freedom. While Freedom might seem a logical stand-in for the God, in “The Dead to the Living” the roles are reversed, as Freedom is blind and humans have the power to give sight, thus retaining the endowment of humanity with divine power, which was suggested in “A Last Appeal” and, to a lesser extent, in “A Choice.”

Though it is possible to read “The Dead to the Living” as an updated parable of religious faith, the references to labor demand that the poem be pushed beyond its religious context. While “The Dead to the Living” may not be as graphic as some of the

social problem novels that came out of the Victorian Era, the poem follows in their tradition by portraying death and mourning as a crux for social reform.⁹⁹ Strange explains that “social commentators were [. . .] alive to the possibilities of using familiarity with death as a political tool. In emphasizing the horrific conditions in which some of the working classes lived, death could be cast as an ethereal friend, heralding release from hardship and privation (more so than the workhouse)” (32). Nesbit plays with this idea, in that the dead speakers, who had no hope while they were alive, find death preferable to life. Though Nesbit does not dwell on the horrific conditions which make the dead find life so burdensome (perhaps because she was unfamiliar with working-class conditions), she does cast death as a “release from hardship” through the suggestion that “death *is* better than life that draws / Pain in, as it draws in breath” (65–66). However, the dead speakers also emphasize that the parent has hope, despite the loss of his/her child.

While the poem de-emphasizes the sacred in favor of the political, it retains an association between the personal and the political. The dead laborers present a choice: either embrace life and fight for Freedom or die and be with the child. But in his/her response to the dead speakers’ query, the narrator posits a third inclusive alternative:

‘My world while I may,’ I cried ; ‘but you
Whose lives were as dark as your grave ?’
‘We too are a part of the coming light,’
They called through the smooth green wave
Their white shrouds gleamed as the flood of green
Rollover and hid them from me—

Hid all but the little hands and the hair,

And the face that I always see. (89–96)

Where the dead seem to want the narrator to choose between the personal—the dead child—and the political—Freedom—the narrator chooses both in proclaiming “my world while I may,” thus signifying his/her commitment to fight while still carrying the image of the dead child (91). Arguably, the child becomes a symbol of the narrator’s hope by personifying and personalizing that for which the narrator strives. In other words, the child gives a physical signifier to an abstract search; moreover the narrator can strive for what he/she would want for the child, were she¹⁰⁰ to have survived. By equating the narrator’s desire for liberty with his/her desire to help the dead child, the poem suggests that any decent parent should fight for liberty in order to provide the best life possible for his/her children. Parenthood, in this case, extends beyond the individual and the family to the public at large, adding to the moral and ethical impetus to change. Where “A Last Appeal” and “A Choice” postulate that complacency with social inequality compromises one’s moral integrity, “The Dead to the Living” suggests that complacency with inequality compromises one’s familial integrity. Instead of fighting for change on abstract moral grounds, the fight becomes personal and, as such, an essential aspect of parental responsibility.

Nesbit uses parental responsibility as an impetus for social change elsewhere in the volume, making the personal inherently political. Two poems, “Baby’s Birthday” and “Children’s Playgrounds in the City,” which appear in *Lays and Legends* but were not reprinted in *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908*, expand the importance of the child figure to the volume’s political agenda. “Baby’s Birthday” is an occasional

poem that covertly presents the speakers' wish that the baby will continue the pursuit of liberty. The poem engages in a traditional presentation of the parents' hopes for their child:

Baby, we wish that those dear eyes
May see fulfillment of our dreaming,
Those little feet may turn from wrongs,
Those hands to hold the right be strong,
That heart be pure, that mind be wise
To know the true from the true-seeming.
We wish that all your life may be
A life of selfless brave endeavour—
That for reward the fates allow
Such love as lines your soft nest now
To warm the years for you, when we,
Who wish you this, are cold for ever. (13–24)

The wishes the narrators have for their child echo the same wishes of the narrators in the other socialist poems, particularly that the child's life "may be / A life of selfless brave endeavour" (7–8). Children are important here not just because they can continue to fight for freedom but also because they too are being harmed by the ineffectuality of the current social and political system. Where some readers may be hesitant to attach any value (sentimental or otherwise) to adult workers who, through stereotypical conceptions, would be seen as responsible for their situations, few people would hesitate to respect, if not identify with, a parent's well-wishes for a child. Moreover, the image of

a suffering child has much more of a sympathetic draw than that of an adult because a child would not be held responsible for poverty. Historically, the poor were accused of being unwilling to work, but this charge does not hold when applied to poor children. The narrators vicariously place responsibility for the child onto the reader through the presumed bond of parenthood and, once again, through the use of the plural pronoun. Much like “The Dead to the Living,” “Baby’s Birthday” charges parents to fight for equality not just for themselves but for their children, with the implied corollary that parents who neglect to fight for equality damage their children.

Though many of the children in the volume are caught up in the hopelessness of their parents, via the warning of future suffering, children still function as a symbol of hope. As the dead child in “The Dead to the Living” provides a face for the narrator’s search for freedom, the children in “Children’s Playgrounds in the City” provide hope for the suffering and the dead. The title itself presents a social critique as the titular playground is in actuality a cemetery:

Dead and forgotten! for Death, requiter
Of love, taught Memory how to forget!
The love that remembered them died.¹⁰¹ Grow brighter,
Oh, dim grave-garden, with dead hearts set!
Room for the small flying feet to pass,
The feet of the children over the grass!
The dead, if they know it, would feel them lighter
Than the weight of a stone that no tears make wet. (9–16)

“Children’s Playgrounds in the City” taps into the commonplace that the squalor that

accompanied the rise of cities under industrialization affects children as well as adults. Strange comments that cemeteries “provided a superb landscape for recreational pursuits, especially in an urban environment. [. . .] Indeed, most churchyards and cemeteries opened their gates on Sundays and during the long evenings of summer months to allow families to take advantage of leisure time.” She goes on to say that many private cemeteries, however, took issue with youths and children who used the land as a meeting spot and for unruly play; these pursuits were deemed at odds with the cemetery’s function as a sacred space for grief (174). “Children’s Playgrounds in the City” clearly takes issue with the decision to deny children space in favor of allocating it to the dead. By exploring the transient nature of grief, the poem suggests that graveyards serve no ultimate purpose and that it would be better to give the space wholesale to the children.

The focus here is on the dead as much as it is on the children, as the living are taken to task for demanding land that they cannot and need not use once they die:

We must die too, and the grief that will live
Must die as surely—death comes to all;
But you who come after—let Nature give
To our graves her tears, to our dust her pall:
Let her hide us away in her cold broad breast,
Let us be forgotten, and be at rest,
And over our heads let the great world strive,¹⁰²
And the children’s voices carol and call. (17–24)

Ultimately, then, the dying are held accountable for making a claim to land to fulfill their vain desires for remembrance. Death was a constant and permanent concern for the

Victorians, as it was for their predecessors. As such conceptions of the afterlife played a major role in religious theologies;¹⁰³ and the final resting place of one's body was largely determined by one's accepted beliefs. For example, for much of the nineteenth century, cemeteries were associated with the Anglican church, and as such, only Anglicans could receive full burial services. Other Christians were permitted burial with abridged services, and those who were deemed to have violated church law, such as suicides, were denied burial in cemeteries. Care was taken to ensure that one received one's favored burial through buying into burial societies and through leaving directions in one's will.

While the cast of "Children's Playgrounds in the City" may seem to be a significant departure from Nesbit's pronouncedly socialist poems, "Children's Playgrounds in the City" intrinsically deals with the class stratification that serves as backdrop to the socialist poems. Strange holds that "it is widely acknowledged that the Victorian burial ground represented a mirror on the urban landscape: prestigious plots with expensive monuments echoed the spatial arrangement of affluent suburbs; common graves were analogous to slum tenements. Burial ground was also a 'sacred space', the design and purpose of which reflected the melancholy of mourning whilst aiming to improve the 'moral sentiments and general taste of all classes and more especially of the great masses of society'" (164). By setting the poems in a physical space that her contemporaries would recognize as socially stratified, Nesbit effectively shifts the locus of her critique while maintaining the underlying philosophical concerns. In "Children's Playgrounds in the City" the narrators point out the futility of elaborate burial plans, reasoning that the dead have no knowledge or discernment of what is around them. Moreover, the living pay no homage to the dead because they have no reason or

obligation to do so. The children are the only ones who pay any attention to the markers of the departed, and they do so, literally, only in passing.

In keeping with its socialist undertones, “Children’s Playgrounds in the City” presents three alternatives for seeking remembrance, but only one works. Stones may be ignored, and those who are impacted by one’s day to day activities die as well. But remembrance, and to a certain degree eternal life, will be gained through work. The only way to be remembered is to follow a course that seeks the better good of humanity rather than a course of false self-worth capped with a stone. The poem contrasts the pretentiousness and indifference of leaving a worthless stone monument with actually effecting meaningful change:

If your heart on the flower of remembrance is set,

There is one way to pluck it—and only one:

Dare you ask your country not to forget

A name that needs to be graved on stone?

By grief, strife, sacrifice, scorn of fame,

You may grave on the people’s hearts you name,

Or you name may die, and your soul live yet

In the cause you died for—the work you have done. (25–32)

Though it is not specifically defined, through the connotations of work, it is logical to read “the cause” as the search for liberty. While “The Dead to the Living” and “Children’s Playgrounds in the City” clearly use death in a literal sense, metaphorically they suggest that the only true way to live is to pursue a socialist agenda or more generally to pursue the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The dead

ultimately recognize a certain knowledge that they lacked in life, but because they never acted on that knowledge when they were alive, they remain cold and dead both in physical life and physical death.

The promise of Liberty and the quest to achieve that promise provide the only recourse to a true form of living, hence the narrators' comment in "Children's Playgrounds in the City" that though one may die in name, one's work will live on.¹⁰⁴ Nesbit's definition of Liberty in *Lays and Legends* ultimately replaces traditional Christian definitions of the divine, both in terms of human divinity and in terms of a divine ruler or figure-head. Salvation under Nesbit's philosophy depends on one's willingness to fight for the good of others as well as one's own good. By framing socialist teachings in Christian terminology, Nesbit offers a pseudo-religion that can neatly take the place of traditional Christian philosophies. Her amalgamation of socialism and Christianity was practical not only because nonconventional ideas are packaged in conventional rhetoric but also, and perhaps more importantly, because it opens up a ready made space for socialist practice and philosophy. As the nineteenth century faced a growing number of people who were not satisfied with the Anglican Church and who, in some cases, broke away from Christian teachings entirely, a space was opened for the growth and development of a new belief-system that would be more applicable to the interests and concerns of the industrial masses. Many rescinded their religious faith because religion, with its promise of reward only in death, had little to do with struggles for day-to-day existence. But a social philosophy that spoke to improving the quality of life while speaking, albeit obliquely, about a comfortable state of death provided the perfect balance of ethics and action.

In the case of *Lays and Legends*, the focus is necessarily more so on the philosophical rather than on the practical. The volume presents a call to arms, backed by Christian and parental ethics, though it ultimately gives no direction as to how one should go about fighting for liberty. In 1886 the socialist movements were reforming in England from the remnants of the mostly dissolved Chartist and labor movements, and socialist organizations needed to present their potentially threatening teachings in a nonthreatening way in order to strengthen their numbers. *Lays and Legends*, as a volume, deals with a wide variety of social situations, including concerns for marriage and parenthood. It also touches on issues of religious faith and corruption. By packaging a light introduction to socialist philosophy with these general concerns, Nesbit increases the volume's marketability and its likelihood of reaching a larger audience. Its engagement with Christian rhetoric only increases its chance of success. The volume is not a how-to guide so much as it is a motivational guide designed to touch a public that would not necessarily be sympathetic to or even aware of traditions of socialism. It also serves as an example of one of the many ways late Victorian thinkers and writers attempted to modernize Christianity.

Chapter Four

Living Without God: Redefining Redemption

in Graham R. Tomson's *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets*

While Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, E. Nesbit, and Graham R. Tomson all wrote during the same time-frame, Tomson demonstrates a particular affinity for fin-de-siècle aesthetics in terms of both its early to mid-twentieth century conception, in which the fin-de-siècle poet is a perverse immoralist, and also its late twentieth and early twenty-first century re-conception, in which the fin-de-siècle poet challenges conventional morality and champions alternative moral virtues. Tomson fits the former role through her unconventional marital life and fits both roles through her deconstruction of Christian faith. Tomson's 1889 volume *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets* denies the validity of Christianity and replaces it with a focus on physical existence and the quality of life in a godless world. Further, in contrast to Mary Elizabeth Coleridge and E. Nesbit, Tomson does not attempt to modernize Christianity but rather to show that God has no place in the modern world.

The volume grounds its religious exploration on the Victorian fear that God had abandoned the world and its inhabitants. Tomson addresses this loss through the Christ figures in "Le Mauvais Larron" and "'Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?'" where she uses the Christ figure as a representation of humanity's rejection of God and God's simultaneous rejection of humanity. In these poems, Tomson uses elements of the gothic to illustrate humanity's fraught relationship with divinity. The volume then explores the ramifications of the absence of God through "Evening," "On The Road," and "Hymn of Labor" which posit that without the promise of heavenly salvation, strife becomes the

primary purpose for life; but rather than attempting to relocate God and heaven, the poems advise perseverance and acceptance in the face of a life that is filled with struggle and toil and a death devoid of salvation. What has the potential to become a nihilistic worldview is counterbalanced by the poems “The Smile of All-Wisdom” and “The Quick and the Dead,” which suggest that through death the physical re-absorption of the body into nature will ensure the continued creation of new life, which provides an additional purpose for human existence. Tomson uses nature to diffuse Christian philosophies, though she rejects the transcendental aspects of nature favored by many nineteenth-century writers, such as William Wordsworth and occasionally Percy Bysshe Shelley. Tomson restructures human life so that it has purpose without the presence of any form of divinity—here, the purpose of work becomes survival of the individual and the individual’s environment. While Tomson suggests that life is tumultuous, she does not advocate suicide or self-destruction; rather, she champions acceptance and resignation. In *The Ballad of the Bird-Bride*, Tomson challenges not only Victorian Anglican beliefs but also those beliefs that attempt to replace Anglicanism by locating the divine in work or in nature.

Before addressing fin-de-siècle aesthetics, it is necessary to briefly review Tomson’s biography in order to clarify the various names and pseudonyms under which she wrote. The marital scandal that characterized Tomson’s life and the resulting confusion over her various names and pseudonyms situate her perfectly within the stereotype of the fin-de-siècle poet whose life was governed by perverse pleasure and immorality. Linda K. Hughes calls Tomson “a heterosexual outlaw,” and she reports that in 1892 Katharine Tynan identified Tomson as being “somewhat unstrung” (“Woman on

the Wilde Side” 102, “Feminizing Decadence” 132).¹⁰⁵ Speaking less strongly, in *Victorian Women Poets: an Anthology*, Angela Leighton introduces Tomson by stating that she “lived a pretty free and unconventional life” (Leighton and Reynolds 581). During her life, Tomson had committed relationships with three men, the first two of whom she legally married, and as a result of her different relationships, she changed her name from Rosamond Ball, to Rosamond Armytage, to Graham R. Tomson, and finally to Rosamund Marriott Watson.¹⁰⁶ Tomson began her career as a poet under the name R. Armytage, with her surname being that of her first husband, George Francis Armytage. After the publication of numerous poems in journals and one well received volume of poetry, the latter of which was published anonymously, her first marriage ended, and the Armytages separated. For a time, while she remained celibate and lived with her sister, the couple remained legally married.

Eventually Rosamond Armytage began an affair with Arthur Graham Tomson, who became her second husband. After learning about the affair, her first husband, George F. Armytage, filed for divorce. Consequently, she lost custody of her daughters, as was the norm in cases of marital infidelity on the wife’s part, and she lost the budding fame associated with the name R. Armytage.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, she prospered, for a time, under the name of Graham R. Tomson, by which she was known in professional and personal circles. Graham R. Tomson gained fame as a poet and journalist, belonged to a prominent circle of literary elite, and enjoyed continued success even after her gender became publicly known.¹⁰⁸ But despite her personal and professional success, Tomson made another high-stakes move and began an affair with Henry Brereton Marriott Watson. After becoming pregnant by Marriott Watson, Tomson left Arthur Tomson,

who subsequently divorced her, and Tomson lost custody of another child, her son by Arthur. Despite the fact that she adopted his surname, Tomson never married H. B. Marriott Watson. Further adding to confusion surrounding her name, upon changing her surname to Marriott Watson, she also changed the spelling of her given name from Rosamond to Rosamund.

Though she published as Rosamund Marriott Watson, her literary career never equaled that of Graham R. Tomson, and after her death, R. Armytage, Graham R. Tomson, and Rosamund Marriott Watson all fell into obscurity for almost a century. Critics have suggested that her literary neglect stems from her changing personas. In “A Woman Poet Angling for Notice,” Hughes comments that “if her elopement was in personal terms an unrestrained indulgence in transgressive sexual desire, professionally it was an act of extravagant sacrifice. Indeed, it might be termed suicidal sacrifice, since she effectively killed off Graham R. Tomson” (144). The fallout of Tomson’s indiscretion, according to Hughes, was that “she was hopelessly tainted by scandal,” that “she shocked and alienated many of her prior associates,” and that “she had destroyed perhaps the most important means by which authors become and remain familiar to audiences and [book] purchasers: name recognition and citation.” Hughes continues to suggest that “no one could now mention Graham R. Tomson and Rosamund Marriott Watson without narrating the cause of the change, and this was at least awkward and at most inconsistent with minimum standards of respectability still demanded of mass publication in the 1890s” (144–45). Accordingly, name recognition became a problem for Tomson because her contemporaries found it too embarrassing to associate Rosamund Marriot Watson with the name Graham R. Tomson, which too closely resembled the

name of her second husband.¹⁰⁹

While Hughes blames Tomson's decline in public favor on her name changes, not all critics agree. Jerusha McCormack suggests that Tomson could have used the scandal that resulted from her affair in order to further build public interest in her literature. McCormack argues that "in 1895, retiring into the obscurity of a third name [. . .] and a new life, she disrupted what a modern public relations person might designate her 'brand identification.' By these tactics she also managed to avoid a feeding frenzy in the press, and she eluded the notoriety that would, in fact, probably have increased her name recognition in the literary marketplace" (62). This reading is problematic because McCormack bases his argument on males who "behaved badly." He explains that "the phenomenon of men behaving badly is nothing new, even on the English literary scene (consider Lord Byron, who made an art form of bad behavior). But for the 1890s poet, the poetry had become part of that behavior; indeed, in many ways, the poetry can be said to have prescribed it" (49). Though McCormack has a valid point, given the differences with which men and women writers were received and perceived by the public, it would be more useful to contextualize Tomson's public relations attempts with those of women writers who were accused of behaving badly. Barring extreme transgression, such as the charge of homosexuality leveled against Oscar Wilde, male authors received greater leeway for bad behavior than their female counterparts did, and Tomson certainly would have been familiar with the experiences of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Robinson, Mary Shelley, L.E.L., and George Eliot, all of whom suffered damaged reputations from their public sexual transgressions. Though these women had very successful literary careers, they also were largely excluded from contemporary literary circles and all experienced

waning public favor when their indiscretions crossed the line of novelty and became serious challenges to Victorian perceptions of femininity. Robinson was the only of the women who was able to manage her public persona without suffering long-term public approbation, and arguably, she was aided by a physical disability that inscribed her femininity.

I. Challenging Morality and Faith: Characteristics of Fin-de-siècle Poetry

While the effects of multiple name changes pose challenges to an author's celebrity, Tomson's years of obscurity suggest that her reputation has been hindered by more than a now out-dated Victorian code of morality. Joseph Bristow identifies another reason for Tomson's critical neglect: "it might also be ventured that this writer's rapid disappearance from the literary-historical record provides a representative instance of the twentieth-century tendency to occlude fin-de-siècle women writers' contributions to aestheticism and Decadence" ("Armytage-Tomson-Watson Sequence"). The critical understanding of what constitutes fin-de-siècle aesthetics has changed recently. Mikuláš Teich and Roy Porter explain that "for decades *fin de siècle* implied a 'go to the dogs' feeling that was thought to pervade European 'civilized' society in the years around 1900. This mood of malaise certainly affected individuals and sections of aristocrats as well as bourgeois social background towards the end of the nineteenth century. Underlying it was a cocktail of lamentations for the past and fears of the future, countenancing the notion that human progress was being brought to a halt, if not to an end" (1).¹¹⁰ Alison Hennegan attributes the period's characteristic sense of fear and doubt to the cultural changes Victorian Britain endured. She argues that "long before the Great War came, English country life was changing out of all recognition. Increasing mechanization, the

gradual disappearance of ancient crafts, the drift to the towns, changing patterns in land ownership, the falling value of agricultural land itself: all these destabilized a way of life that had changed little over the previous three centuries” (199). The vast social changes and the public reactions that they stirred-up can be identified in the writings of many fin-de-siècle poets, including Coleridge, Nesbit, and Tomson.

However, until recently, Tomson and other women writing at the end of the century would not have been considered valid subjects for fin-de-siècle scholars. Largely codified by modernists—most notably William Butler Yeats—the mythology of the fin-de-siècle writer expelled almost all women and many men who were highly acclaimed poets during the late nineteenth century, and it provided a very limited range of topics that were suggestive of the fin-de-siècle. Jerusha McCormick summarizes the myth of the fin-de-siècle poet by explaining that “in the minds of most readers, the 1890s poet would not have been a woman; he would have been a man, neither middle-aged nor prosperous; and he certainly would have been neither happy nor successful” (47).

Bristow agrees with McCormick’s definition and suggests that “according to the common wisdom of the day, to be a fin-de-siècle poet was to be the kind of man who explored of the seedier side of the imperial metropolis rather than championing the upstanding spirit of empire” (Introduction 2). In addition to identifying fin-de-siècle writers as men with questionable tastes and judgments, Chris Snodgrass argues that “critical commentary of the period has frequently allied itself with one or more of three highly dubious myths: (1) that the decade represents the creatively stale dead end of the Victorian Age, which immediately preceded the creatively resurgent Modern Period; (2) that this ‘dead end’ was typified by the world-weary and dysfunctional decadents of Yeats’s ‘Tragic

Generation;’ and (3) that those decadent poets, dedicated to ‘art for art’s sake,’ sought to divorce art from morality and extol, instead, the pursuit of immoral sensations” (321–22). While these views are currently being undermined by twenty-first century critics, well through the twentieth century, critics viewed a surplus of tragedy and lack of morality as the key feature of fin-de-siècle poets.

One of the reasons that the myth of the fin-de-siècle poet remains so firmly engrained in the minds of readers can be found in the poets’ self-presentation and their representation by critics. Snodgrass asserts that “this idea of a ‘decadent’ or ‘yellow’ nineties—surely one of the most tenacious in literary history—continues to transfix the historical imagination, in part because many of the most famous nineties poets happened to die young, usually from diseases (tuberculosis, cerebral haemorrhage [sic], alcoholism) traditionally linked to a decadent lifestyle, and in part, of course, because racy tales of the fated convergence of willful iconoclasm, sexual scandal and personal tragedy are difficult narratives to let go of” (321). Wilde and his circle certainly provided sufficient fodder for scandal and tragedy, and in many cases, they successfully marketed themselves through notorious press. The mythology of the jaded fin-de-siècle poet served the writers well during their lifetimes because it allowed them to capitalize on the public’s taste for spectacle in order to translate notoriety into literary exposure. McCormack explains that “just as 1890s poetry was often perceived as male, public, and performative, so in the popular mind did the actual performance become part of the poetry. Long before public relations people and spin doctors, the poets of the 1890s understood the importance of manipulating appearances, or at least playing up to their image” (51). In many cases, salacious press translated into editions sold.¹¹¹ McCormack suggests that one of the

reasons negative press sold was the changing English landscape, and he argues that “the myth [of the fin-de-siècle poet] was generated by a poetry consciously aware of itself as a city poetry, which addressed itself not to a coterie but to the larger world of London society and even to the readers of the popular press” (53). The city at large provided a semi-anonymous stage onto which the poet could cast his or her desired persona.

Despite the endurance and the origins of the myths of fin-de-siècle poets and poetry,¹¹² critics tend to find the myths particularly problematic for all parties involved, including those who served as the basis for these myths. Bristow explains that “the male poets who established their reputations during the 1880s and 1890s, and whose names have traditionally been closely linked with this period, are seldom well served by the critical terms—such as ‘fin-de-siècle,’ ‘aesthetic,’ and ‘decadent’” and that there is “a persistent tendency within the most widely touted myths of aestheticism and decadence to occlude, almost to the point of invisibility, the remarkably strong presence of women writers in the thriving literary culture of the time” (Introduction 4). However, current critical work increasingly exposes this stereotype as inaccurate, particularly as women and “minor” poets have come to play a larger role in studies discussing the last decades of the Victorian era. Studies by Bristow, McCormack, and Snodgrass, in addition to those by Hughes, Talia Schaffer, and Kathy Alexis Psomiades, have challenged the myth of the fin-de-siècle period and of the poets who were publishing during the period.

Scholars have sifted through the myths and misconceptions and have identified a variety of themes that, in hindsight, are common to a large body fin-de-siècle poetry. Bristow proposes that “this much-misrecognized literary decade was not entirely a doom-laden affair that hurtled the Victorian age toward its terminal point. Instead, it was a time

whose apparent freakishness and faddishness, naughtiness and neurosis, pretension and perversions are better understood as signs of its authors' well-considered interest in devising fresh poetic models that could engage with the modern before further shifts in poetics became identifiably modernist" (Introduction 39). On a similar note, Snodgrass points out that "far from reflecting waning decay, world-weary enervation or solipsistic insularity, the 1890s was an exceptionally vivacious and diverse age of experimental innovation and artistic adventure" (322). Fin-de-siècle poetry sought to overturn literary and social convention and to discover new modes of artistic thought and representation. That fin-de-siècle poets frequently challenged long-standing literary tradition is perhaps one of the reasons it has been so poorly understood by the dominant literary tradition. Snodgrass suggests that "for all the myriad differences among the so-called 'Decadents', they did share several common themes, among them a deep commitment to precise technique, a privileging of refined art over unrefined nature (and cerebral reflection over raw materiality), a Romantic attraction to intensity and 'strangeness,' a sensitivity to cosmic misery, and a quest for (and torment over) love, or spiritual truth, or both" (329–30). He goes on to suggest that "nineties poetry tends to define spirituality (and religion generally) in more diverse and unorthodox ways than most previous decades had done, often advancing specifically agnostic or atheist themes" (327).

Though atheism garnered some popularity at the end of the century, it was not the norm. Lance St. John Butler suggests that "for almost the whole of Queen Victoria's reign the assumption was made that belief was a norm and disbelief a variation, that doubt was an aberration. Only with the coining of a word (the word 'agnostic') in 1870 do we find the first glimmering of a rebellion against the tyranny of this assumption" (1).

Agnosticism and atheism were closely associated with end of the century writers; however, they were not the first generation to turn to disbelief. Alister McGrath suggests that atheism started to gain prominence a century earlier during the French Revolution. He credits the Revolution's emphasis on reason and William Godwin's expression thereof with the initial popularization of atheism. While Godwin was not the first atheist or the first to write about atheism,¹¹³ he gained a level of celebrity that afforded him a wide audience to whom he could express the irrationality of religious faith. McGrath argues that at the end of the eighteenth century, "a brave new world lay ahead, firmly grounded in nature and reason, and equally firmly committed to the liberation of humanity from 'tyranny' and 'superstition.' The wisdom of the day was as simple as it was powerful: eliminate God, and a new future would dawn" (21).

Much of the rhetoric of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century associated religious faith with superstition, as exemplified by the writing of Godwin and his one-time disciple Percy Bysshe Shelley. For Godwin and other supporters of the French Revolution, belief in God was not only irrational but also anti-libertarian since God was a power over the people. While many writers denounced Christianity as being tyrannical, they did not entirely denounce the ideology behind the divine. McGrath comments that "one of the most interesting features of British literary culture throughout the nineteenth century is that a growing interest in atheism did not entail abandoning belief in the transcendent.[. . .] While poets such as Keats affirmed a transcendent dimension to human existence, they did not see this as necessarily entailing a belief in divinity, whether in the general or specifically Christian sense of the term" (McGrath 121).

However, by the end of the century, writers such as Tomson abandon the transcendent almost entirely.

II. Divine Neglect: Life With an Absent God in

“Le Mauvais Larron” and “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?”

In *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets*, Tomson adopts a gothic folk quality that neatly packages the volume’s underlying concern with social and religious conventions. Tomson begins the volume with a ballad sequence that gently introduces the focus on human suffering and divine neglect. The specific causes of suffering described in the ballad section take many forms but are centered on the physical absence or death of a loved one, which reflects not only Tomson’s personal literary concerns but also her awareness of popular sensibilities; Lance St. John Butler comments that “any anthology of Victorian poetry quickly reveals the obsession with loss, with death, with endings and with yearnings for greener grass elsewhere” (23). In *The Bird-Bride*, Tomson’s concern with death and loss revolves around not only human life but also the divine. “Le Mauvais Larron” and “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?” use the image of a crucified Christ to argue that God has abandoned the world. Thomson’s use of the Christ figure is heavily tinged with gothic elements. In part, this coloration is inherent in her topic, which necessarily addresses the supernatural. Michaela Giebelhausen explains that “nowhere, of course, is the problem of the supernatural and the paradox of the dividing line between the divine and the human more apparent than in the figure of Christ” (178). In “Le Mauvais Larron” God, through the figure of Christ, is rejected by the moneyed classes who orchestrate his death. “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?” serves as a lamentation of God’s abandonment of the world and suggests not only that humanity

has given up on God but also that God has given up on humanity.¹¹⁴ In both “Le Mauvais Larron” and ““Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?”” the God figures are represented as supernatural powers who have antagonistic relationships with the general human population.

In “Le Mauvais Larron” the titular character, named Antoine, is inherently Christological though he is also a criminal. The poem mimics Christian iconography most obviously in the crucifixion scene that opens the poem:

THE moorland waste lay hushed in the dusk of the second day,
Till a shuddering wind and shrill moaned up through the twilight grey;
Like a waking wraith it rose from the grave of the buried sun,
And it whirled the sand by the tree—(there was never a tree but one—)
But the tall bare bole stood fast, unswayed with the mad wind’s stress,
And a strong man hung thereon in his pain and his nakedness.
His feet were nailed to the wood, and his arms strained over his head;
’Twas the dusk of the second day, and yet was the man not dead. (1–8)

Excepting the physical setting, the passage could easily be mistaken for a retelling of the crucifixion of Christ. Though the Victorians may not have been the firmest of believers by the end of the century, the crucifixion would certainly evoke both Christian undertones and, most likely, sympathy for the hanging man via his association with Christ. Tomson’s use of the Christ figure follows popular usage of Christ from the mid-Victorian era.¹¹⁵ Sue Zemka comments that “between 1845 and 1850, Dickens, Disraeli, George Eliot, Tennyson, and [Robert] Browning produced works that invoke, in a variety of genres and with mixed successes, the image of Christ. As either a literary allusion or a

quasi-mythical figure, Christ appears in Dickens's *Life of Our Lord* (1848), Disraeli's *Tancred* (1847), Eliot's translation of Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1846), Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), and Browning's *Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day* (1850)" (100). While Zemka emphasizes the popularity of Christ at mid-century, she suggests that Christology was a defining feature of the entire Victorian era: "that writers of a comparable stature from the previous and following centuries did not, with such frequency and in such a concentrated period of time, make similarly explicit uses of Christology should alert us to the over determined—or at least overextended— nature of this Victorian trope" (100). Tomson's use of the Christ figure revises these images by focusing on the suffering of Christ and his removal from earth. Like many of her predecessors, Tomson presents a human Christ; still, her Christ is shorn of his power and is cast out of society, much like the Christ in Biblical stories.

Tomson replaces the beneficence and sacrifice of the Biblical Christ with need and desire that are comparable to late nineteenth-century images of Christ. Antoine's nameless lover, the speaker for most of the poem, depicts the life she shared with Antoine:

Have they trapped thee, the full-fed flock, thou wert wont to harry and
spoil?
Do they laugh in their town secure o'er their measures of wine and oil?
Ah God ! that these hands might reach where they loll in their rich array;
Ah God, that they were but mine, all mine, to mangle and slay!
How they shuddered and shrank, erewhile, at the sound of they very name,
When we lived as the grey wolves live, whom torture nor want may tame:

And thou but a man! and still a scourge and a terror to men,
Yet only my lover to me, my dear, in the rare days then.
O years of revel and love! ye are gone as the wind goes by,
He is snared and shorn of his strength, and the anguish of hell have I. (23–
32)

The lover's passionate lament paints the thief as a victim; however, this view is a notable reversal of the Biblical symbolism that Tomson's readers would have expected, regardless of the strength of their faith. Biblically, of course, the symbol of a flock of sheep often refers to those who are faithful to Christian teachings and who, in turn, are protected by God, their Shepherd. This image occurs repeatedly in the Bible and most prominently in Psalms; Isaiah; and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John. In its various manifestations, the Shepherd is used in the Bible most often to represent God or Christ and occasionally to represent a non-deific religious leader. "Le Mauvais Larron" shows that this particular flock has been led by the wrong Shepherd, since they are so willing to crucify Antoine. This reversal of images is complete as the thief evokes the image of the sacrificial Lamb of God. Tomson's conflation of Christ with criminality is colored by the comparison between the Christ figure and the flock, who seem to deny him sustenance and ultimately life.

For a Victorian reading audience, Tomson's Christ-figure would take on additional mythopoetic significance through his standing as a criminal who was operating in the wilderness and on the fringes of society. Tomson's thief Antoine mimics Christ's original reception as a criminal and outcast, particularly when was captured prior to his crucifixion. Like the Biblical Christ, Antoine terrifies and threatens those who hold

power—in this case, the moneyed flock. Indeed, though he is human, Antoine retains the power of a god-figure, as indicated by the terror he strikes into the town folk. In both cases, Christ functions as a rebel who challenges cultural and social norms. Tomson’s decision to emphasize the revolutionary nature of Christ is telling. Her Christ figure is somewhat problematic because of his apparent attacks on those who have rejected him; the biblical Christ was primarily pacifistic. Moreover, Tomson’s Christ, as a thief, rebels not in the interest of spiritual reform but rather in the interest of self-preservation, where the biblical Christ rebelled through teaching others to worship in ways that radically challenged their dominant religious beliefs. Despite the apparent moral difference, the poem does not condemn Antoine.¹¹⁶ Instead, it critiques those who hoard goods rather than distributing them to the less fortunate and advocates doing whatever is necessary to ensure one’s survival. Rather than passively accepting his state as being in accordance with God’s will, as the Biblical Christ does, Antoine fights against his condition in order to maintain his own wellbeing. Tomson’s use of Christ not only shows his death as inglorious but also as unnecessary. Moreover, by replicating Christ’s Biblical role as an outcast rather than casting him as a popular Victorian hero, Tomson suggests that her era is not receptive to Christian values, as the Christ figure is so readily disposed of.

In addition to the parallels between Antoine and Christ, Tomson’s criminal has intriguing parallels to popular conceptions of the fin-de-siècle artist. Hennegan explains that Victorian psychoanalysts believed “that geniuses and criminals were often curiously alike in temperament” (202). She suggests that “where many social commentators saw vanity as the link between criminals and artists, others might see resistance and rebellion” and that “in effect two concepts of the artist were in conflict.” She argues that the older

concept, which was “espoused by the Counter-decadents, assumes that artists, however critical of society, nevertheless belong to it and are rooted in it. The other, newer, more disturbing vision, sees artists as essentially alienated from a society which is actively hostile to the values which artists represent and seek to further. In this vision criminals and artists are indeed linked as elements which undermine an anyway always precarious social stability” (203). This last concept helps explain the role of the *fin-de-siècle* artists who critiqued and attempted to reshape social values. In “Le Mauvais Larron,” Antoine takes on characteristics of the *fin-de-siècle* artist through his challenges to society. The echoes of Christ in the character of Antoine and the depiction of the ruling class as immoral suggest a direct attack on dominant middle class values that privilege individual comfort over the greater-good of the poor and disenfranchised. While Antoine’s thievery may not be admirable, the punishment he receives is excessive,¹¹⁷ particularly given the marked poverty that characterizes his lifestyle. “Le Mauvais Larron” serves as an example of society disposing of the poor who lack the means to tend to their own wants and desires. Rather than demonstrating Christian virtues, Antoine’s captors demonstrate the malevolence of gothic villains.

In redefining morality, Tomson challenges one of the stereotypes of *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics. Bristow explains that in the 1890s “*fin-de-siècle* promptly became a slogan for any artistic fashion favored by the cultural elite that might raise eyebrows. [. . .] In particular, critics attached this tag, whether as adjective or noun, to anything peculiar that could be explained by the growing trend of identifying the end of the century with an overwhelming sense that cherished moral conventions and traditional artistic protocols were hastening toward their doom” (“Introduction” 2). Again, it is worth stressing that

the charge of immorality attributed to fin-de-siècle poets originated from those whose moral values were being called into question. While Tomson's poetry demonstrates an affinity for fin-de-siècle aesthetics, she breaks with the stereotype by replacing a focus on existing for pleasure—seen in her depiction of the “full-fed flock”— with a focus on doing whatever is necessary to survive, as seen in the characters of Antoine and his lover. This break is in keeping with the revisionary nature that critics are now ascribing to fin-de-siècle poetry. Rather than giving in to disillusionment and living self-destructively, the volume advocates surviving at all costs. The titular character of “Le Mauvais Larron,” who may be taken as an example of reckless immorality through his thieving, is instead revealed as one who relies on immorality only as a means of sustaining existence.

In addition to its artistic relevance, the Christ figure held particular significance through the Evangelicals' emphasis that Christ was a direct link to God. Julie Meknyk explains that “Evangelicals emphasized the individual need for conversion and salvation by faith, with a corresponding stress on the atoning works of Jesus. Their focus on the crucifixion contrasted with the increasing emphasis on Jesus' incarnation as the central doctrine of Christianity” (20). Meknyk goes on to suggest that “all evangelicals stressed the immediacy of the individual believer's relationship to God (through Jesus) and de-emphasized or denied the need for the mediation of the clergy” (20). Once both clergy and Christ are removed, accessing God becomes increasingly difficult. While *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets* as a whole demonstrates a rejection of Christian faith, in the volume rejection functions as a two way street wherein God has also rejected humanity. Yet Tomson was hardly unique in portraying the world as god forsaken. Butler posits that “it is easy to find, in the work of major Victorian writers at least, an

unmistakable fear that God has abandoned the earth and that it has been handed over to the forces of darkness, themselves paradoxically akin to the forces of simple unbelief” (56).

Though it was commonplace for the Victorians to fear the absence of God, they were among the first generations to indulge that fear. David J. Gordon explains that “For Hardy as for other Victorian poets, God was dying or disappearing, a not yet completed process” (101). Additionally, J Hillis Miller explains that “the industrialization and urbanization of man means the progressive transformation of the world. Everything is changed from its natural state into something useful or meaningful to man. Everywhere the world mirrors back to man his own image, and nowhere can he make vivifying contact with what is not human.” Miller continues to say that “though it is impossible to tell whether man has excluded God by building the great cities, or whether the cities have been built because God has disappeared, in any case the two go together. Life in the city is the way in which many men have experienced most directly what it means to live without God in the world” (5). For many writers, the absence of God was evidenced by the fallout of industrial and scientific developments. Miller uses the examples of Thomas De Quincey, Robert Browning, Emily Brontë, Matthew Arnold, and Gerard Manly Hopkins to demonstrate the connection between industrialization and the loss of God. Moreover, though Miller does not address them, Romantic writers such as Wordsworth showed the disconnect between divinity and urbanity, as did Victorian writers such as Henry Mayhew and Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

Tomson explores the idea that God abandoned the world and the resulting fear in “‘Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?’.” The poem demonstrates a loss of faith on the part of the

speaker of the poem; yet the speaker also betrays a bitterness and a sense of abandonment in the face of an absent God.¹¹⁸ The imagery of the crucifixion of Christ exemplifies the absence of God because God did not prevent Christ's suffering and because Christ, as an aspect of the Trinitarian God, was killed and removed from the earth. Echoing the crucifixion of Jesus presented in the Gospel of Mark, "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?" espouses the rejection of all objects of hope and exposes the transient purpose that all these objects serve. The poem begins by retelling the crucifixion of Jesus and lamenting God's absence, but rather than focusing on the Christian implications of the scene (i.e. the belief that Jesus died in order to save human life), "Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?" focuses on the grief and loss that accompany abandonment by God and, in so doing, rejects not only Christianity but also all things that often serve as stand-ins for religion:

STRAIGHT, slender limbs strained stark upon the cross,

Dim, anguished eyes that search the empty sky,—

All human loneliness, and pain, and loss,

Brake forth in thine exceeding bitter cry,

Thou King of Martyrs, lifted up on high

For men to mock at in thine agony:

Would that that last, worst cup had passed thee by!

Would that thy God had not forsaken Thee!

The cry of each man born that loves or prays—

Yea, be his idol human or divine,

Body or soul sinks dead in thorny ways

Before the marsh-lit lantern of a shrine:

I, Friend, have my God—ay, and thou hast thine;
Art, Fortune, Pleasure, Love? Or Christ, may be?
Shall the cry rise from thy lips first? Or mine?

‘Why hast thou, O my God, forsaken me?’ (1–16)

“‘Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?’” recognizes that objects other than God may bring purpose to life but then deems them inadequate as justifications for the continuance of human existence. While the poem does not posit a replacement for or alternative to Christian doubt, “‘Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani?’” notes that for some doubters faith has been relocated to the tangible, hedonistic realm in proclaiming “Art, Fortune, Pleasure, Love” and Christ to be of the same accord (14). Indeed, Miller suggests that one of the jobs of the poet was to identify methods of relocating God. He argues that “many Victorian poets inherit the romantic conception of poetry, but such poets differ in one essential way from their predecessors. Almost all the romantic poets begin with the sense that there is a hidden spiritual force in nature. The problem is to reach it, for the old ways have failed, and though it is present in nature, and in the depths of man’s consciousness, it is not immediately possessed by man” (14). Tomson, however, calls off the search for a substitute God. Instead of accepting “Art, Fortune, Pleasure, Love” as an acceptable substitute, the poem embraces a cult of suffering, where pain and toil are the only things to be gained from life. This pessimistic worldview is a commonplace in fin-de-siècle poetry where the world is often viewed as invariably changing in ways that cloud the purpose of life.

Symptomatic of fin-de-siècle aesthetics that challenge conventional Victorian morality, rather than attempting to replace or update religious belief, the volume rejects it

wholesale and suggests that any hope for transcending, understanding, or changing the human condition should be abandoned. Where Coleridge validates religious searching and Nesbit validates religious revision, Tomson invalidates religious belief in all forms that were available to Victorian England. However, this invalidation comes with a steep price, as suggested by the lament presented in “‘Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?’”:

A weak soul wailing in the body's slough;
A strong man bent beneath a leaden Fate;
Dead hopes, crushed toys, and shattered gods!—O Thou
Whom high desires and dreams left desolate,
We cannot tread Thy narrow path and strait
But all our pity and love go forth to Thee—
Thine is the cry of each soul soon or late:
‘Why hast thou, O my God, forsaken me?’ (17–24)

The implication here is not that the speaker willingly rejects God but rather that the speaker is ill suited to the prescriptions necessary for the acceptance of God. Put differently, the poem suggests a disconnect between Biblical ideology, as presented through the life and death of Christ, and Victorian reality. Though growing numbers of Victorians were unable to follow Christ's path, Tomson's pronouncement of Christ's position remains appropriate for fin-de-siècle England; “dead hopes, crushed toys, and shattered gods” aptly summarizes the religious mind-set for many Victorians in the wake of scientific and industrial development (19).

In their rejection of Christianity and their struggle with hope for future faith, “Le Mauvais Larron” and “‘Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani?’” betray a common condition at the

end of the century. Hughes suggests that “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?” “links near blasphemy to profound sympathy with Christ, presenting Christ’s feeling of abandonment on the cross as paradigmatic of the *fin de siècle*, which had been abandoned by its gods—art, fortune, pleasure, love, Christ himself. If the speaker compassionated with Christ, she underscored in the process His vanished agency” (Hughes *Graham R.* 76). Tomson’s engagement with religious ideologies and faith betrays her awareness of the hedonism and materialism that characterized the Victorian *fin-de-siècle* and arguably her own life. “Le Mauvais Larron” and “Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani?” reflect *fin-de-siècle* interests through their focus on morality. Hennegan explains that “poets and prose writers alike questioned a whole host of time-honoured assumptions: about ‘suitable’ and ‘unsuitable’ subjects for art; about the nature of morality and immorality; about the nature of gender and human sexual response; about the characteristics of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art and the connections, or not, between the morality of art and the morality of the artist who creates it” (172). In other words, writers during the *fin-de-siècle* posited themselves as being opposed to mainstream Victorian values and beliefs. In “Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani?” Tomson’s pronouncement that “We cannot tread Thy narrow path and strait” demonstrates her awareness of late Victorian values and their incompatibility with Biblical Christian values (21). As demonstrated by Antoine, though, Christian values are not outdated because of perversion on the part of those who reject cultural norms, but rather because the norms themselves are perverse. Ultimately, “Le Mauvais Larron” and “Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?” reject both Christian and Victorian morality. Moreover, while “Le Mauvais Larron” and “Eli, Eli Lama Sabachthani?” do not reject the possibility of attaining pleasure or of discovering a new faith, they give very little hope to

the possibility of doing so in the late Victorian era.

III. Coming to Terms With Existence: The Necessity of Strife in “Evening,”

“On the Road,” and “Hymn of Labour”

In the absence of God, the world in *The Bird-Bride* is largely built upon struggling for survival with no hope for divine grace. Butler suggests that this viewpoint came to the fore in the mid-nineteenth century: “the earth is no longer [. . .] the middle ground between heaven and hell. Mankind is no longer to be found [. . .] between the animals and the angels. Heaven has become a distant and highly speculative possibility while hell is rampant among us and dominant on earth” (38). Tomson depicts the scope of a godless life in a group of poems that comprise the Verses section of the volume. In her verses, Tomson employs religious tropes and essentially rewrites Christian orthodoxy for nonbelievers. At the same time, she engages with the rhetoric of socialism through the suggestion that life consists entirely of work that will be broken only upon death. Though she uses familiar socialist tropes, it appears unlikely that Tomson had any true loyalty to socialist causes. Hughes explains that “Graham R. became more involved with socialism after her move to [St. John’s] Wood and increased contact with socialists like E. Nesbit [. . .] and friends of the Sharps (who included Belford Bax and Sergei Stepniak)” (*Graham R.* 70). However, Hughes quickly follows this statement by adding that Tomson’s publisher, Andrew Lang, “questioned the sincerity of Graham R.’s socialism” and that “Lang had grounds to be suspicious of Graham R.’s politics. If sincere in 1889 they were only a current enthusiasm increasingly shoved aside by work, and they would be abandoned along with the poet’s signature in 1894” (*Graham R.* 70, 71). Tomson’s lifestyle certainly suggests only a mild flirtation with socialism, though

“Evening,” “On the Road,” and “Hymn of Labour” superficially address socialist concerns.¹¹⁹ Moreover, though the poems retain the language of socialism, they hold no hope of attaining equality or of improving the lot of laborers. Rather, the “socialist” poems set out merely to console those who are suffering.

The bleak worldview presented in the labor poems stems from the speakers’ attempts to live with the realization of an absent God. Once she establishes that God is no longer present in the world, Tomson faces the challenges of avoiding a completely nihilistic world view. Tomson’s labor poems suggest that the suffering of the working classes is not only to be blamed on unsatisfactory working conditions, as the socialists would have, but also on a negligent God. Moreover, in the poems that have been identified as socialist, Tomson makes use of a tactic similar to that used by Nesbit and other socialist writers by mimicking Christian hymns that present life as a journey. Tomson revises the journey theme by removing the prospect of heavenly reward, as does Nesbit. For Tomson, however, this removal signifies a rejection not only of any sort of definable afterlife but also of religious faith in total. Owen Chadwick suggests that “by the last decades of the century the pamphleteers [. . .] succeeded in injecting into the consciousness of the poor a powerful idea: the preachers contribute to injustice by the promise of future rewards. *Suffer here and you shall be crowned hereafter*—resignation into the hands of God was central to the Christian ethic. [. . .] The working man was told that the doctrine of the future life was not only a doubtful truth but a dangerous lie, a way of keeping him down” (93). The exploration of life in the absence of the “doctrinal of the future life” was common in socialist and anti-religious poetry.

Both “Evening” and “On the Road” focus on the struggling and suffering that life

entails while emphasizing the futility of hoping that the strife of living will eventually result in reward. “Evening” follows the journey theme in a fairly traditional manner by focusing on the difficulty of life without developing a significant discussion on the nature of the rest that comes at the end. In so doing, Tomson borrows a theme with which most readers would be familiar and leaves them to draw their own conclusions:

THE wild gulls wheel and waver,
They call and cry,
In sad, shrill notes that quaver
’Tween earth and sky:
The red sun sinks apace,
While yet his gleaming face
Looks out a moment’s space
Through mists that fly.
The toiling team move slowly
In rhythmic beat,
With patient heads bent lowly,
Their heavy feet
Past fresh-cut furrows clear;
While low waves whisper near,
And sweet earth-odours here
The salt airs meet.
Dim wings of twilight hover
O’er field and sea,

For day is past and over;
And silently,
With weary sense and sight,
Through veils of fading light,
The ploughman welcomes night
Where rest shall be.

“Evening” is in keeping with verses that expose unfair labor conditions by reappropriating the conventional Victorian Anglican belief that one should accept whatever suffering one is assigned because all suffering will be rewarded in heaven. Much like Christina Rossetti’s poems, “Evening” states that rest will come with night; however, “Evening” refrains from identifying the scope and nature of that rest. Rather than explaining what rest will entail, as Rossetti’s poems do, “Evening” stops short and leaves the reader with the responsibility of defining the parameters of the afterlife. The absence of a definite reward undermines the purpose of devotional hymns that were intended to comfort the reader and, as such, undermines the Christian faith attached to such poems. Even though “Evening” does not explicitly deny the existence of an afterlife, its failure to affirm heavenly grace suggests that the poem discounts the assurance provided by devotional literature.¹²⁰

Tomson’s socialist poems are similar to those of Nesbit in that they engage Christian faith while refusing to accept it wholesale. However, Tomson also rejects a socialist vision, such as the one advanced by Nesbit, in which there is hope of creating a life where labor will be regulated and where rest will exist on earth. Different socialist organizations had different agendas, but most socialist groups from the late Victorian era

believed that through advocacy, education, and political reform a change could be made in the status of the working classes. Generally, socialists sought to improve the working conditions and financial reward of the laboring classes, though some such as the Christian Socialists were more concerned about the moral state of the poor. Regardless of their program and goals, all organizations believed that change was indeed possible. Conversely, Tomson's labor poems emphasize the futility of trying to amend one's living conditions. For Tomson, labor and strife are inherent in all human life. "On the Road" suggests that while change may be possible, it happens so slowly that for most individuals it may as well not exist:

The sands of Tyranny are slow to run.

Alas ! that this and many a morrow's sun

Must see the goal ungained, the work undone!

The road is long.

Our lives were ladder-rungs: the Cause moves on;

The light shines fair as ever it has shone;

'Twill blaze full bright ere many years be gone—

The road is long.

We are but bubbles breaking in the sea,

The strong slow tide that one day will be free;

We shall not know it—yea, but it will be:

The road is long. (13–24)

With its emphasis on the journey motif, "On the Road" echoes religious hymns that lament the suffering of life while celebrating an eventual return to heaven. "On the

Road” also echoes socialist poems, such as Nesbit’s, that rewrite Christian hymns to serve socialist agendas. Yet both Christian and socialist visions are questioned in the final verse of the poem. Like Nesbit, Tomson acknowledges that those of the her generation will not see the end result of “the Cause”; however, where Nesbit suggests that the fight must continue for the sake of future generations, Tomson presents a much more passive image. Though Tomson acknowledges that the sea of humanity shall be free, her focus ultimately rests on the multitude of individual lives that will be spent before change occurs. “The Road is Long” betrays the hopelessness and doubt felt by many late Victorians, which was symptomatic of the existential dread resulting from a combination of the decline of faith and the advancement of science.¹²¹ However, the poem refrains from advancing the belief that life is purposeless.

Much like “The Road is Long,” “Hymn of Labour” attempts to rationalize human suffering while specifically warning against relying too heavily on hope. Despite the poem’s title, it does not support the sort of socialist agenda found in Nesbit’s poetry. Labor, for Tomson, becomes a blessing rather than a bane because it is the only purpose for existence.¹²² “Hymn of Labour” focuses on two unnamed speakers.¹²³ The first speaker, echoing Matthew Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” presents a sense of how Christian doubt invariably altered the course of spiritual faith, and the second speaker responds to the lament of the first:

“Woe for the bale and the burden, the weary wasting of days!

Woe for the toil and the tangle, the dim desolation of ways!

Lost, in mist of the Past, are the early faiths and fears;¹²⁴

Dead, in the womb of the Future, the dream of the distant years.

Shadows lengthen and shrink, and bleak day followeth day;
Idle are all words spoken—What is there left to say?”
This—it is well, indeed that the old faiths slumber and sleep;
This—that the dream deemed dead may one day quicken and leap.¹²⁵ (1–
8)

The first speaker here describes the effects of loss of hope, namely that there is no reason to work or to suffer if there will be no reward. Though the speaker of the first verse is not identified, it is unlikely that a contemporary of Tomson would fail to recognize that the referenced is to Arnold’s “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse.” Yet the poem does not embrace the hopelessness that Arnold expresses in pronouncing religion dead; rather “Hymn of Labour” functions as a corrective to Arnold’s lament. The second speaker rejoins that work must be done for its own sake, and while rejecting established religious conventions, holds out for the possibility of future knowledge. Though the poem pronounces the implausibility of Christian morality, it does not offer an alternative codified morality to take its place. The poem engages with the Victorian desire to replace Christian faith with a substitute, such as socialism or science, though it stops short of offering up a particular substitute.

While “Hymn of Labour” does not reject the possibility that a new hope will be born, it demonstrates the futility of longing for something other than one’s current state of existence.¹²⁶ In so doing, it rejects Christian ideology that is based on waiting for heaven. Writing at the close of the nineteenth century, Tomson is not unique in her rejection of Christianity. Though the true extent of religious decline is difficult to measure, the existence of atheism is undeniable by the close of the nineteenth-century.

McGrath suggests that “there is no doubt that growing concerns over the intellectual credibility of Christianity were a major contribution to its fading appeal. The growing influence of biblical criticism, a persistent failure on the part of the clergy to engage with the troubling issues of the day, and the rise of Darwinism all undermined the potency of faith. Perhaps the erosion of the Christian faith in later Victorian Britain is attributable not to its diminished appeal to human reason but to its failure to capture the *imagination* of its culture” (113). In Tomson’s poetry, the loss of Christian faith results not so much from the challenges posed by scientific and technological development as it does from the struggle to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of human suffering.

Though the poem allows for the possibility that a new faith might develop, “Hymn of Labour” suggests that life must be embraced as it is rather than waiting for another religion to give it meaning. To that end, while offering the possibility of future faith, the poem cautions the reader not to expect that a new ground of faith will be discovered:

Strive for the strife’s sake only, smite not foeman nor friend—

Strive for the strife’s sake only, set no shrine for an end;

Set no goal for the winning, no bright bourne for the scope;

Ask no guerdon of praise, hope thou nothing from Hope.

If, afar in the sunrise, white wings flash and are fled,

Lift not thy hand from the toiling, turn not aside thine head.

[.]

So shalt thou come to thy reaping, so shalt thou say—it is well—

With lips redeemed from the curse, and soul from the uttermost hell.

So shalt thou look through the sunset, glad, and weary, and free,

Saying, 'A little space only—a little while—but I see.' (13–18; 23–26)

In the absence of hope, strife becomes the only purpose of life and heaven is denied. In a Christian framework, suffering is usually encouraged with the promise of reward in the afterlife, but with the removal of that promise nothing remains to justify inharmonious existence. The only hope, if it can be so called, is that one day death will provide freedom from a life of toil. While the poem denies the validity of a Christian afterlife, “Hymn to Labour” does suggest that eventually a moment of clarity will arise before the finality of death.

Like “Le Mauvais Larron” and “‘Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?’” “On the Road,” “The Road is Long,” and “Hymn of Labour” engage with *fin-de-siècle* literary traditions by radically shifting contemporary moral perception. Rather than championing industry, the latter poems advocate acceptance of a God forsaken life, which entails embracing life despite its hopelessness and drudgery. Tomson uses the labor poems not to advocate socialism so much as to explore the ramifications of acknowledging God’s neglect. She uses work primarily to give meaning to life by providing purpose through the continuation of humanity rather than individual existence. By denying God, Tomson risks falling prey to the immorality and hopelessness that was attributed to *fin-de-siècle* writers. Yet Tomson succeeds in constructing a Godless world with some form of hope. While Tomson provides no divinity to give purpose to life, she does suggest that some material good may come of it. For Tomson, the purpose of life is simply to exist, even if that existence is marked by toil and strife. Accordingly, life has no greater meaning or purpose than those experiences, be they positive or negative, that humans gather.

IV. Accepting God's Decline: Death and Regeneration

In "The Smile of All-Wisdom" and "The Quick and the Dead"

In *The Bird-Bride*, Tomson counters Victorian Anglican teachings and rewrites death to eliminate the idea of heavenly grace. According to Michael Wheeler, for Victorian believers "heaven comes into the picture as the reward of the blessed; it is the goal, the fulfillment, the consummation of the Christian's 'lively hope'" (119). Wheeler explains that Victorians who viewed heaven as a Christian reward or site of grace tended to follow a few specific models of belief. He suggests that "although there are potential contradictions between heaven as beatific vision and heaven as worship," there is a set of models that "emphasize both the eternal nature of the church as the body of Christ and the continuity of the kingdom 'from this world to the next'" (120). He goes on to say that "other models, however, are anthropocentric, and stress the continuity of personal identity and thus of interpersonal relationships. [. . .] Perhaps the most characteristic Victorian ideas of heaven are of a place in which family reunions and 'the recognition of friends' are to be achieved after death" (120).¹²⁷ All of these images of heaven were essential in maintaining hope for members of all classes; however, the working classes in particular were targeted by "homey" images of heaven that were used to keep workers contented with their lot in life.

In *The Bird-Bride*, Tomson undermines the traditional Victorian conception of heaven by eliminating it entirely. In "The Smile of All-Wisdom" and "The Quick and the Dead" death is presented as a natural stage that is devoid of the mystery and of the significance that the living often attribute to it. Both poems are emphatically nonreligious and work to settle the fears of death that are often quelled by religious

conceptions of the afterlife. As Wheeler suggests, “heaven, that long home or blessed country, represented for many Victorian writers and thinkers the fulfillment of their Christian hope. Ruskin, for example, claimed a special place for hope in the Christian scheme, and specifically in relation to heaven” (12). Tomson’s task in “The Smile of All-Wisdom” and “The Quick and the Dead” is to retain a purpose for life that is divorced from Christianity and the hope that it provides to faithful believers. In rejecting Christianity and the notion of heaven, Tomson opens the doors to a nihilistic philosophy in which life is utterly devoid of purpose and, thus, not worth living. In “On the Road,” “The Road is Long,” and “Hymn of Labour” she attempts to fill the void of Christianity by suggesting that all people have the obligation to work for the continued good of humanity, even though this work will be without reward. In “The Smile of All-Wisdom” and “The Quick and the Dead” she uses an historical artifact and natural regeneration to realign death away from an individual standpoint and nearer to a communal standpoint by suggesting that some semblance of hope lies in the fact that life will continue eternally despite the death of the individual.

To emphasize the need to persevere in life, Tomson conceptualizes death as a transformative power through which the individual is integrated into the larger existence of all living things. Through death, the individual’s identity, like the flesh, is assimilated into nature, which in turn is sustained by the loss of life. Death, in this conception, is eminently practical and devoid of the mystery Christianity associated with it. Rather than focusing on the human and individual impact of the loss of life, “The Smile of All-Wisdom” and “The Quick and the Dead” focus on the global benefits nature reaps from the loss of life. Significantly, though death poems readily lend themselves to the gothic,

“The Smile of All-Wisdom” and “The Quick and the Dead” are almost entirely devoid of gothic undertones. Instead, both poems reflect celebratory tones and suggest that death is pleasant, even in the absence of an afterlife.

“The Smile of All-Wisdom” attempts to erase the mystery of death in the process of constructing a history for the creation of the Sphinx. Tomson’s turn to the past recalls the poetic enterprises of Algernon Charles Swinburne, who was fascinated by medievalism and ancient Greek religion, and generally of the Pre-Raphaelites, particularly Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Morris, both of whom frequently referenced Arthurian Legend. Moreover, turning to the past was a common theme for Victorian writers. Many writers, such as Carlyle, for example, viewed the past as a golden age where religious and social instructions had not been impacted by industrialization or the scientific and technological advances that accompanied and accelerated it.¹²⁸ While the Pre-Raphaelites make extensive use of medieval history in their poetry and paintings, their use tends to emphasize aristocratic representations, such as King Arthur’s court and its mythological opulence. Tomson’s use of the Egyptian past, however, is markedly different in terms of the class politics she emphasizes. Her history of the Sphinx is predicated solidly upon laboring values:

SEEKING the Smile of All-Wisdom one wandered afar

(He that first fashioned the Sphinx, in the dusk of the past):

Looked on the faces of sages, of heroes of war;

Looked on the lips of the lords of the uttermost star,

Magi, and kings of the earth—nor had found it at last,

Save for the word of a slave, hoary-headed and weak,

Trembling, that clung to the hem of his garment, and said,
“Master, the least of your servants has found what you seek:

(Pardon, O Master, if all without wisdom I speak!)

Sculpture the smile of your sphinx from the lips of the Dead!”¹²⁹

Rising, he followed the slave to a hovel anear;

Lifted the mat from the doorway and looked on the bed.

“Nay, thou hast spoken aright, thou hast nothing to fear:

That which I sought thou hast found, Friend; for, lo, it is here!—

Surely the Smile of the Sphinx is the Smile of the Dead!” (1–15)

That the slave finds what his master could not in many ways counters Victorian perceptions of faith. While religious faith was certainly practiced by members of all classes, many Victorians lamented what they perceived to be a decline in worship on the part of working-class practitioners. The Religious Census of 1851¹³⁰ suggested that the movement away from Anglican worship was as a disturbing trend among city-dwellers and of members of the working classes. Butler comments that “the proletariat was swelling visibly and their way of life appeared to be largely without religion.” He also suggests that between 1854 and 1862 “very considerable concern was expressed about the unholy trinity of working-class poverty, urbanization and godlessness” (117). Butler goes on to say that “throughout the 1860s, and 1870s, and 1880s, the cry goes up that something must be done about the state of the working-class soul” (117). “The Smile of All-Wisdom” counters the perception that religion is a prerogative of those with money and suggests instead that the wealthy, which would include those who by and large controlled the Anglican Church, lack the ability to identify what true knowledge is. The

slave, however, is able to recognize wisdom in the smile of the dead hovel dweller, where the sculptor would never have looked since his search was only among the social elite.

While “The Smile of All-Wisdom” relocates the power to perceive knowledge, the poem also redefines the nature of knowledge.¹³¹ The setting of “The Smile of All-Wisdom” moves from ancient Egypt to Victorian England:

Aye, on the stone lips of old, on the clay of to-day,
Tranquil, inscrutable, sweet with a quiet disdain,
Lingers the Smile of All-Wisdom, still seeming to say,
“Fret not, O Friend, at the turmoil—it passeth away;
Waste not the Now in the search of a Then that is vain:
“Hushed in the infinite dusk at the end shall ye be,
Feverish, questioning spirits that travail and yearn,
Quenched in the fullness of knowledge and peaceful as we:
Lo, we have lifted the veil—there was nothing to see!

Lo, we have looked on the scroll—there was nothing to learn!” (16–25)

The speakers not only deny the existence of heaven as the Victorians conceived it to be but also deny any sort of afterlife or knowledge that will be gained after death. Bristow argues that “the poetic voice suggests that if the smile still prompts ‘questioning spirits’ to try to unearth its seemingly deeper meaning, there is little point in modern attempts to do so. Instead, as Tomson’s speaker suggests [. . .], it is best to resign ourselves to our inability to know some underlying truths” (“Armytage-Tomson-Watson”).¹³² However, the poem goes beyond resignation¹³³ to unknowability and ultimately denies the very existence of “underlying truths.” The knowledge that the speakers possess is that there

was no mystery in the first place and that death is exactly what it seems to be from the perspective of the living—a cessation of life and nothing more. Though the dead hovel dweller found no truths, he still found peace through the cessation of life.

While the denial of an afterlife seemingly runs counter to hope, Tomson uses nature to eliminate any sort of dread that might accompany the loss of heaven. Tending toward surprising lightheartedness, “The Quick and the Dead” presents death as preferable to life because while life consists of pain and suffering, death leads to a naturalistic regeneration.¹³⁴

Under the grass and the graveyard clay

Faint fall the voices from overhead.

Rough is the road for the quick to tread.

Breasting the tide and the tempest they—

Mine is the haven of life’s heyday.

They are dying, but I am dead!

Oh, but the daisies and long grass under,

I, with my myriad lives instead,

Listening, laughing, I hear them wonder—

They are dying, but I am dead!

I, with my myriad lives again,

Grass and roses, and leaves and rain,

They with their struggle with doubt and pain,

They with the strangling throes to come,

They with the grip of the grave to dread,

God ! how I laugh in my quiet home—

They are dying, but I am dead! (1–17)

Much like Rossetti's enlightened dead, Tomson's dead speaker revels in understanding what death entails. Tomson's dead speaker, however, does not sleep and dream of heaven. Rather, he/she enjoys the knowledge that death brings release from suffering. Tomson's speaker offers a convoluted hope predicated on the assumption that all people, at some point, become preoccupied with death and what it will bring. This fear of the grave, perhaps coupled with a not so healthy fear of divine judgment, leads to a state of anxiety that denies any hope of peace, but the dead, by their very nature, are relieved of this burden. Tomson here gives a radical revision of *1 Peter*, which holds: "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. / The grass witherith, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth forever" (*King James Bible* 1.24–25). Moreover, "The Quick and the Dead" attempts to provide comfort for the living by exploring the physical nature of death, which is presented as a process of decay and regeneration.

Though Tomson's poetry does not rely heavily on a technical discussion of the process of decomposition, "The Quick and the Dead" posits the process as an alternative to religious doubt and dread. James Paradis and Thomas Postlewait suggest that "the literary artist and social critic who wished to recreate some aspect of Victorian life, whether in fiction or poetry, in social or intellectual commentary, was destined to come face to face with the remarkable fact that science and its applications were not only transforming the structure of English society, but that they were also redefining the images and values upon which the culture as a whole had traditionally been based" (xii).

The revisionary effects of scientific knowledge are demonstrated by Tomson's replacement of heaven with natural regeneration.¹³⁵

While the process of decomposition may have given pause to some Victorians, the speaker of "The Quick and the Dead" revels in the process of being re-born as nonhuman living entities. Like Coleridge, Tomson constructs a naturalistic version of the afterlife where the dead are reborn in the living, natural world. Significantly, though, Tomson's speaker rejoices in being born as plants and non-human animals, which live a life of ease as compared to the toil that humans suffer.¹³⁶

Oh! But the life of me! gathering, growing,

Emmet and butterfly, flower and thorn,

Poppy and rose in the gold sun glowing,

Over and over unmade, re-born.

One with the grey of the winter day,

One with the glint of the sunset gold,

One with the wind and the salt sea-spray,

One with the dun of the furrowed mould.

How shall I joy in the world unwitting?

How shall I lean to the dear warm sun?

Grub or nightingale—creeping or flitting—

Nature and I in the end made one. (18–29)

As the dead narrator proclaims, death does not bring any sort of heavenly afterlife to reward the trials of life. Those who were unable to maintain their faith tended to lament their inability to do so, as did Arnold in "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse." In

contrast, Tomson's speakers in "The Quick and the Dead" and in "The Smile of All-Wisdom" suggest that faith is necessary only as a means of coming to terms with death and that once one accepts the fact that death is not something to fear, then one no longer need worry about religious faith or doubt.

Tomson's conception of life and death are significant not only because they embrace modernity but also because they explicitly challenge Victorian values. By erasing heaven, Tomson removes one of the primary justifications of Victorian morality. The promise of divine reward or retribution was used to keep the poor and working classes accepting of their lot and to generally encourage good behavior among all classes. Moreover, heaven promised divine reunion with God, family, and friends. Tomson's challenge to this dominant system of faith firmly places her in a *fin-de-siècle* tradition that runs counter to high-Victorian values and initiates the movement to modernism. Despite embracing modernization, Tomson acknowledges its growing pains. The implicitly religious poems in *the Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets* trace the journey of the loss of faith from the actual loss, shown in "Le Mauvais Larron" and "'Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?'" through the effects of longing for faith, which is demonstrated in "On the Road," "The Road is Long," and "Hymn of Labour;" and finally to the point of accepting that belief in God is unnecessary and that there is no divinity or afterlife, as suggested in "The Quick and the Dead" and "The Smile of All-Wisdom."

Tomson's deconstruction of Christian faith presents a challenge to Victorian morality, which was largely shaped by Anglican Christian belief. In so doing, Tomson expresses *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics that expound new modes of thought and value. However, unlike many of her contemporaries who sought alternatives to Christian faith,

Tomson offers the possibility of life without reliance on divinity. For Rossetti and Coleridge, life without God is unfathomable. Though Coleridge questions humanities ability to define divinity, she never doubts the existence of divinity. Nesbit too, despite her radicalism, retains the notion of the divine, though she locates it in human relations. After lamenting the incompatibility of the human and the divine, Tomson locates a purpose for life in human enterprise and the renewal of nature. However, she does not romanticize labor; rather she suggests that it gives life purpose. Accordingly, all humans must work to improve their common lot. In Tomson's schemata death will not lead to an afterlife in which all are rewarded for their toil. It will, however, lead to release from suffering and to regeneration into nature.

Conclusion

As the nineteenth century progressed and England became more and more thoroughly industrialized, the questions that in many ways opened the century take on new urgency: Where is God, and what is his role in the human condition? Though Christina Rossetti, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, E. Nesbit, and Graham R. Tomson develop radically different theological approaches, their use of gothic aesthetics and biblical imagery suggest a shared literary engagement with the Victorian cultural fear that religion, and indeed God's presence, was on the wane. Though Rossetti was never viewed by her contemporaries as anything other than a devout Christian, her poetry in *Goblin Market and Other Poems* illustrates understanding and sympathy with the doubt that wracked England during her lifetime. Coleridge, too, sympathized with that doubt; though, unlike *Goblin Market*, Coleridge's *Fancy's Following* identifies doubt as symptomatic of a healthy relationship with the divine, providing that doubt refrains from drifting into disbelief. Nesbit and Tomson tend to be more radical in their configurations of divinity and, perhaps, more akin to modern tastes. Reflecting Nesbit's socialism, *Lays and Legends* strives to identify all human life as divine and renounces all authoritarian powers, whether they are human or divine. In keeping with the predominant literary expression of faith in the 1890s, Tomson's *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets* divorces God from humanity and seeks comfort in a shared condition among all living things.

While all four women use elements of the gothic to express their views on religion, their volumes are neither wholly gothic nor wholly religious. Moreover, the writers that I focus on were certainly not the only ones who used gothic conventions to

explore and express their relationships with the divine. A quick review of canonical literature shows that in the nineteenth century, the idea that one's relationship with God could be terrifying first surfaces in the prose and poetry of the Romantic Period. There are traditional gothic novel that explored the ways in which humans abused their status as religious devotees, such as M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* and James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. However, a more direct precursor to the late Victorian uses of the gothic can be identified in the verses of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is the most canonical example of tropes of the gothic being used to voice the darkness and fear that can be inspired by one's relationship with God. Though not necessarily Christian in their leanings, George Gordon, Lord Byron's *Manfred* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* depict the fraught relationship between the human and divine and the dangers that can accompany traditions that identify the human as divine. These works are significant because they explore the individual's relationship with the divine particularly in terms of the individual's attempt to ascend to or usurp divinity. Moving through the Victorian era, the relationship between the human and divine shifts away from humans who attain divinity (or at least try to) towards a divorce between human and divine. Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* indicates this shift through Heathcliff, who retains the ambitions of his Romantic precursors, and Catherine, who wants nothing to do with heaven, preferring instead to remain in the world she knows. As the Victorian era progress the dark side of religion can be found in Algernon Charles Swinburne, James Thomson, and Oscar Wilde, whose characters alternatively proclaim and lament the absence of God.

While I have only sketched a brief and cursory list of works that engage in discussions of the relationship between human and divine, it should become immediately obvious that if we attempt to gain a full understanding of the Victorians and their relationship with God, more women's voices need to be added to the discussion. In many ways the work that began in the early 1990s with scholars such as Anne K. Mellor, Isobel Armstrong, and Virginia Blain needs to continue today. Though the field of literary studies has further diversified from when she made the comment in 1995, Armstrong's point still stands: "We have had two hundred years to discover a discourse of and strategies for reading male poets. They belong to a debate, a dialect; we know how to think about politics, epistemology, power, and language, in productive ways that, whether it is Matthew Arnold or Paul De Man who writes, make these poets *mean* for us. A hermeneutics has evolved. Not so with the female poets. We are discovering who they are, but there are few ways of talking about them" (15). Further scholarship needs to study the methodology women poets used to engage in many of the same issues that their male counterparts addressed. In so saying, I am not arguing for a "women only" tradition of poetry; indeed from a cultural and historical standpoint, setting up a canon of women's writing is no more useful than the more traditional male centric canon. In either case, we can only see a partial image of the literary tapestry that existed during any given period. Still, as scholarship on the nineteenth century progresses, studies that focus on women's poetry must be completed in order to fully understand the literary and cultural influences in poetry by both genders.

Essential to any understanding of Victorian literature and culture are discussions of the fraught relationship the Victorians had with religion. Because the Anglican

Church played a major role, for good or bad, in the social life of all Victorians, religion takes on a pressing importance that gradually waned during the twentieth century, much as the prominence of the Anglican Church did. As I have attempted to demonstrate in this study, women's writing on religion, whether devotional, doctrinal, or radically agnostic, plays an important role in our understanding of the ways in which women were impacted by and in turn impacted literary dialogue about the state of Victorian faith. Following Sue Morgan and Cynthia Scheinberg, my contention is that women's engagement with religious thought necessarily constitutes a feminist act by virtue of the cultural belief the women lacked the necessary qualities for philosophical inquiry. Accordingly, any women's poetry that engages religious debate, whether to uphold or denounce established systems of faith, necessarily engenders a feminist statement.

In this project, I consciously focused on poetic engagements with Christianity because of its dominant stature in the nineteenth century. However, as religious tolerance grew during the nineteenth-century, non-Christian faiths gradually (much more so than Dissent and Catholicism) gained the same freedoms as Christian faiths. In order to fully appreciate the scope of women's engagement with religious dialogue, further study needs to be done not only on women who addressed Christianity but also women who wrote on non-Christian faiths. A short list of women who concerned themselves with religion, women who advocated various levels of belief and disbelief, includes Louisa S. Bevington, Toru Dutt, Dora Greenwell, Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Amy Levy, Constance Naden, Adelaide Anne Procter, A. Mary F. Robinson, Arabella Shore, and Speranza (Lady Wilde), none of whom are yet well enough known. And surely, these poets were not the only women who concerned themselves with issues

of faith and doubt, belief and disbelief. In order to fully understand what the Victorians perceived as a crisis of faith—indeed, to determine whether their faith really was in crises or was merely in a state of flux—the voices of these and other women, Christian and otherwise, need to be heard.

Notes

¹ Spelling has been standardized from UK to US English.

² Butler notes that Victorians were the last generation to have recourse to a common font of religious practice. He comments that “after Hardy there will be a progressive freeing of discourse from the narrative syntax of the Bible—that will be one of the main legacies of Hardy to Modernism, a movement (if it can be called such) that is characterized more than anything else by its attempt to create its own myths and to write its own Bible” (201). This “freedom” in part came as a result of a decline in the importance of a national religion, if not the importance of faith itself.

³ Women writers then and now have received some modicum of respect by writing devotional literature. Though it is not my intent to explore devotional literature, it is also not my intent to devalue it. The devotional does (and should) hold an important place in the literary canon not only because of the extensive amount of devotional literature but also because devotional literature was seen as a legitimate form of literary expression that was often equally valued with what we today consider canonical expressions of doubt. However, when it comes to religious writing by women, devotion was not the only option, and many women explored alternative systems of faith.

⁴ Hyles goes on to suggest that “like Monk Lewis, Sir Walter Scott’s poems are steeped in German balladry. For Scott, the world was a mixture of the medieval and the marvelous. All of his best poetry has supernatural overtones that cause the mood to be sinister and gloomy as in ‘The Lay of the Last Minstrel’ and ‘The Lady of the Lake,’ which contain goblins, druidic rites, and demons. Southey’s most ambitious poems,

‘Thalaba’ and ‘The Curse of Kehama,’ blend witchcraft with folklore and myth; Blake’s entire canon has the effect of total fantasy imbued with supernatural and horrific traces; and Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and Byron give us pictures of the vampire (‘Cristabel’), the macabre (almost all of Shelley’s poems), the serpent-like wood nymph (‘Lamia’) and incantations, phantoms, and spirits (‘Manfred’). Even the staid Victorians strayed often into the shadowy realm of the supernatural (Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’ and Browning’s ‘Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came’ immediately come to mind)” (4).

⁵ Rossetti’s was one of the most popular Victorian poets in literary and nonliterary circles; some notable admirers are Charles Algernon Swinburne, Jean Ingelow, Dora Greenwell, Lewis Carroll, Augusta Webster, Adelaide Procter, Gerard Manly Hopkins, and Katharine Tynan.

⁶ In addition to Rossetti, a short list of Victorian women poets who were well received because of their religious verses would include Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Dora Greenwell, Jean Ingelow, Alice Meynell, and Adelaide Procter. Despite the relative lack of critical attention these women have received, with the obvious exception of Barrett Browning, all of these women were bestselling poets during the Victorian era.

⁷ The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion establish the basic tenants of Anglican faith. They are divided into four sections. Articles I through VIII address the Catholic Faith. Chronologically, they are Of faith in the Holy Trinity; Of the Word, or Son of God, which was made very man; Of the going down of Christ into Hell; Of the Resurrection of Christ; Of the Holy Ghost; Of the sufficiency of the Holy Scripture for Salvation; Of the Old Testament; and Of the Three Creeds. Articles IX through XVIII address Personal Religion. Chronologically, they are Of Original or Birth Sin; Of Free Will; Of the

Justification of Man; Of Good Works; Of Works before Justification; Of Works of Supererogation; Of Christ alone without Sin; Of Sin after Baptism; Of Predestination and Election; and Of obtaining eternal salvation only by the name of Christ. Articles XIX through XXXI address Corporate Religion. Chronologically, they are Of the Church; Of the Authority of the Church; Of the authority of General Councils; Of Purgatory; Of Ministering in the Congregation; Of speaking in the Congregation in such a tongue as the people understandeth; Of the Sacraments; Of the unworthiness of the Ministers, which hinders not the effect of the Sacraments; Of Baptism; Of the Lord's Supper; Of the wicked which do not eat the body of Christ, in the use of the Lord's Supper; Of Both Kinds; and Of the one oblation of Christ finished upon the Cross. Articles XXXII through XXXIX address miscellaneous issues. Chronologically, they are Of the Marriage of Priests; Of Excommunicated Persons, how they are to be avoided; Of the Traditions of the Church; Of Homilies; Of Consecration of Bishops and Ministers; Of the Civil Magistrates; Of Christian men's good which are not common; and Of a Christian man's Oath.

⁸ The Low Church initially held the most influence in the nineteenth-century Anglican Church. Evangelicalism came originated during the eighteenth century. Rosman explains that “evangelicalism arose at a time when there was much fashionable interest in ‘deism’, the belief that a divine being created the world but did not subsequently intervene in it. This teaching, which undermined everything in which orthodox Christians believed, caused educated churchgoers much consternation.” Evangelicalism countered the trend of deism by contending that God directly influenced all individuals and that God could be experienced directly in one’s life. This helped produce public

interest in Evangelicalism; according to Rosman, “Evangelical faith offered a welcome reprieve from the anxiety provoked by philosophical speculation. Theoretical debates about whether God did or did not intervene in human affairs ceased to worry believers who were convinced that they had experienced his activity in their own lives” (152). The belief that God directly influenced the individual and that church hierarchy did not affect one’s access to God was not only a defining mark of Evangelicalism but also led to its association with the Low Church movement.

Despite their eventual rise in popularity, Evangelicals were initially ostracized by the y the other branches of the Anglican Church because of their beliefs and, to a greater extent, their methods of devotion and worship. Meknyk explains that “Evangelicals embraced an emotional style of worship, and they were eager to share their faith, imparting the gospel to others. Because they believed that religion should permeate their social and intellectual lives, they talked openly about religious matters, often quoting Scripture in ordinary conversation” (23). Though the Victorians did consider religion a personal matter, the general population was not engaged in a process of publicly questioning the nature of their faith, let alone proselytizing. Moreover, some Anglican beliefs did not readily mesh with Evangelical teachings. Meknyk suggests that Evangelicals “regarded the Bible as God’s authoritative revelation, often as the only reliable source of authoritative teaching; they tended to reject church doctrine as it developed over the centuries as having any significant authority, though, as Anglicans, they maintained allegiance to the Thirty-Nine Articles. Generally, they regarded these articles as supported by biblical teaching, though on certain issues, such as baptismal regeneration, the two seemed in clear conflict” (20).

As late as the mid-eighteenth century, Evangelicalism had little political power within the structure of the Anglican church; however, despite its initial alienation, by the end of the eighteenth century, Evangelicals were fully welcomed into the Anglican Church.

Rosman suggests that “Evangelicalism ceased to be regarded as aberrant and became an accepted part of Church of England life, distinguished by preaching which focused on Christ’s atoning death and by its concern for personal or in evangelical parlance ‘vital’ religion” (171). Moreover, Herbert Schlossberg suggests that by the mid-nineteenth century “the movement had become the dominant voice in the Church.” However, he augments his view with the comment that “even when it became dominant, it did not constitute the majority of Church people, and it always faced opposition, but by the time of Victoria’s coronation in 1837 the opposition had taken on some of its characteristics, as had indeed the whole society” (47). One of the reasons that the Low Church was able to gain power was its practice of working in the community and running charitable organizations, as the works of William Wilberforce and Hannah More demonstrate.

Rosman explains that “like the puritans before them, evangelicals believed that they were called to implement God’s will on earth and they caught others up in their enthusiasm” (174). Although Schlossberg suggests that the Evangelicals were active because of the political power they lacked (71), activism also afforded the Evangelicals a venue through which they could improve the spiritual and moral condition of England.

⁹ The third major church party, the Broad Church, differed largely from the Evangelicals and Tractarians in terms of their willingness to modernize Anglican Church teachings so that they could maintain pace with industrial, scientific, and social developments.

Meknyk explains that “while the Evangelicals stressed the Protestant past of the Church

of England, and the Tractarians and their successors stressed its Catholic past, the Broad Church stressed the church's diverse and evolving present. Dedicated to the preservation of the church, they believed that it could only survive by meeting head-on the challenges of the modern world" (Meknyk 30). Because they took a liberal view as to what should be accepted into Church doctrine, their views were not always uniform, and as a result, the Broad Church movement lacked the coherence of the Low and High Church movements. John Wolffe suggests that the Broad Churchmen "were not a party in the sense that the Evangelicals or Anglo-Catholics were, eschewing the institutional and literary basis of independent organization. They tended to be individualists, united only in their critical attitude to the other groupings and in an emphasis on the comprehensiveness of the Church of England" (12). The Broad Church had two primary reasons for their liberal attitude: their desire to maintain the relevance of the Anglican Church in the lives of its constituents and their desire to uncover the purest form of theological understanding. Meknyk explains that "Broad churchmen welcomed the knowledge offered by science and by novel methods of biblical criticism, and they were willing to reconsider and reformulate Christian doctrine in the light of this new knowledge. Theologically liberal, they early acknowledged the admixture of myth in the Bible, and they sought to disentangle the myth from the timeless truth revealed by God" (Meknyk 30). Among the more prominent Broad Churchmen were Thomas Arnold (father of Matthew Arnold), and Charles Kingsley and F. D. Maurice, both of whom were associated with the Christian Socialist movement.

¹⁰ Spelling has been standardized from UK English to US English.

¹¹ See for example the paintings titles “Ophelia” by Arthur Hughes, John Everett Millais, and James William Waterhouse; the paintings title “The Lady of Shalott” by Walter Crane, Hughes, Millais, and D.G. Rossetti; Waterhouse’s “St. Eulalia”; or the death of Sir Percival’s Sister in Rossetti’s “The Attainment of the Sanc Grail” murals.

¹² In his collection of Christina Rossetti’s poems, William Michael Rossetti expresses his discomfort with the level of biblical influence that pervaded his sister’s work: “The reader of Christina Rossetti’s poems will be apt to say that there is an unceasing use of biblical diction. This is a fact; and to some minds it may appear to detract seriously from her claims to originality, or to personal merit of execution. Without pre-judging the question, I will only remark that the bible was so much her rule of life and of faith that it had almost become a part of herself” (xii).

¹³ *cf.* Matthew Arnold’s “Longing.”

¹⁴ *cf.* Byron’s “If That High World.”

¹⁵ Spelling has been standardized from UK English to US English.

¹⁶ Notably, how souls would be able to recognize each other in absence of the physical body became a major source of concern for Tennyson in *In Memoriam*. However, Rossetti takes as a matter of faith that recognition will not be difficult.

¹⁷ *cf.* Tennyson’s “Come Not, When I Am Dead.”

¹⁸ Anne Jamison here reads the speaker as female, which is also in keeping with Catherine Maxwell’s reading of “After Death.” Though the poem does not specifically identify the sex of the speaker, given the male viewer’s actions and reactions at the deathbed and Victorian gender norms, reading the speaker as female is logically justified in this case.

¹⁹ *cf.* Byron's "Stanza's [And thou art dead, as young and fair]"

²⁰ McGann points out that "this moving poem follows a traditional model, and its all but explicit forebears are two of Herbert's most familiar pieces, 'The Pilgrimage' and the last poem in *The Temple*, 'Love (III)'" (133).

²¹ In the 1571 edition of the Articles of Religion, article seventeen, Of Predestination and Election reads:

PREDESTINATION to life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby, before the foundations of the world were laid, He hath constantly decreed by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom He hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation as vessels made to honour. Wherefore they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God be called according to God's purpose by His Spirit working in due season; they through grace obey the calling; they be justified freely; they be made sons of God by adoption; they be made like the image of His only-begotten Son Jesus Christ; they walk religiously in good works; and at length by God's mercy they attain to everlasting felicity.

As the godly consideration of Predestination and our Election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons and such as feeling in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh and their earthly members and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ, as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God: so for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the devil doth thrust them

either into desperation or into wretchedness of most unclean living no less perilous than desperation.

Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise as they be generally set forth in Holy Scripture; and in our doings that will of God is to be followed which we have expressly declared unto us in the word of God.

²² Isobel Armstrong goes into further detail about Rossetti's reception by Tynan, Levy, and Meynell, women who were associates of Graham R. Thomson and E. Nesbit.

Armstrong states that according to Tynan, Rossetti "was a born mystic, her mind saturated in the English Bible. Nevertheless, Rossetti was too obsessed by death. Her preoccupation with suffering and death was inordinate. She was unable to keep the 'worms' out of her poetry. [. . .] Tynan put this down to the dark, morbid house in Torrington Square, with its freight of old ladies. She could not imagine how Rossetti could have borne this life" (24). Armstrong comments "worms for Tynan, cypress for Amy Levy, reviewing the 1888 collected poems in *Woman's World*: 'The mysticism and the almost unrelieved melancholy . . . that perverse assumption of the cypress,' mourning for the lost object, as this might be called, was for Levy the dominant characteristic of Rossetti's poems" (24). Armstrong also explains that "Alice Meynell was more astringent. [. . .] Meynell subtly trivialized the life of prayer and succor for the poor, the 'scrap-books for children and hospitals, that, she thinks, passed as work for Rossetti'" (25).

²³ Only 125 volumes of *Fancy's Following* were printed, making the volume extremely difficult to obtain today. Theresa Whistler's 1954 *Collected Poems of Mary Coleridge* is the most recent and most comprehensive edition of Coleridge's poetry; however, there

are a few discrepancies between individual poems in the two texts. Where discrepancies exist, my text reproduces the text present in *Fancy's Following*, with the exceptions that all instances of the long s have been modernized and that usage of ligatures has been eliminated. Throughout this chapter, I have provided the composition date that Whistler assigns to the poem's because the poems published in *Fancy's Following* were written over a ten year period.

²⁴ A notable exception to this is Vanessa Furse Jackson's essay, which consciously focuses on the shorter poems that, by far, make up the bulk of Coleridge's oeuvre. Drawing on a wide selection of Coleridge's poems, Jackson convincingly connects the poems to specific incidents in Coleridge's life while still allowing for some slippage of subjectivity by refusing to identify Coleridge as the speaker; instead, Jackson suggests that the poems may have biographical inspiration while presenting a non-personal perspective.

²⁵ Though scholars have been eager to point out the influences of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poems on Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's gothic writing, no one has yet explored the Coleridge's views on religion. Both authors confronted issues of doubt and explored the nature of God and religious faith.

²⁶ Theresa Whistler's introduction to the *Collected Poems*, "Mary Coleridge: Her Life and Personality," presents a complete retelling of the events that led to the publication of *Fancy's Following*: Violet Hodgkin "thought it time the poetess was discovered, and she was far too energetic to leave that to chance. She had already informed Mary that she had 'no nice honourable feelings' about reading any of her poems she could find, and Mary had not objected. For Christmas 1891 she gave Violet a little white notebook half

full of her verses, all printed in an odd, laborious lettering of her own invention. From time to time she would supplement the collection, and in the spring of 1894, when the book was full, Violet showed it to her aunt, Mrs. Bridges's mother [. . .] and they arranged for it to lie about casually on the hall table where [Robert] Bridges would be sure to see it. [. . .] Violet Hodgkin confessed her treachery to Mary, and gradually her reluctance to own her authorship was broken down, for Bridges had suggested publication" (62–63).

²⁷ Among other popular Victorian women poets who used pseudonyms are L.E.L. (Letitia Elizabeth Landon), George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Speranza (Jane Francesca Wilde), Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson), Violet Fane (Mary Montgomerie Lamb), and Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper).

²⁸ Though for quite a different reason, in her 1946 essay, Beatrice White also suggests that a necessary distinction must be made between the works of elder, male Coleridge and the younger, female Coleridge: "It is idle [. . .] to compare Lucifer and Ariel. If we are to look for close affinities we must look for them not to [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge, but to 'mæg a cræft,' to poets of her own time and sex and stature, who, perhaps because their visions are less vast, their designs less immense, their perception and sensibilities as acute and delicate, have achieved, within the limits imposed upon them by the nature of their poetic equipment, a still impressive measure of completion" (83).

²⁹ This is most regularly the case with Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's most often studied poem, "The Other Side of a Mirror." Christine Battersby is an exception in that she refuses to tie the speaker's voice to Coleridge.

³⁰ Much energy has been directed towards figuring what, exactly, Coleridge could have been aiming at with her use of the name “Anados.” From her diaries and letters, we know that Coleridge consciously adopted the name Anados from the hero of George Macdonald’s 1858 *Phantastes*: “And lest this [personal] *I* should grow troublesome and importunate, I will christen myself over again, make George Macdonald my godfather, and name myself after my favourite hero, Anodos in *Phantastes*” (qtd. in Sichel 24). Battersby presents the most complete history of the name Anados: “For although in most common non-Platonic contexts ‘*Anados*’ means ‘on no path’ and is glossed by Coleridge herself as ‘Wanderer,’ it is MacDonald’s self-consciously philosophical novel of a mystical (male) quest for Platonic perfection that provides the rationale for the choice of pseudonym. Indeed, in the myth of the cave in Plato’s *Republic*, ‘*anodos*’ is the term used by Plato (at 517 b5) to denote the movement of the psyche towards the intelligible realm as it emerges from the cave into the world of sunlight” (254).

³¹ *cf.* Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach”

³² *cf.* Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a country churchyard”

³³ I am using androgynous in a somewhat generic sense, but it is worth noting Battersby argument which identifies Coleridge as being trapped between a hermaphroditic and androgynous existence. Battersby explains that “when post-Romantic writers described the genius as an androgyne, they thought of this in terms of a male with a ‘feminine’ psyche. In male androgynes artistic creativity was *displaced* sexual energy; in female hermaphrodites, by contrast, genius was a form of *misplaced* (male) sexual energies. It is a question between noble and ignoble monsters” (251). Furthermore, she suggests that Coleridge’s invocation of MacDonald’s character Anados is an attempt, albeit a failed

one, to break out of this stricture: “her choice of pseudonym indicates an interest in *renouncing* sexuality in a way similar to MacDonald: an ideal that left Mary Coleridge with severe problems, since MacDonald’s androgyne was a feminine male and his women were represented as *naturally* sexless and as lacking any real personality or will of their own” (Battersby 254).

³⁴ Standard fare from female poets is best exemplified by Felicia Hemans, L.E.L., and Jean Ingelow, all of whom conformed their poetry to the expectations placed on women poets.

³⁵ Edith Sichell provides potentially conflicting information on Coleridge’s religious affiliations. Sichell comments that “Catholic [sic] though she was, you could never wholly count upon her” (33). Later Sichell says that “Born into the Church of England, she remained in it; she was loyal to its traditions, and loved, as she said, to kneel; where her forefathers had knelt. But as she grew older, faith seemed to her larger than any set of beliefs; the life of Christ more vital than Christianity” (37–38). In accord with the Tractarians and with her own preference for refusing a strict orthodoxy, it is possible that Coleridge was a High Anglican who favored a return to some aspects of Catholic worship, much as Christina Rossetti did.

³⁶ Dissenters constituted a wide variety of Presbyterian religions that differed in beliefs from the Anglican Church. Such groups include Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Quakers, and Unitarians.

³⁷ Rosman suggests that “Dissent had always taken a variety of forms and it became even more diverse in the nineteenth century” (187). However, Schlossberg counters that “Dissent’s revival was not uniform, and scholars speak of a bifurcation between

denominations that continued in decline (chiefly Presbyterians) and ‘New Dissent’ denominations (mainly Congregationalists and Baptists) groups by the 1780s were growing much faster than the still-moribund Presbyterians and Quakers. To a large extent this growth was fueled by the example and influence of the Methodists” (121). Dissenting religions drew their strength from their appeal to the middle-class and skilled workers. Rosman suggests that one of the reasons for the popularity of Dissent among the middle and upper working class was that “Dissent offered people of low status opportunities to play a leading role in congregational life” (193). Because the Anglican Church hierarchy was largely filled by the aristocracy and upper middle class, those without financial resources were often shut out of Church decisions. Thus, Dissenting faiths largely bore the hallmark of the middle class. Rosman explains that “nonconformists were prominent among the growing ranks of retailers, shop assistants, school teachers, and clerks” (194).

Being attached to the middle class and skilled laborers benefitted the Dissenting churches in that they were able to reach a sizable segment of the public which largely eluded the Anglican Church. Schlossberg explains that “the failure of the Church to attract more of the middle class, which consequently went to Dissent, was a frequent lamentation of the clergy” (128). However, in the matter of public opinion, Dissenters were not always favorably measured. Schlossberg explains that “mid- and late Victorians of advanced views often lampooned Dissenters, partly because they were thought, with good reason, to be so attached to middle-class ethical values. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Dissenters had become largely middle class” (128). In other words, Dissenting Churches still mimicked the class associations attributed to the Anglican

Church—where aristocrats ruled Anglicanism, the middle classes ruled dissent.

However, though they catered to middle-class values, Dissenting churches still carried the class distinctions that were found in the Anglican Church. Rosman suggests that “as Nonconformity acquired its own social élite, divisions from the secular world were replicated within chapels as well as within parish churches. Nonconformists, like Anglicans, often charged pew rents as a means of covering the costs of running a place of worship. Differential rates ensured that affluent members of the congregation contributed more than the poor towards chapel funds but they also occupied the best seats” (195).

Although Dissent was popular in the nineteenth century, it still faced antagonism from the Anglican Church and from the court of public opinion. Because Dissenters rejected the Anglican Church and, by extension, the thirty-nine articles of faith, they were prohibited from holding public office, which required one to swear to uphold the articles of faith. Since church and state were enmeshed, it was believed that one could only truly be loyal to England if one practiced the faith of the Church of England. Dissenters were also prohibited from attending English universities,³⁷ which also required loyalty to the Anglican Church. Moreover, at various times of political turmoil, Dissenters were also faced with suspicion of their beliefs and of their loyalty to Britain. Schlossberg explains that “the French Revolution brought about a serious turn for the worse. Dissenting opinion of all sorts was taken to be sympathetic to the revolution, and fear that the conflagration could spread to England spurred repression” (123). The fear of Dissent stemmed not only from the implications of worshipping a different God but also from the patriotic ramifications of denying the religious authenticity of Anglicanism.

Though Dissenters were sometimes treated with suspicion, Catholics were largely reviled. Catholic distrust had its roots in the turmoil that followed the sixteenth-century split of the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church. During the reign of Elizabeth I, Catholicism was entirely banned from the English countryside, though there were still small factions of Catholics who practiced their faith in secret. During the nineteenth century, Catholic worship gained ground in England because of the Tractarians' call for a return to some Catholic practices, because of the 1829 Catholic Emancipation act, which made it legal to be a practicing Catholic, and because of the subsequent return of Catholic priests and bishops. René V. Overholser suggests that "the anti-Catholic feeling allied for centuries with England's national self-definition had been stirred by the 1829 Catholic Emancipation act and the reestablishment of England's Roman Catholic hierarchy in 1859 (the 'Papal aggression'). Its continued potency, reduced but still prominent in the public sector, was reflected at mid-century in the press and in popular fiction, with the long-running battle within the Anglican Church over ritualism helping to keep the dangers of Popery in the public eye" (131–32). Overholser also suggests that "the situation was further exacerbated by a series of actions by Pope Pius IX over a fifteen-year period, the most contentious the proclamation of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary in 1854, followed ten years later by the Vatican Council I's declaration of papal infallibility in 1870–71" (32). The role of the pope was particularly contentious because his position granted him not only religious but also political authority.

Though Catholicism grew in strength, it did not grow in popularity. In fact, just the opposite occurred. Rosman suggests that "one reason why the restoration of the Catholic

hierarchy aroused such powerful emotions was the growing fear that Catholicism was gaining ground within the Church of England itself” (181). The particular aspects of Catholicism that were problematic for the Victorian Anglicans were the reliance on rituals (deemed superstitious by non-practitioners) and the role of the priests. Anglicans were opposed to the potential for sexual indecency that the Catholic practice of confession offered, and they were opposed to the practice of priest celibacy because it was not ordained by the *Bible* and because it too had the potential to lead to sexually deviant behaviors. Rosman suggests that “the gulf between Catholic and Protestant was widened by a revival of Catholic devotional practice. In the second half of the century attendance at Mass and confession improved, new types of devotion were introduced from the continent, and indigenous forms of piety became more widespread” (216). Because of their fears, Anglicans and some Dissenters consciously identified themselves as being non-Catholic. Rosman explains that “as Victoria’s reign progressed, increasing efforts were made to maintain a distinct Catholic identity. Local fear of Protestant competition was reinforced by the hierarchy’s concern that Catholics who mixed with people who did not share their faith might imbibe unacceptable ideas” (218).

³⁸ Julie Meknyk explains that “British anti-Catholicism was deeply engrained, partly because Catholicism itself seemed to many essentially foreign to British identity. Partly this resulted from the association of Roman Catholics with continental Europe. But, more significantly, the Anglican Church had been formed in explicit opposition to the Roman Catholic Church, and to be Protestant had become an essential element of Britishness” (44). Doreen Rosman concurs that history played a major role in the British distrust of Catholicism. She suggests that “antagonism between Catholics and Protestants

was deeply rooted in English history. By the start of the nineteenth century Catholics no longer presented a serious threat to the Hanoverian royal house but anti-Catholicism remained an integral part of popular patriotism” (178). Moreover, as Rosman explains, the growing number of Catholics entering England was a concern. Rosman comments that “fear of Catholics was exacerbated by the arrival of immigrants from Ireland who helped to increase the Catholic population from under 100,000 in 1800 to 750,000 fifty years later” (179) and that “popular anti-Catholicism came to a climax in 1850 when Catholic dioceses, each with their own bishop, were reintroduced into England” (180).

In addition to fearing the number of Catholics that were moving into England, the Anglicans also feared the ground that Catholicism was seemingly gaining in their own churches. Rosman points out that “the 1830s witnessed the emergence of a new brand of Anglican high-churchmanship associated with a group of Oxford clergymen who published a series of *Tracts for the Times*. Members of the Oxford Movement [. . .] sought to defend their church against the threat which they believed was posed by the development of a liberal, secular state. It soon became clear, however, that their perception of the church was very different from that of other Anglicans or even that of fellow high-churchmen. The latter shared their belief that modern Anglicans should look back to the early Christian centuries for a model of church life but combined this respect for antiquity with a high regard for the founders of their own church” (181). Rosman goes on to suggest that “the second half of the century witnessed another development within Anglican high-churchmanship when a new generation of priests started to introduce what many English people saw as Catholic rites into Anglican worship” (Rosman 185).

Meknyk suggests that “particular Catholic doctrines aroused Protestant fears. The most serious was the supreme authority of the Pope, which British Protestants represented as a kind of tyrannical and arbitrary power that an enlightened Britain had rejected. Anti-Catholics thus often referred to Catholicism as ‘Popery’ and Catholics as ‘Papists,’ picking out this particular element of Catholic belief for opprobrium” (44). Meknyk goes on to argue that Protestants “regarded other Catholic doctrines—the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, the veneration of saints, the use of relics—as little more than retrograde superstitions. Other practices and emphases, including some that the Tractarians adopted, struck the Protestant British as undermining the traditional family, especially priestly celibacy and authority: the Catholic Father seemed to usurp the position of the Victorian father. The growth of Catholic religious orders during the Victorian era did nothing to relieve such anxieties, since convent allowed women to abandon traditional family life and live instead under the direct authority of the church” (45).

³⁹ Herbert Schlossberg suggests that “although the Dissenters suffered legal discrimination until well into the nineteenth century, after the Toleration Act of 1689 they were able to live and worship more or less as they pleased. The Test (1673) and Corporation (1661) Acts imposed legal disabilities related to the holding of public office, but these had loopholes that removed much of their sting. Still, there was a palpable decline in the religious life of Dissent” (120).

⁴⁰ Though the implications extend beyond the scope of this project, it is worth noting that religious freedoms were only extended to non-Anglican Christian religions. The 1828 repeal of the Test and Corporation act meant that a declaration of faith to the Anglican

Church was no longer essential for holding public office, including Parliamentary seats. Yet despite his 1847 election, it was 1858 before the Jewish Lionel de Rothschild was awarded a seat in Parliament. Jews had only received voting rights just over twenty years earlier, in 1835.

⁴¹ Meknyk explains that “Catholic Emancipation finally gave Roman Catholics in Britain and Ireland the right to hold government offices, but the new rights came hedged round with conditions, known as ‘securities.’ One of these, aimed particularly at the much-distrusted Jesuits, prevented the growth of Roman Catholic religious orders in Britain by forbidding them to take in new members; though it was passed, it was never seriously enforced. Another ‘security’ barred Roman Catholic officials from advising the monarch on matters relating to the Church of England. The act also raised the property qualification for voting in Ireland, which disenfranchised a large number of Irish voters and limited the impact of the Roman Catholic vote in Ireland. Most relevantly, Catholics entering Parliament were required to take an oath swearing allegiance to the reigning monarch, denying the jurisdiction of the Pope over British law” (45).

⁴² In Britain, interpretation of the Bible began as early as the sixteenth century; however, at this point interpretation was limited primarily to the level of translation. Rosman explains that during the Reformation “pressure to reform the church came initially from intellectuals, men known as humanists, who were fascinated by the rediscovery of old classical and biblical manuscripts. As they perused Greek versions of the Bible they reali[z]ed, with mounting excitement, that some passages could be understood in ways other than those traditionally authorized. The scribes who had made copies of the Bible had made mistakes and their errors had become part of the accepted text. Scholars

questioned whether some Greek terms had been translated accurately” (26). By the eighteenth century, however, the Bible was once again seen as an infallible authority. Rosman explains that the Evangelicals “regarded the Bible as the prime source of spiritual authority and believed that God spoke personally to individuals through it” (149). Though it was gradually subject to challenge, through the eighteenth century the Bible remained a literal expression of God’s word.

⁴³ *cf.* Thomas Hardy’s “God’s Funeral.”

⁴⁴ Coleridge was fond of the works of William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, though she disapproved of their reported lifestyles. She believed, as was commonly reported at the time, that Blake was mad, and she rather ambivalently defended Shelley: “It seems to me that Godwin evilangelized [sic] him so very successfully that one can only pity him, not condemn him for many of his misdeeds; they were errors of judgment rather than sins. Of course that cannot be said of all. He was terribly wrong,—and yet, do you know, sins and all, he never repels me for a moment, as does a man like Carlyle, for instance, whose life is moral, but whose character is utterly immoral, being grounded in selfishness and intolerance; or like Wordsworth, who was false to the ideal of his youth for want of faith” (qtd. in Sichel). Interestingly, Coleridge’s responses to each of these poets runs counter to popular opinion. Shelley was lambasted as an immoral atheist; William Wordsworth was praised for rejecting his “youthful” support of the French Revolution; and Thomas Carlyle was viewed as a modern-day profit.

⁴⁵ My use of enthusiasm in this essay follows the late eighteenth and nineteenth century usage of the term. In this context, enthusiasm is generally a disparaging term used to reference individuals who show extreme devotion to God. Schlossberg explains that

enthusiasm “was taken to be not a praiseworthy description of zeal in the execution of a good work but rather a by-word for spiritual self-importance, for zealous execution of a task that one has presumptuously taken as a commission from God” (22). The term was most regularly applied to Dissenters, particularly Quakers, and Evangelicals, largely because of their belief that God acted through people and, as such, was able to move them. The term enthusiast was also applicable to people who took their religious beliefs to extremes that surpassed the comfort of the Anglican norm.

⁴⁶ Among Rossetti’s devotional poems, “Sweet Death” and “Advent” present the examples of poems that clearly show death as something to be welcomed because it brings the promise of reunion with loved ones and with God. Among her non-devotional poems, “Sound Sleep,” “Rest,” “Up-Hill,” and “Echo” express the same idea.

⁴⁷ *cf.* Algernon Charles Swinburne “A Litany.”

⁴⁸ Spelling has been standardized from UK to US English.

⁴⁹ *cf.* Matthew 7.13–14.

⁵⁰ Spelling has been standardized from UK to US English.

⁵¹ *cf.* Byron’s *Cain*.

⁵² Without question, the most famous Victorian poem on doubt and death is Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam*. Lance St John Butler comments that “it is worth noticing that [Tennyson] is just as much of a doubter [. . .] in the supposedly strongly Christian Prologue to *In Memoriam*, as he is in other parts of the poem. I take this undertow of doubt, this grammar and lexicon that works against the overt assertion of faith, as emblematic of Victorian discourse in general. It seems that early in the nineteenth century a major shift in consciousness took place such that no *enfant du siècle*, as

[Alfred] de Musset called his generation in 1836, could seriously write in the old way, and the new way was to write in a language and a manner shot through with doubt even when the intention was to assert freedom from doubt” (12). A key difference exists between Tennysonian doubt and Coleridgian doubt—that is, comfort. Though Tennyson voices a common condition of the Victorians, he struggles heartily to translate doubt into faith, particularly as the Prologue to *In Memoriam* suggests. In Coleridge, however, doubt and faith are not diametrically opposed. Rather, doubt is a condition that occasionally visits anyone with true faith.

⁵³ Both Chapman and McGowran identify the speakers based on the assumption that “The Witch” is a response to *Christabel*. However, within the text of “The Witch,” the first, female speaker of the poem is not named as such, and the second speaker is given neither a name nor a gender. McGowran acknowledges that “perhaps the most curious feature of the poem is the confusion effected by a slippery, shape-shifting ‘I’ which masks and swaps the identities of the two figures in the poem” (“Restless Wanderer” 187). However, she does not alter her reading to accommodate the slippage of speaker.

⁵⁴ Experiencing a loss of faith in the face of death is fairly common in Victorian poetry, with *In Memoriam* again serving as the most prominent example. This can also be found in Rossetti’s “After Death” and “A Peal of Bells.”

⁵⁵ Meknyk suggests that “religion permeated Victorian lives and culture in ways that modern readers may find hard to reimagine. It affected nineteenth-century men and women in their private lives—in their sense of personal identity and self-worth, their moral beliefs and behaviors, their family relationships and friendships, their spending habits, and their use of leisure time” (1).

⁵⁶ Among Coleridge scholars, there exists somewhat of a scandal over the title of this poem. Gilbert and Gubar, who use the poem as a cornerstone of their landmark study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, mis-titled the poem as “The Other Side of the Mirror” rather than “A Mirror.” Nor are they the only ones to make this mistake. Katherine McGowran, the preeminent Coleridge scholar, makes this error as well in “Re-reading Women’s Poetry at the Turn of the Century.” That scholars of this magnitude, scholars who have clearly taken the time to live with their material, could make such a mistake speaks volumes, I think, for the difficulties that have and continue to come along with “rediscovered” nineteenth-century women’s poetry, particularly with respect to accessing original and/or reliable editions of women’s poetry.

⁵⁷ *cf.* Genesis 4.19.

⁵⁸ *cf.* Byron’s *Manfred*.

⁵⁹ It is not clear if she is using art in a Romantic sense as artifice or if she is using art in a creative sense. However, I would suggest that the latter is more likely, particularly given the context of the volume. Artifice, for the Romantics, would be interpreted as an object giving false appearance and would run counter to nature or that which is natural. The poem’s union of nature and art suggests that art stands as an originary human creation that exists on par with nature as God’s creation.

⁶⁰ Among the more prominent of the *Lays and Legends* Victorian admirers were Algernon Charles Swinburne, H. Rider Haggard, Olive Schreiner, George Bernard Shaw, and Oscar Wilde.

⁶¹ Julia Briggs says that “According to Bower Marsh [one of Edith’s young lovers], Edith herself had been thought of as a coming poet when *Lays and Legends* was first published

in 1886, but by degrees her poetry had ceased to be highly regarded. He thought her problem was that, with such facility in writing, she had never really worked hard enough at it to become a good poet, a view endorsed by others. Even in her own judgment, the result often fell short of her aim” (164). Briggs also says that Arthur Watts, a friend of Nesbit’s, “noticed that she disliked writing and never worked systematically or regularly, but was always willing to be distracted” (271).

⁶² A heavy smoker all her life, Nesbit contracted lung cancer, and near the end of her life she became bedridden and was physically unable to write. According to Briggs, Watts thought that “too much smoking” was one of the reasons Nesbit was so high-strung (271).

⁶³ In a bid to maintain social propriety for her family and to spare Hoatson’s reputation, Nesbit claimed maternity for all five children, though only three were biologically hers; Bland was the biological father of all the children. Hoatson lived in the household under the title of aunt, which was used by the entire household, including both of her biological children. Posthumously, through her will, Nesbit disowned paternity of Hoatson’s children and left the majority of her estate to her daughter Iris and son John; her son Fabian predeceased her. Her motives for disowning Hoatson’s biological children are unclear; while she may have had a personal vendetta against the Hoatson branch of her household, she may also have taken into account that her husband’s will provided handsomely for Hoatson’s biological children.

⁶⁴ Briggs explains that “[Nesbit] enjoyed surrounding herself with younger men, often but not always aspiring artists or writers whose careers she attempted to advance. She liked to hold court, while her young men adopted the attitudes of subservient worship

associated with courtly love” (160). Though Briggs does not suggest the possibility, maintaining a variety of protégé’s, with whom she had varying degrees of romantic relationships, appears to have been a coping mechanism for Nesbit as she dealt with Bland’s infidelity and with her own disinclination to age with the social grace expected of a middle-class Victorian woman.

⁶⁵ The lives of Nesbit and Graham R. Thomson were surprisingly similar in terms of their unconventionality. Both women were professional writers (i.e. writers who financially supported themselves by publishing), except that where Nesbit turned to children’s fiction, Thomson turned to non-fiction journalism. Both women enjoyed living luxurious middle-class lives, even when they did not have the financial means to do so. Both women also had highly unconventional marriages, but where Nesbit had an open marriage, Thomson had a series of marriages that ended in divorce because of her infidelity.

⁶⁶ Briggs claims that “Virtually none of her earlier work is worth reviewing except for its historical interest” (178). W. W. Robson proposes that “her narrative poems in the manner of Tennyson (*Lays and Legends*, 1886) make little impression on modern readers” (251).

⁶⁷ In 1908, The Fabian Society collected forty of Nesbit’s already published poems and reissued them in the volume titled *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908*. The majority of the poems were unrevised, though minor changes were made to some. Nesbit routinely inserted socialist poems into her otherwise nonpartisan volumes, most likely as a means of disseminating them to a readership that was not politically inclined.

⁶⁸ Nesbit was certainly not unique in her engagement with socialism. Scholars generally

agree that the last two decades of the nineteenth century were prime for the conception of socialist organizations in Britain, though they disagree on why conditions were optimal. During the 1870s, Victorian Britain experienced a Great Depression, the greatness of which is still being called into question. Margaret Cole suggests that the Depression was “in reality two or three trade recessions coming on the heels of one another in a comprehensive trough,” which were not severe enough to diminish actual earnings but were severe enough to destabilize the job market, resulting in “heavy” unemployment (12). A.M. McBriar reaches a similar conclusion: “there were rising real wages for those in employment, but a great deal of unemployment” (7). However, Peter d’A Jones claims that “what was actually happening to the British economy at that time was by no means certain” (31). Yet, he points out that “the late Victorians themselves believed there was a ‘Great Depression’” (32). This point is significant because the Depression is frequently looked at as one of the contributing factors in the growth of British Socialist organizations.

I would suggest that the social effects of a culture that was actually experiencing a depression would be similar in many ways to the effects of a culture that believed they were experiencing a depression. While there would be a real economic difference, a placebo effect would mask this and would result in the same social experience as an actual depression. Despite Jones’s claim that “it is not possible to make easy causal connections between the ‘Socialist Revival’ of the eighties and nineties and the ‘Great Depression’ of the same years,” I would suggest that regardless of actual economic conditions, the Victorian belief that they were experiencing a depression would be enough to raise cultural concerns about social welfare (31). Moreover, Cole and McBriar

both see direct connections between the Depression and the rise of Socialist activity.

Though writing much, much earlier than Cole and McBriar, M. Beer also agrees that a connection existed between the rise of socialism and the depression and says that “the number of the unemployed had greatly increased; discontent spread in an ever-widening circle; the dissatisfaction with free-trade found expression in the movement for fair-trade” (2.260). In short, he suggests that the more people suffered financial hardship, the more they clamored for social and economic reform.

In addition to forging connections between the Great Depression and the increase of socialist activity, historians have identified other factors that contributed to an interest in social leveling. Stanley Pierson suggests that “the development of the Socialist ideology in Victorian Britain [. . .] emerged only through the adaptation of Marxism, a foreign system of thought, to indigenous habits of mind” (21). Beer holds similar beliefs, saying that “the rise of modern socialism in Great Britain since 1882 [. . . is] inseparably linked to Marxism” (2.202). However, Jones argues directly against this, suggesting that “Karl Marx, who had lived in London for over thirty years, died there in perfect obscurity in 1883” (41). Though Beer reached a different conclusion, the evidence suggests that while Marxist ideology may have fed socialist thought, Marxism could not have been the propulsive force behind socialism. Beer states that “Marx’s doctrines were only accessible to those Englishmen who read either German or French. In 1880 two articles on Marx appeared in English monthly magazines, one in favour of, the other in opposition to, his doctrines” (227). If nothing else, Beer’s evidence suggests that working-class socialist organizations would have had limited access to Marxist philosophies, as a result of lacking easy access either to translations or to translators of

Marx. While Marxist philosophies may have fed the growth of socialism, they certainly were not widely accessible enough to be taken as a primary causal factor in socialism's spread.

By far, the most comprehensive explanation for the rise of socialism is Ian Britain's suggestion that economic, social, and religious factors need to be taken into equal consideration. I agree that it seems fruitless to attempt to isolate the loci of discontent when all aspects of Victorian existence would have fed the movement for change. In addition to the above considerations, Britain suggests that the rise of socialism corresponded directly to the struggles of the Church:

personal feelings of insecurity and dislocation are shown to have been a factor of increasing force behind the questioning of traditional institutions and values which culminated in socialism. The sorts of insecurity involved, it becomes clear, were not just economic in nature, but reflected deep spiritual dilemmas or uncertainties, born partly of the disruptive impact of Darwinian evolutionary theories on conventional patterns of religious thinking. For its exponents, at least, socialism evidently presented itself as a new faith or system of values, and promised a new kind of security, both personal and social. (2)

Britain's hypothesis is supported by the reverential tone and insistence on morality presented in much, though by no means all, socialist literature, including that authored by Nesbit and by other members of the Fabian Society. Religious faith was fairly easily transferred and, in some cases, adapted to socialist teaching; systems of morality and ethics formed the grounds for and the defense of many socialist systems.

⁶⁹ The Christian God is almost universally conceptualized as male.

⁷⁰ For the Fabians, Liberty represented both personal freedom from government rule and the freedom to do as one pleased. Nesbit holds to Mill's suggestion that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty or action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (*On Liberty* #). With this exception, according to both Mill and Nesbit all individuals should have equal and unlimited access to liberty. Unlike Mill, Nesbit uses liberty as a political goal and as a deific power, the latter of which follows Percy Bysshe Shelly's much earlier use of Liberty.

⁷¹ Despite their new-found religious aspirations, both Nesbit and her husband continued their extra-marital affairs and maintained their bohemian lifestyle, which was in many ways uncongenial to Catholic teachings.

⁷² Though most accounts hold that the Fellowship came before the Fabians, Britain claims that this is not certain: "the origins of the Fabian Society, as an institution, are still a matter of dispute. The dispute centers on the precise relationship of the Society to a closely allied London coterie—The Fellowship of the New Life. One of these organizations began its independent existence by splitting off from the other, but uncertainties over the date of the official foundation of the Fellowship have made it difficult to tell which of the two bodies was a 'parent' and which the progeny that formally broke away" (25). Most historical accounts hold that the individuals who were to become the founding Fabians were meeting as early as the fall of 1883, the group officially became the Fabian Society during a meeting on January 4, 1884. While the

Fellowship of the New Life has no definite birth date, its members were meeting as early as September 1882, when Thomas Davidson began to gather followers in London.

⁷³ Though Nesbit joined the Fellowship of the New Life and the Fabians simultaneously with her husband, most histories of the Society fail to mention her. An exception would be that of McBriar, which mentions her only as the wife of Hubert Bland and as “the author of the children’s stories” (4). If the testimony from other Fabians, which Briggs presents, is taken at face value, one reason for this may be that Nesbit occasionally found the Fabian meetings less than amusing, which in turn caused many Fabians to find her entirely un-amusing. Briggs contends that “though Edith shared the Fabian ideals, she tended to use the meetings as opportunities for drawing attention to herself [. . .] If she couldn’t make an effective contribution to the discussion, she employed irritating little ‘feminine ruses’, pretending to faint, or dispatching friends to fetch her a glass of water” (Briggs 70).

⁷⁴ A. M. McBriar comments that “the early Fabian Society was, no doubt, a body of ‘middle-class’ or ‘bourgeois’ intellectuals. [. . .] Most of them were teachers, journalists, and clerks in private and government employment; a number of them had had a university education” (6). Ian Britain comments on this as well, saying that the Fabians “never had anything but a very small—merely token—working-class following, and it deliberately aimed most of its propaganda at securing further converts from the middle class” (6). However, he adds that the group’s limited social diversity allowed for their expansive ideological diversity:

from the start, [the Fabian Society] made its greatest appeal to an alienated section of the middle class that had been brought up in the commercial

sector of that class and had then achieved—or aspired to—various positions within the professional or salaried sector. For all the heterogeneity of its individual members’ sensibilities and attitudes, the Society boasted a strong social homogeneity. This enabled the members to thrash out their differences in terms they could all understand and in an atmosphere that gave some coherence to their debates and a sense of basic solidarity beneath all their differences on particular issues. (20)

To borrow Britain’s language, the Fabian Society was almost as well known for their heterogeneous philosophies as they were for their homogenous origins. One of their strengths was that they were not overly concerned with practicing or developing one uniform brand of socialism; they were content to let their members individually maintain whatever beliefs and values the members were comfortable with.

⁷⁵The Fabian’s willingness to express ideas piecemeal and their broadness of definition makes it difficult to formulate a solid theory of Fabian Socialism. However, sets of characteristics are identifiable. Margaret Cole explains that Fabian thought is “eclectic, following no single leader, but taking ideas from several and adapting or developing them on its own lines” (27). This practice is similar to and in keeping with their process of disseminating information. In quoting the *Fabian Essays*, Cole also suggests that Fabian thought “was democratic, that it believed that alongside and equally important with the economic influences, ‘the main stream which has borne European society towards Socialism during the past hundred years is the *irresistible* progress of Democracy” (Cole 28). The Fabians believed, in other words, that the evolution of Democracy would necessarily lead to a socialist society. McBriar points out that, though the *Fabian Essays*

were authored by different individuals and occasionally promoted non-uniform viewpoints, “an evolutionist outlook was common to all the essays, whether they dealt with economic theory, history, industry, ideas of property, politics, or even morality” (61). The job of the Fabians, then, was to assist evolution by seeding specific socialist ideas into any groups that were deemed ready to receive those ideas. Under this program, the piecemeal existence of socialist teachings became an advantage because groups and individuals have the option of accepting only those teachings that can be accommodated by their already established belief systems, thus allowing for a gradual transition to a universal though not immediately uniform socialist society.

⁷⁶ The Fabians were gradualists, believing that nonviolent changes could lead to the establishment of socialism as an economic, political, philosophical, and social system. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that they believed, despite their celebration of gradualism, that this socialist world-view could be created in their life-time. Cole attributes this to the suggestion that “they were both optimists and enthusiasts. They believed that the march of events was going their way, and they were as convinced [. . .] that it only needed patient explanation of facts to persuade other of the truths of socialism and the desirability of socialistic reforms” (32). She goes on to posit that “it is probable, also, that they were to some small extent deluded by the immediate success of their own propaganda, in *Fabian Essays* particularly, and thought that they were in a position to influence the social development of their country more rapidly than was in fact the case” (45). Presenting the Fabians as far less naïve than Cole does, M. Beer and McBriar point to the Fabians faith in democracy as the more likely cause for their anticipation of a socialist nation. Given their belief that the machinery of socialism was already in place

in Victorian Britain and their belief that democracy would lead seamlessly and naturally to socialism, it seems logical for the Fabians to see at least a partial transition to a socialist society as something that would indeed happen in the immediate future. There were, however, two key impediments that needed to be addressed in order to usher in the move from democracy to socialism. First, true democracy needed to be achieved. Thus, most Fabians, excluding Nesbit and Hubert Bland, approved of universal suffrage. McBriar explains that “the Fabians expected the enfranchisement of the working-class to force, democratically and gradually, the adoption of collectivist and socialist measures” (72). And second, capitalism, with its accompanying labor inequalities, needed to be eradicated. To accomplish their second goal, the Fabians promoted compulsory, universal education and heavy taxation. Accordingly, taxation would ensure that education could be made free through the pre-university level and that scholarships could exist for those capable of attaining university education. Progressive taxes on all unearned incomes, including death taxes and land taxes, would help eliminate economic and social stratification.

⁷⁷ Today it is commonly acknowledged that the practice of cloaking political poem in nonpolitical garb was also widely used by eighteenth and nineteenth century female poets who wanted to address political issues to an audience that generally preferred to keep their women and their politics separate.

⁷⁸ The group that explicitly identified themselves as “Christian Socialists” originally organized between 1847 and 1854, basing their program on the ideology of Frederick Denison Maurice, Charles Kingsley, and J. M. Ludlow. Existing in tandem with Chartism, the goal of the original Christian Socialist movement was to replace a laissez

faire economy, which favored the interests of the individual, with a social and economic plan that emphasized group solidarity and mutual aid and that was shaped according to God's teachings, as derived from the Bible. Though the first incarnation of the Christian Socialists originally disbanded in 1854, they reformed and returned to the political arena in the 1880s and 1890s, and with their non- or sometimes antichristian cousins, Christian Socialists sought religious justification for social and moral change, which would ideally conform to God's standards.

⁷⁹ Though he was writing much earlier than Nesbit or the Christian Socialists, William Blake, for similar reasons, also identified humans as divine. By so doing, Blake added weight to his argument that the Anglican church and the English government were ethically and morally wrong.

⁸⁰ I use "men" here after Nesbit's specific address to the male sex. Given Nesbit's belief that government was best served by men, it makes sense that she would specifically direct her address towards brotherhood. If her goal here is to truly seek change, she must draw in those whom she believes hold the power to effect change. Moreover, the tropes of fraternity and brotherhood dominated British socialist rhetoric from the Victorian Era. Interestingly, the poem evokes the idea of brotherhood directly in its address and indirectly in its employment of a plural narrative voice, though the voice is not specifically male gendered.

⁸¹ I use "gentlemen" here in keeping with Nesbit's dialogue of brotherhood.

⁸² Lines 20–24 make up the refrain of the poem, which recurs after each of the four verses. Of the four occurrences, this is the only one that ends in a question mark, presumably because it finishes the question that begins at line 17.

⁸³ See, for example, Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*.

⁸⁴ Peter Alekseyevich Kropotkin and Sergius Mikhailovich Kravichinsky, who was known in England as Stepniak, were Russian Revolutionaries and theorists of anarchy who resided in England during their exile from Russia.

⁸⁵ April Carter located the origins of Anarchy in the French Revolution. She explains that "Anarchism like most other contemporary political ideals and doctrines began to emerge as a relatively coherent theory at about the time of the French Revolution. William Godwin's *Political Justice*, which is usually treated as the first theoretical exposition of anarchism, was popularly regarded as a reply to Burke's denunciation of the Revolution" (1).

⁸⁶ Nesbit's engagement with Utilitarianism is in keeping with her Fabian roots. McBriar explains that "in its first stages, Fabian thinking derived from the Ricardian-Benthamite school, in the state to which it had developed immediately after the death of John Stuart Mill. When the Fabians came to it, that school had been not greatly disturbed by the criticism of Marx, and no more than jolted by the astonishing irruption of Henry George" (29). Adam B. Ulam also suggests that "the minds of the young people who wrote the *Fabian Essays* were not only registering the impact of social and economic changes that England was undergoing before their eyes. The ideas of John Stuart Mill, of Thomas Hill Green, of Henry George were a potent influence, much better known and real to them than the thought of two obscure German thinkers who within the lifetime of the authors of the essays and in England were constructing a complex system of economic and political theories" (73).

⁸⁷ Mills explains that “in the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality” (*Utilitarianism* 148).

Schlossberg explains that “for the utilitarians, as the name implied, the moral justification of an action depended on its usefulness, which in turn was dependent on the happiness it would provide. And that depended on the degree of pleasure or pain that would result from it. Since the world was self-evidently full of unhappiness, there was abundant scope for improvement; hence the utilitarians tended to be activists, engaged in such projects as prison reform, public health, and education” (188).

⁸⁸ The majority of the poems deal with love and the loss of love, and where violence exists, it is highly sentimental, self-inflicted, and fruitless. The two most prominent non-socialist examples of violence are “The Moat House” and “Absolution,” which address the corruption of the aristocracy and the destructive capability of institutionalized religion. “The Moat House” revolves around the love between an aristocratic man and Lady Ladybird, an orphan who was raised in a convent. Upon falling in love with the aristocrat, who returned her love, she manages to escape the convent, but she refuses his offer of marriage because of her fear that the priest would harm the couple. When he leaves her behind to visit a dying uncle, the aristocrat falls in love with and marries the virtuous and religious Lady May, who knows nothing about Lady Ladybird or her baby. Upon the couples return to the moat house, the now mad Lady Ladybird is trampled by their carriage when she steps in front of it to confront her faithless lover. Lady May refuses to see her husband after the incident, though she decides to raise the child he had with Lady Ladybird. Playing on the Anglican fear of confession, “Absolution” involves

an unnamed woman who during confession admits that she loves the priest to whom she is confessing. Upon the confession, the priest struggles with his faith and ultimately rescinds his devotion to God, only to find that in the interim, the woman had committed suicide.

Though the poems do not intersect with Nesbit's discussion of socialism, both demonstrate the destructive power of traditional Christian belief. Lady Ladybird was rejected not because of her class standing but because of her insistence of refusing marriage and of "living in sin." Similarly, the parishioner drowned after confessing her sinful love for the priest. In both cases, though the women died through suicide, they are pronounced innocent and assumed to have entered heaven. The male objects of love, however, assume that they have been consigned to hell, and though miserable, both men refuse to commit suicide because of their fear of the afterlife. As Barbara T. Gated explains, the Victorians viewed the killing of one's self as a sin, so Nesbit's sanctification of her suicides is telling in terms of her view on church teaching. Nesbit paints self-murder as a better alternative than living in sin.

⁸⁹ Erasing God from religion was a common tactic in nineteenth-century attempts to modernize Christianity. By far, the most popular work to demonstrate this is Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*.

⁹⁰ Jonathan Mendilow discusses the origins of the discussions of liberty explains that "the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries thus became an arena where many of the doctrines of authority and of liberty which form the staple of much modern political thought battled for supremacy" (169). Amongst the doctrinarians of liberty were Godwin, a young William Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley.

⁹¹ Nesbit uses Liberty and Freedom interchangeably; the words are capitalized when used as proper nouns that are synonymous with God.

⁹² In most poetry, Liberty either is not gendered or is personified as being female, although a notable exception is Oscar Wilde's "Sonnet to Liberty," where Liberty is the speaker's brother. In *Lays and Legends*, Liberty is not given a gender identity, though Freedom is assigned the feminine pronoun.

⁹³ In *Lays and Legends*, Nesbit apparently misquoted *The Song of Solomon* and later caught her mistake. *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908* lists 1900 as the revision date for the poem. Because my primary text is *Lays and Legends*, I retain the original title of the poem.

⁹⁴ Though I cast Nesbit's children poems in terms of parental responsibility, the poems are extensions of anti-egotistic writing of Blake, Shelley, and Carlyle, among others. Generally speaking, all four poets set up a dichotomy between love for others and love for self, where self-love or selfishness lead to evil, tyranny, and injustice. Melanie Bandy explains that "both Shelley (in works after Queen Mab) and Blake find within the self, not in institutions, the origin of the evil god, priest, and king. In language that is strikingly similar, they assert that all aspects of tyranny are reflection of man's selfishness or selfhood, a shade cast by and through his own mind. In this process of thought, man's mind becomes turned in upon itself, thought is divorced from feeling, affection, or love, and that limited self image is then projected upon all outer things" (99). Though she focuses only Blake and Shelley, her discussion is equally applicable to Carlyle. In his discussion of Shelley and Carlyle, Mendilow explains that "both thinkers conceived man as the arena in which two opposing qualities wrestle for supremacy. The

same struggle creates the dynamic of social history as in the essence of historical evolution. Like Carlyle's Devil and God coexisting in his archetypal Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, Love and Egotism—the liberating going out of the self and the tyrannical restrictions of self-centeredness—strive for mastery in Shelley's conception of man" (173). Nesbit retains the need to reject selfishness in favor of love in her children's poems and in her other socialist poems through her discussion of parental responsibility and Christian ethics, respectively, and she uses love of others as a basis for fighting for liberty.

⁹⁵ As noted above, Nesbit was "mother" to her three biological children and to Hoatson's two biological children. So that she could stay on in the house, Hoatson was "aunt" to all of the children. Briggs explains that the situation came about because "When Edith discovered her friend's plight, she felt deeply sorry for her, imagining her miseries only too vividly, for six years earlier she too had found herself in just such a position. [. . .] The answer seemed obvious enough to Edith, who enjoyed dramas and taking charge of awkward situations. She had often enough asked Alice to go and live with her, to become her companion and housekeeper. The solution presented itself with a compelling logic: if Edith adopted the baby, Alice could avoid disgrace and effectively keep the baby too. After her own bitter loss earlier that year [1886] she could not bear the idea of separating mother from child" (113). Nesbit lost two of her children, with one dying as an infant and the other in his early teens, after "The Dead to the Living" had been written and published.

⁹⁶ Indeed, quite a number of the poems in *Ballads and Lyrics of Socialism: 1883–1908* make use of children as motivators for change. In addition to "The Dead to the Living,"

see, for example, “To a Child Reading,” “Two Lullabies,” “These Little Ones,” “The Children,” or “A Word for the Future”

⁹⁷ “Dead to the Living” is a dialogue between a living parent and the dead people who are buried near the parent’s dead child.

⁹⁸ Though Leighton reads the speaker as female because of Nesbit’s own experience with loosing a child, in keeping with the absence of a textual reference, I retain the narrator’s lack of a gendered identity and rely on the he/she construction.

⁹⁹ See for example George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* or Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*.

¹⁰⁰ I read line sixteen’s reference of “my baby-queen” literally.

¹⁰¹ *cf.* Algernon Charles Swinburne “After Death.”

¹⁰² *cf.* Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

¹⁰³ Varying beliefs in the afterlife largely contributed to that fragmentation of Christianity into its denominations. According to Doreen Rosman many denominations splintered off the Anglican Church because of differing beliefs in predestination and because of the nature of hell. She explains that “although class divisions played an important part in the religious conflicts of the nineteenth century, there is danger in giving them too much emphasis. In the eyes of many Nonconformists the really important gulf in society was not one of class but that between the ‘saved’ and the ‘unsaved’” (195), and she goes on to say that “in the second half of Victoria’s reign what happened after death became a topic of debate in both the secular and the religious press” (270).

¹⁰⁴ Nesbit taps into a contemporary dialogue of work as it is presented in the texts of Carlyle, John Ruskin, and William Morris. Rob Breton suggests that “For Ruskin (as well as for Marx and Carlyle) Work and selfhood are directly linked: Work begins a

process of endless self-conversion, of reworked subjectivity. Not only does each and every worker produce and express difference, but the individual worker avoids personal homogeneity, stagnation, over time.” However, as Breton goes on to explain, industrial working conditions in England stifled expressions of individuality. He posits that “modern industrial work, producing sameness, destroys the opportunity for self-development and autonomy, control and skill. As with Carlyle, Ruskin believed that industrialism also makes the world ugly, which they both equate to banishing Truth or God. Good art or good objects of work express pleasure or freedom in the work process, and a universal sublime.” John Ulrich suggests that “by representing labor as ‘sacred,’ Carlyle underwrites its transcendent status, a status mirrored in a particular code of labor relations, the Chivalry of Work, that Carlyle offers as an ideological justification for a recentering of the workplace around the all-penetrating gaze of the Captains of Industry.” According to Ulrich, recentering labor is a twofold process: “The process of this symbolic re-inscription proceeds on two levels: first, as we have remarked above, Carlyle will emphasize the divine (and therefore transcendent) character of Labor as the stabilizing force of a meaningful system of representation; and second, in terms of social organization, Carlyle will advocate as the foundation of human interaction (and especially the conditions and relations of productive activity) a model of beneficent governance that conforms to a code he will term the ‘Chivalry of Work’ (270).” He goes on to explain that “For Carlyle, the ‘true’ practice of labor (and hence its ‘divine’ character) is founded on a sacrificial economy of energy, as an expenditure or ‘giving’ of one’s life energy as an end-in-itself, rather than as a commodity to be exchanged for wages, or as an investment whose motive is a greater return.”

However, Breton identifies a shortcoming in Carlyle's presentation of the Gospel of Work. According to Breton "Carlyle, [. . .] withdraws into Work, isolating the Gospel [of Work] from economics, factory life, exploitation, alienation, and the realm of necessity. A factory worker, of course, cannot withdraw into Work, wrest a healthy sense of identity from his place on the assembly line, or suspend the economic context. Carlyle overlooks class when class is most relevant." He goes on to suggest that "Carlyle and even Ruskin treat Work as a refuge, eliding at those points the reformism, the recognition of art's material base and the acknowledgement of class struggle, or the understanding of the government's role in initiating piecemeal but necessary change which appears elsewhere in their writings. As a result, the Gospel of Work, a utopian order of Work, is preached in the context of economic deprivation and industrial deskilling." Breton suggests that Morris made an explicit attempt to correct this oversight. Breton comments that "by making his utopia explicit, he emphasized that the Gospel of Work cannot manifest itself in the context of capitalism. Morris knew that perfect Work could only take place in the realm of freedom, in a post-economic society, and when everything else was right. He uses utopia in a remarkable way: to reign in, to circumscribe, or to preclude idealism." Breton goes on to argue that "unlike Ruskin, Morris understood that intrinsically valuable work must involve more than just the craftsmanship of a 'free' worker. The worker, simply put, in order to take pleasure in the work and thus make a work of art, also has to decide for himself or herself what it is that he or she is going to make and then have equal social and intellectual access to it."

¹⁰⁵ In addition to her critical biography *Graham R.: Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters*, Linda K. Hughes has written four articles on Tomson that merit mention. In

her 1996 essay “‘Fair Hymen holdeth hid a world of woes’: Myth and Marriage in Poems by ‘Graham R. Tomson’ (Rosamund Marriott Watson)” Hughes discusses Tomson’s depiction of marriage in her folk ballads, particularly “Ballad of the Bird-Bride” and “Ballad of the Were-Wolf.” Hughes suggests that “Graham R. Tomson’s most evocative ballads are set in a fey, otherworldly realm of fairy lore or myth. The displacement of action to an apparently nonreferential plane not only tapped her most powerful imaginative gifts—the articulation of liminal states poised between the familiar and alien—but also freed many of the emotional restraints she customarily imposed on her poetry. The result is an often arresting exploration of such issues as scandalous sexual involvement [. . .], women’s power for revenge [. . .], and, in ‘Ballad of the Bird-Bride’ and ‘Ballad of the Were-Wolf’, troubled marriage” (165). Hughes concludes that “marriage in these poems is not so much a site of fulfillment or sorrow, as a scene of contending wills, Sundered homes, violence and flight” (170). In both poems, the female spouses exhibit animalistic qualities of a bird and a wolf, respectively, and these animal natures conflict with the marital rights accorded Victorian husbands.

In her 1999 “Feminizing Decadence: Poems by Graham R. Tomson,” Hughes explores Tomson’s place in fin-de-siècle Decadence and Aesthetic movements. Specifically, she suggests that “Tomson initiated a dialogue with French decadence, appropriating the tropes of flaneur and vampire while interrogating the impetus toward autonomy lauded by many decadents and later exponents of high modernism” and that “Tomson’s decadent poems thus emerge as a complex web of female appropriation, resistance, critique, and complicity, a configuration that (as [Rita] Felski might suggest) more nearly approximates women’s relation to decadence than does a strict gender

divide” (120). As per Hughes, Tomson’s tendency to explore masculine pursuits, including formalistic and formulaic poetry that was topically based on city living and her extra marital affairs fitted her to standard definitions of Decadence and Aesthetics, despite her gender.

Hughes’s 2004 essay “A Woman Poet Angling for Notice: Rosamund Marriott Watson” focuses on the ways in which Tomson managed her public personas. Hughes suggests that Tomson’s “case history illuminates three specific conditions under which competition for prestige, publicity and hence agency with publishers might be carried out: the situation of the author who attains *success d’estime* but whose sales are modest; the dangers of physical beauty for a woman seeking critical success as a poet; and the strategies available to a woman writer whose breach of permissible behavior diminished her symbolic capital” (135). Hughes concludes that “in many respects the story of Rosamund Marriott Watson’s attempts to control public perception of her while ‘angling for notice’ is one of disaster and failure. By surrendering her ‘brand name’ as a poet after her 1894 elopement she very nearly disappeared altogether. Her career as both Graham R. Tomson and Rosamund Marriott Watson, however, illuminated many of the challenges peculiar to women poets in an era of gossip, celebrity and photography. And her authorial history also reveals the surprising number of resources at her disposal when her career was most vulnerable and tenuous—and her active disposition to use them” (151).

Hughes’s 2005 “A Woman on the Wilde Side: Masks, Perversity, and Print Culture’s Role in Poems by ‘Graham R. Tomson’/Rosamund Marriott Watson” explores what Hughes identifies as the fragmentariness of fin-de-siècle aesthetic poetry. Hughes

begins with the assertion that “one of the many paradoxes of fin-de-siècle poetry is its insistence that aesthetic unity derives from the experience of fragmentariness” (101) and argues that Tomson “rather than declaring allegiance to aestheticism or to Decadence in her poetry, [Tomson] promiscuously alternated between them—or embraced both at once. Her early villanelles, sonnets, and ballades were elegant executions of demanding verse forms that exemplified aestheticism’s commitment to art for art’s sake.” Hughes continues to say that “Decadence required that she take art for art’s sake a step further, plying highly polished poetic style and form off transgressive content, especially sexually suggestive or blasphemous expression. This Decadent strategy multiplied masks [. . .] and further destabilized poetic reference, since shocking content might signal social rebellion or merely literary performance” (102).

¹⁰⁶ Because I focus solely on *The Bird-Bride: A Volume of Ballads and Sonnets*, throughout this essay I use the name Graham R. Tomson, the name under which the volume was published.

¹⁰⁷ In *Graham R.: Rosamund Marriott Watson, Woman of Letters*, Hughes suggests that Tomson and her younger daughter, Daphne, reconnected at some point since Daphne attended her mother’s funeral. The elder daughter, Eulalie, did not attend her mother’s funeral, which, according to Hughes “suggests alienation from her mother and anger at Rosamund’s abandoning the tenuous family connection she still had” after the separation and before the divorce (33).

¹⁰⁸ Among others, Tomson developed friendships with Thomas Hardy, Amy Levy, Alice Meynell, Mathilde Blind, Katharine Tynan, Vernon Lee, E. Nesbit, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, Violet Hunt, J. M. Barrie, and H. G. Wells, though some of these

relationships were strained through her elopement with H. B. Marriott Watson.

¹⁰⁹ Taking an extreme view of Tomson's marital life, Hughes also posits that "had she and Marriott been content to carry on an affair that everyone knew about but chose to ignore, everything would have been so much easier. Violet Hunt [a member of the same circle of friends] enjoyed public favor and entertained the eminent well into the next century despite her series of lovers [some of whom were married to other women]. But Hunt never broke up a marriage—or made herself ridiculous through one too many elopements, as if it were an unfortunate habit she could not break" (*Graham R.* 219).

¹¹⁰ The Victorians uncovered scientific proof that the world was much older than previously thought, and this helped fuel their belief that the world would soon come to an end. Exhibiting what appears to be turn of the century custom, many late Victorian's supposed that the end of the century would permanently alter life as they knew it, as did many Romantics and many writers at the end of the twentieth century.

¹¹¹ Fin-de-siècle poets were not the first to realize that scandal sold. Some of the more popular nineteenth-century writers who thrived (for a time) on negative publicity were Mary Robinson, Lord Byron, L.E.L., and Dante Gabriel Rossetti; however, before the end of their career's, both women writers had to take measures to repair their public personas because their affairs became too shocking for public sensibilities.

¹¹² *L'art pour l'art* is another common theme that is frequently a source of misrepresentation. Hennegan suggests that under the banner of *l'art pour l'art* "poets and prose writers alike questioned a whole host of time-honoured assumptions: about 'suitable' and 'unsuitable' subjects for art; about the nature of morality and immorality; about the nature of gender and human sexual response; about the characteristics of 'good'

and ‘bad’ art and the connections, or not, between the morality of art and the morality of the artist who creates it” (172). Rather than divorcing morality from art, the call of *l’art pour l’art* instead relocated the source of morality and attempted to “free art and artists from the burden of a naïvely didactic moral teaching” (Hennegan 172). Expanding on this idea, Snodgrass asserts that “two elements of the art-for art’s-sake creed appealed powerfully to British ‘Decadent’ poets: its commitment to stylistically impeccable technique and execution; and its insistence that art not be a mere tool of, and smothered by, ruling-class morality [. . .]. However, what the British ‘Decadents’ did *not* embrace about ‘art for art’s sake’ was the suggestion that aesthetic integrity necessitated denying (or ignoring) art’s moral function” (324). Indeed, Swinburne, one of the earliest proponents of *l’art pour l’art* argued that while poetry must avoid didacticism it must not avoid issues of morality. Anthony H. Harrison explains that “Swinburne began to propound his doctrine of art for art’s sake in [an 1866] *Spectator* review of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal*. As Harrison notes, in the review Swinburne comments that “a poet’s business is [. . .] presumably to write good verses, and by no means redeem the age and remould society.” However, Harrison comments that “Swinburne is nonetheless careful in this essay, just as he is in his later aesthetic criticism, to make clear that a poem shaped predominantly by aesthetic concerns may still have important implications for moral values and ethical behavior.”

¹¹³ Both Thomas Hobbes in the seventeenth century and David Hume in the eighteenth century questioned the existence of God.

¹¹⁴ *cf* Hardy’s “God’s Funeral” and Algernon Charles Swinburne’s “Hymn to Proserpine.”

¹¹⁵ Though Tomson relies on images of a masculine Christ, by the 1880s it was common for writers to evoke a feminine Christ. Sue Zemka comments that “throughout England and much of Europe, the life of Christ was one of the battlefields on which the pious contended with skeptics over the role that religion should play in modern society. But changing images of Christ also reflected another, ancillary battle over the perceived generational and gendered nature of religious authority” (101). She goes on to say that “the source of ambivalence toward representing Christ as a man lay in a psychological effect of Christianity itself: human subjectivity of the nineteenth century was often predicated on guilt, and according to the plot of sentimental fantasy, guilt was a male prerogative, a dubious entitlement linked to sexual and monetary appetites that neither children nor women in their ideal forms shared. Hence [. . .] the artist’s habitual withdrawal from the image of Christ as an adult male, an image which suggested a disturbing convergence of guilt and divinity, of dependency and power” (104).

Julie Meknyk extends the idea of a feminized Christ by suggesting that it was so common for Christ to be feminized that that muscular Christianity developed in order to combat the feminization of religious values. She explains that muscular Christianity “tried to reconcile Christian and heroic values in a new definition of masculinity. Victorian Christianity tended to identify Christian values with virtues traditionally defined as feminine: meekness, patience, compassion, and self-sacrifice. In particular, the figure of Christ, the model for all Christians, was significantly feminized in Victorian devotional poetry and hymns” (31).

In yet another study, Sue Morgan provides some examples of feminized images of Christ; she suggests that “probably the most celebrated example of an early nineteenth-

century self-appointed female messiah was Joanna Southcott (1750–1814). Later in the century, heterodox philosophical systems such as that proffered by the theosophist Frances Swiney also argued for the divine status of the female intermediary. Within the mainstream Christian tradition, Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* (1861) and the devotional poetry of Christina Rossetti, compared the spiritual superiority of women with the figure of Christ" (14).

¹¹⁶ *Proverbs* 6.30–31: "Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry; / But if he be found, he shall restore sevenfold; he shall give all the substance of his house."

¹¹⁷ Though crucifixion for thievery is excessive punishment by modern standards, Christ was crucified next to two thieves.

¹¹⁸ *cf.* Wilde's "Sonnet on the Massacre of the Christians in Bulgaria."

¹¹⁹ Tomson thrived on a Victorian middle-class lifestyle. In her biography of Tomson, Hughes repeatedly notes Tomson's love for art, furniture collecting, interior décor, garden design, and fashion. Tomson was able to profit from these passions in her magazine writing and editing.

¹²⁰ *cf.* Swinburne's "Ilicet" and "The Garden of Proserpine."

¹²¹ The Victorians had a turbulent relationship with science, where many welcomed the novelty and innovation that it orchestrated while others feared the implications of scientific development. James Paradis and Thomas Postlewait suggest that "the Victorians were witnesses to a remarkable social revolution. Never before had science so publicly altered the ways in which individuals viewed their common world. Never before had centers of culture and education been confronted with such a vast new body of

knowledge. Not only did scientific interests promote a variety of new educational institutions, academic faculties, and professional societies, but science also found public expression in the popular lecture series of scientists like Michael Faraday, William Carpenter, John Tyndall, Thomas Huxley, and many others” (x). Because science was part of the public realm, rather than existing in the confines of universities and specialist professions, most all educated Victorians would have some level of scientific awareness. Because of its pervasiveness and the nature of its teachings, science and Christianity were not always compatible. Butler suggests that “it could be said that the churches were vulnerable to the advances of science at any time from 1830 onwards. There was enough material in Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* of 1831–3 to justify considerable alarm, but the alarm was only felt after Buckle, Darwin and Colenso had done (or rather, published) their work in the late 1850s and early 1860s. The problem seems only to have been felt after this later spate of the popularizing of science” (6). While science and Christianity were always somewhat antithetical, tension between science and Christianity grew because of the former’s tendency to disprove and rewrite what was formerly seen as biblical truth. Particularly, the account of creation as presented in *Genesis* was challenged, as geologists discovered that the world was older than previously suspected and as the works of Charles Darwin and William Wallace propped the idea that species developed as a result of evolution rather than divine intervention.

Though science gained momentum during the mid-nineteenth century, scientific progress continued as a frenetic pace through the latter half of the century. As Butler suggests, “in science there was an impressive surge of publications in the 1870s.” With respect to evolution, Butler points out that “Darwin, besides the *Descent of Man*,

published his essays on *Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* in 1868 and the *Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals* in 1872. His coincidental fellow-discoverer of evolution, William Wallace, produced *Natural Selection* in 1870, *The Geographical Distribution of Animals* in 1876, and *Tropical Nature* in 1878.”

Additionally, Butler notes that “Tyndall’s *Lectures on Sound* of 1867 and his *Lectures on Light* of 1873, in spite of their technicality, had a readership that seems surprising today. [. . .] Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Psychology* appeared between 1870 and 1872, W. S. Jevons’s *Principles of Science* in 1874 and Maxwell’s *Treatise on Electricity and Magnetism* in 1873” (88).

¹²² *cf.* Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* and E. Nesbit’s “Children’s Playgrounds in the City.” Tomson’s use of work here parallels work as it appears in the *Bible*. Like Carlyle and Nesbit, Tomson builds off of the biblical directive in *John* 9.1 “I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh, when no man can work.” For Carlyle, work takes on a spiritual function where the act of working is seen as divine action. Carlyle avoids charges of materialism by emphasizing the importance of the activity of work over the production that results from work. Yet unlike Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris, all of whom similarly conceptualize work, Tomson attributes no divine purpose to work nor does she posit it necessary for the communal good of humanity.

¹²³ *Cf.* Tennyson’s “The Two Voices.”

¹²⁴ *cf.* Tennyson’s “Despair.”

¹²⁵ *cf.* Wilde’s “Santa Decca.”

¹²⁶ Though Tomson emphasizes the futility of fighting for change, she does not submit to Christian Quietism. Quietism advocated complete passivity in the faith that God’s will

controls all human experience and that, as such, we should accept whatever happens to us in order to avoid disobeying God. Because they believe that God governs all human circumstances, Quietists believe that it is futile (and sinful) to try to change any aspect of human existence, even those that most people would consider social ills. While Tomson agrees with the Quietest belief that human desire is futile, she does not place humanity in opposition to God's design. Rather, she suggests an a priori power that prevents change without considering the best interest of humanity, as a Christian God would. The futility that Tomson expresses is in keeping with that present in poetry by Wilde and James Thomson.

¹²⁷ *cf.* Alfred, Lord Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and Christina Rossetti's "Echo" and "Advent."

¹²⁸ Swinburne deviates from this view in that he shows the past as a time where individuals mistakenly adhered to Christianity. Anthony H. Harrison explains that "if Swinburne 'idealizes' the period in any way, he does so by consistently depicting it as a golden age—like the Hellenic age—of tragic heroism and tragic love; these appear in a society realistically characterized as disharmonious and corrupt, populated with men and women who are fickle in their emotional attachments, capricious in their loyalties, and misguided in their adherence to Christianity."

¹²⁹ *cf.* Wilde's "The Sphinx."

¹³⁰ In 1851, England conducted a Census of Religious Worship that was designed to measure the number of people who were attending Anglican churches and to ensure that there was enough room in the buildings to accommodate all worshipers. Though it was the only religious census taken in Victorian England and there were no previous points of

data comparison, many Victorians took the census as a sign that church attendance was on the decline. Doreen Rosman explains that the census “was based on the assumption that everyone ought to go to church at least once every Sunday unless prevented by age, illness, or unavoidable labour. This assumption conditioned the way in which contemporaries responded to the published figures. Politicians and church leaders were appalled to discover that many people chose not to attend church at all. Their reiterated laments at the level of absenteeism helped to fuel the idea, subsequently adopted by historians and sociologists, that churchgoing was in decline” (207). John Wolffe agrees that the census was a bit misinterpreted. He explains that the census “it is one thing to acknowledge that the count of bodies on a particular wet English spring day implies that the core of committed Anglican worshippers was less than a quarter of the population, but quite another to use this statistic as a general index to the fortunes of the Church of England in the Victorian period.” He also comments that “it should be noted that 1851 was probably rather early to measure the impact of the remarkable upsurge in energy in the Church of England associated with spiritual revival and reforming zeal” (21).

¹³¹ *cf.* Tennyson’s “Locksley Hall.”

¹³² Bristow identifies the speaker of lines 19–25 as the Sphinx; however, lines 16–18 suggest that the speakers, plural, are all those who bear the Smile of All-Wisdom, which would include both the Sphinx and also all those that are dead: “Aye, on the stone lips of old, on the clay of to-day, / [. . .] / Lingers the Smile of All-Wisdom, still seeming to say.” Still, Bristow’s discussion of the gender implication of the poem merit note.

Bristow suggests of the poem that “it should be clear that this ingenious poem celebrates the enduring power of deathly femininity” (“Armytage-Tomson-Watson”). He continues

to say that “In ‘The Smile of All-Wisdom’ Tomson suggests that the Sphinx’s presence [. . .] retains a self-presencing power that stems not only from her supernatural qualities but also the fact that she belongs, in part, to another species” (“Armytage-Tomson-Watson).

¹³³ *cf* Matthew Arnold’s “Resignation.”

¹³⁴ “The Quick and the Dead” is a Biblical reference to 2 Timothy 4:1 and 1 Peter 4:5 and is echoed in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. All references refer to Jesus sitting in judgment over the living (i.e. the “quick”) and the dead.

¹³⁵ *cf* William Blake’s *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

¹³⁶ *cf* Tennyson’s “The Lotos-Eaters.”

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