

## ABSTRACT

### Poets in the Pulpit: Nineteenth-Century Clerical Critics on Tennyson and the Brownings

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In the nineteenth century, great poets were widely understood as spiritual teachers as well as literary innovators. Religious terms like “prophet,” “priest,” and “preacher” were applied to the poet by critics, even as actual priests and preachers who interpreted biblical prophecy from the pulpit contributed significantly to literary criticism. Alfred Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Robert Browning were recognized as religiously authoritative by such clerics. The first chapter of this reception study considers how Anglican priests, through lectures and sermons, communicated Tennyson’s role as a national prophet. His poetry served as parallel scripture in their homilies, encouraging readers toward a better life in communion with one another, with the church, and with the nation. The second chapter continues to look at clerical lectures and sermons, considering how Nonconformists’ readings focused on Tennyson as a model for faith in the face of scientific rationalism. These clerics considered the poet’s intuitive faith an extension of his poetic vision. While clerical critics of Barrett Browning were surprisingly willing to attend to her spiritual instruction and attribute a prophetic power to her verse, they did so in conversation with

her role as a female poet. The third chapter explores Anglican and Nonconformist clerical journalism that complicates poetess fictions and recognizes Barrett Browning's spiritual authority wherever her work lies in agreement with the reading minister. The fourth chapter addresses the strange phenomenon of the uniquely religious Browning Societies. These Societies were immensely popular in their day, with almost a thousand groups stretching from the United Kingdom to the United States. They understood Browning to be a religious mediator whose poetry articulated obscure but necessary spiritual truth. The poet's work acts all the more literally as parallel scripture, functionally ordaining lay critics—including women—who offered homiletic interpretations of his poetry in the Society's quasi-ecclesiastic space. From the nineteenth into the twentieth century, clerical critics have looked to these poets to provide spiritual wisdom, guidance, and revelation. This study explores the correspondences and distinctions in their religiously pedagogical interpretations of the poets and their poetry.

Poets in the Pulpit: Nineteenth-Century Clerical Critics on Tennyson and the Brownings

by

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For Roger Lundin, who brought me here



## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### *Nineteenth-Century Clerical Criticism*

The poet held a unique role in nineteenth-century British culture. A swift rise in education, literacy, and affordable publication made the works of poets accessible to a growing number of readers. Advanced print technology, copyright law reform, improved postal services, and quick distribution by rail made periodicals and printed collections widely and readily available. Railcars, reading rooms, lending libraries, and coffeehouses were increasingly common reading spaces for an increasingly reading public (King 9; Altick 88-89, 301-304). In new ways, the written word—and poetry in particular—became a shared cultural experience. Nineteenth-century poets spoke to the current moment and shaped the nation's sense of its own history and identity. Likewise, poetic criticism also rose in significance, mediating and interpreting the work of these poets for readers eager to participate in culture. This criticism developed into a genre all its own, taken up in periodicals, lectures, and even sermons.

Religious clerics, from their position of authority in nineteenth-century daily life, interpreted the work of popular poets for readers in their congregations and communities through these very mediums. They did so across denominations without losing sight of their primary role as religious teachers. Their ministerial commitments thus nuance their interpretations of poetry and poets, giving such interpretations a distinctly pedagogical shape. Granted, it was

common practice for readers to encounter poetry with an ear for moral or spiritual instruction. Such a posture is not uncommon even today among religious readers. But in the nineteenth century, it might be considered normative. When the spiritualizing reader of popular poetry happens to be a man of the cloth,<sup>1</sup> this tendency toward pedagogical reading takes on a certain urgency. The cleric's vocation obliges him to consider the development of spiritual virtue in the act of reading, to interpret poetry specifically to that end, and to instruct his congregation in such efficacious interpretation.

This study considers clerical interpreters of Tennyson and the Brownings who responded to such pedagogical obligations by engaging with the poet as a religious figure—namely, as priest, preacher, or prophet. Their engagement often differs depending on their denominational perspectives. For example, Anglican clerics may refer to the poet as *priest*, while Nonconformists rarely do. They may, however, treat the poet as a fellow *preacher*. In either case, these clerics identify in the poet elements of their own clerical or ministerial vocation. What they mean by *prophet* depends on the context and is often conflated with the poet's clerical identity as well. These distinctions grow increasingly complicated as the religious context of the interpretation becomes less explicitly ecclesiastical.

The first two chapters of this study explore clerical sermons and lectures on Alfred, Lord Tennyson. These homiletic presentations were delivered during Sunday morning and evening gatherings, literary society gatherings, and working men's lectures. They thus range in explicit ecclesiastic context from the

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1. While the fourth chapter of this study introduces the complexities Elizabeth Barrett Browning's gender brings to clerical interpretations of the poet, and the fifth chapter looks at women who took on clerical roles within Browning Societies, all of the officially ordained clerical figures in this study are, unsurprisingly, men.

church pulpit to the public hall. The following chapter considers clerically authored articles on Elizabeth Barrett Browning. While readers may not have known the authors' clerical roles, as many of the articles are unsigned, the periodicals' particular theological commitments often made a religiously nuanced reading all but inevitable. The final chapter explores clerical practice and presence in Browning Societies, discussion groups devoted to Robert Browning's work across the United Kingdom and North America. Here, the ecclesiastic context becomes more complex, as Society gatherings mirrored church liturgies, practices, and spaces. The rhetorical mediums of clerical engagement in each context—sermon, lecture, article, and Society paper—shape the clerics' poetic interpretations.

I have considered clerical responses to Tennyson and the Brownings in particular because these three poets all engaged thoughtfully and intentionally with questions of faith and the religious nature of poetry in their own work. Furthermore, they witnessed their work being used in conversation about poetry and faith in their lifetimes. Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, for example, provided a paradigm for many clerics to engage with questions of faith and doubt in their public ministry throughout the nineteenth century. Barrett Browning received both praise and censure for the authoritative poetic voice she used to address the spiritual significance of injustice in poems such as "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" and *Aurora Leigh*. The ecclesiastical shape of Browning Society gatherings was a direct response to readers widely recognizing Browning as a religious teacher. Though denominational and contextual differences influence interpretation of these poets, they also clearly reflect the shared conviction that all three write with religious instruction and prophetic power.

### *The Religious Ethos of the Preaching Poet*

Clerics found fertile soil for religious instruction and spiritual guidance in these poets' works in part because poetry, more than any other literary form, was considered religious by nature. A widely held view among nineteenth-century critics—religious and otherwise—was that poetry carried its own kind of spiritual authority. Charles LaPorte, in his study *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible*, outlines how poetry was considered a higher artform than prose. He cites Church of Scotland minister George Gilfillan's 1851 study of the Bible, in which the minister treats the whole of scripture as a work of poetry.<sup>2</sup> The conflation of scripture and poetry, by implication, attributes a prophetic role to the poet in any context. And this perspective was not limited to clergy like Gilfillan. LaPorte also identifies Alfred Austin, later Poet Laureate, making this exact argument in *The Poetry of the Period* (1868-1869). Austin describes Wordsworth in composition as "being visited by the living God" (48).<sup>3</sup> The poet did not write out of a process of his own thought, Austin suggests, but rather, "God was thinking for him, pouring divine thoughts through him; him who had—as all great poets, and great poets only, have—channels ready-made for the reception and transmission of such precious messages." This is a literal interpretation of Percy Bysshe Shelley's earlier claim in *A Defence of Poetry* (1840) that poets are "legislators or prophets" (677). It continues to be echoed through the century, even in Matthew Arnold's famous assertion that "the strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry" (xvii). Many of these fundamentally Romantic ideas about

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2. The fourth chapter will consider in more detail how Gilfillan's belief that "the Bible is a poem" influences his reading of Barrett Browning's verse (Gilfillan xx).

3. Austin's laureateship began in 1896.

the religious nature of poetry—and the poetic nature of religion—can be traced to Bishop Robert Lowth, a Church of England cleric whose eighteenth-century work on the poetry of the Hebrew prophets was popularized by Hugh Blair, a minister of the Church of Scotland. Thus, clerical critics who interpret the work of the poet as one of religious prophecy and clerical ministry follow in a tradition of thought likewise originated by clerics.<sup>4</sup> Such interpretation does not aim to find replacements for scriptural prophecy, then, but poetic partners with that scripture.

Nineteenth-century poets participated in such interpretations by making use of religious texts and symbols in their work with confidence that readers would recognize and understand them. Literacy in general was biblical literacy, after all, as Timothy Larsen notes in *A People of One Book*. “For much of the century,” he observes, “many children learned to read at Sunday schools or at schools sponsored by churches or non-denominational religious organizations” (2). In consequence, to read was to read religiously. Larsen also outlines the frequency with which nineteenth-century authors, even agnostic and atheistic writers such as T. H. Huxley and Shelley, make use of scripture in their writing or openly advocate for its importance in public literacy. Writers rightly assumed their readers’ familiarity with the Christian scriptures in their unannotated allusions to biblical texts and narratives. So much so, Larsen adds, that “a prerequisite for entering into a Victorian author’s imaginative world” was a common and thorough knowledge of the Bible (4). Widespread scriptural literacy

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4. The intellectual heritage of the clerical critic has been recognized by others. William McKelvy, for example, in *The English Cult of Literature* (2007), recognizes the leading role clerics played in the construction of the reading nation and its understanding of both reading and literature.

provided poets of the age with a vast body of readily available symbols and metaphors with which to make meaning. And the poets' use of these symbols and metaphors in turn enabled clerical interpreters to employ their poetry as texts for ethical and spiritual instruction. Such poets wrote religious work for religious readers.

This study complements and contributes to the ongoing conversation about religious readers and writers in the nineteenth century driven by scholars such as Kirstie Blair, Mark Knight, Emma Mason, Charles LaPorte, Karen Dieleman, and Joshua King. Like Larsen, Blair affirms in *Form and Faith* that canonical Victorian poets “produced their religious poetry as part of a context of popular religious poetics that would have been readily familiar to their readers—in large measure because of the sermons, articles and other religious texts shaping public discourse in their day” (5). These texts, she argues, contribute to a “shared vocabulary...that we have largely lost.” This is not simply the vocabulary of the Christian scriptures but of Christian discourse that influenced the work of poets even as it cyclically engaged with their work. In seeking to recover that vocabulary, scholars of nineteenth-century literature and religion, like Blair, reassert the predominantly religious character of nineteenth-century British culture.<sup>5</sup>

The body of literature contesting the traditional nineteenth-century secularization narrative is vast. As early as 1986, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge's *The Future of Religion* argued, contrary to the popular critical

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5. This conversation holds significance outside of the study of poetry as well. In *Good Words: Evangelicalism and the Victorian Novel* (2019), Mark Knight argues that a shared vocabulary for the theological dimensions of the *novel* needs to be recovered and developed.

consensus of the time, that religion survived even if in new and changing forms. In *Victorian Testaments* (1997), Sue Zemka traced evidence of that survival through a relocation of religious emphasis onto narratives of individual character or the virtue of the family. Callum G. Brown's *The Death of Christian Britain* (2001) finds the secularization narrative more convincing, but ultimately recentralizes it in the 1960s rather than the 1800s. In 2004, Alex Owen argued in *The Place of Enchantment* that the new forms of religion have often been more explicitly, even occultly spiritual. And Eugene McCarraher's *The Enchantments of Mammon* (2019) echoes this conviction, suggesting the new religious forms have survived in their relation to capitalist "enchantment"—either appropriating or reacting against the push for profit that defines nineteenth-century progress. The secularization narrative lost ground outside of academia as well. Tom Holland's bestseller, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (2020), reminds readers how much our supposedly secular western world continues to be shaped by the Christian religion. These scholars have effectively undermined previously prevailing narratives of secularization, such as Owen Chadwick's *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (1975) and David Martin's *A General History of Secularization* (1978). Though more recent theoretical works, such as Charles Taylor's influential *A Secular Age* (2007), prove that the conversation deserves ongoing attention and nuance.

This study takes for granted that religion was important to nineteenth-century readers, that religious leaders were considered authoritative within and occasionally beyond their denominational spheres, and that attention to clerical interpretations of poetry can enlighten our understanding of that poetry, its authors, and its readers. While this study does not attempt to trace general

reader responses to such clerical writings, one reason for taking clerical interpretations of canonical poets seriously is simply that these interpretations were common in their own day. Kirstie Blair notes, for example, that the collected sermons of F. W. Robertson, some of which directly respond to Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, sold more widely than many popular novels at the time of its publication. She argues that these sermons "played a substantial role in disseminating religious views directly related to Tennyson's poem" (175). The influence of these ministers' writings varies significantly, but most of them found sizable readership, both at home and abroad. Thus, clerical interpretations of popular poets offer a first step toward understanding how many others would have encountered such poetry.

As Blair's example illustrates, contemporary scholarship has considered clerical interpretations of popular poetry from the nineteenth century before. But these interpretations have not been considered exclusively, in such a way as to mark patterns of agreement and divergence, to explore a distinct body of clerical criticism, and to suggest their reciprocal influence on the poets themselves. After all, these three poets were well aware of their clerical receptions and engaged with them either explicitly in their work or more generally in their own understanding of their role as poets in a particular context. Furthermore, while clerical texts by nature often seek to instruct or persuade, the cleric is also another religious reader, attending to these poems for their beauty and delight. Rather than examining either these poets or their clerical readers through a single theoretical lens, then, these chapters form a reception study, concentrated and contextualized within nineteenth-century clerical discourse.



Thus, this study addresses a gap in the ongoing scholarly discussion on Victorian religion and literature by responding directly and exclusively to the cultural influence of clerics in critical discourse. Ministers of many different denominations participated in literary criticism through the pulpit and the written word. As poetry occupied a shared space between the secular and the sacred, it was natural for clerics to authoritatively evaluate, interpret, and mediate poetry to their congregations and communities. Dieleman notes that many critics today struggle to imagine Victorian religion “as more than a contested cultural category or other than a set of unprobed ideas or language, much less a generative place for literary work” (4). I would argue that this failure of imagination might extend to dismissing the church as a generative place for literary criticism as well. Thus, this study looks at nineteenth-century instances of clerical literary criticism with attention to how these readings can sharpen our critical attention to and understanding of the discourses that mediated poetry in the Victorian period.

My research focuses particularly on Tennyson and the Brownings not only for the intentional religiosity of their work but because these poets were widely addressed by clerics in public discourse during the poets’ own lives. The popularity of these poets made them familiar to the average congregation and reader. The clerics considered in this study recognized these three poets as suitable models of religious thought, feeling, and practice. Thus, their criticism often took on biographical shape, as clerics read poetry instructively through the lives of the poets themselves. The emphasis on biography participates in the clerical texts’ instructive mode while maintaining and extending clerical authority from the speaker to the poet. In the case of popular poets such as

Tennyson or Browning, this exchange of authority can go both ways. The interpreter of the religious poet can likewise acquire prophetic authority in the process of mediating poetry and the poet's life to other readers. This exchange is complicated, of course, but not wholly undone when the poet being mediated is a woman, whose religious and poetic authority is not necessarily assumed by cleric or congregant.

Regardless of whether the mediated poet is male or female, however, clerical critics used their works and narratives for instructive persuasion.<sup>6</sup> In this, their criticism reflects the rhetorical mode of the spiritually persuasive homily. Robert Ellison suggests that Victorian homiletic theory, following in the mode of classical oral tradition, primarily aimed to be "practical and persuasive rather than merely abstract or informative" (18). The sermon was not meant to persuade toward some kind of intellectual assent, but to "persuade—indeed, to compel—men and women to embark upon a spiritual course of action" (19). A good homily tells its listeners how best to govern their lives. While the lectures, articles, and discussions considered in the following chapters offer a number of intellectual arguments, they incline toward that spiritual persuasion that Ellison identifies in the homily. Like the homily, they are concerned with what constitutes a good Christian life. And a significant element of that persuasive power, Ellison explains, lies in the ethos of their orators. The ethos of the poet also then must be clearly established by the cleric who wishes to use their poetry in or as a homily. Thus, the emphasis in many of these clerics' instructive

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6. As we shall see, the biographical narratives most often used for instructive persuasion include Tennyson's grief over the loss of his friend Arthur Hallam that gave inspiration for *In Memoriam*; Barrett Browning's marriage, motherhood, and lifelong illness; and Browning's marriage and widowhood.

criticism lies on the poets' religious faith and their suitability as a model for responding to the concerns of their particular age.

### *Reading Poets Denominationally*

While these clerical texts all to varying degrees share the homily as a rhetorical mode, their denominational differences also influence those interpretations. That is, while they all find the works of Tennyson and the Brownings useful for persuading their listeners and readers toward "a spiritual course of action," they differ in their consideration of what that action might be, even when interpreting the same text. It is thus not possible to speak thoughtfully about the relationship between clerical critics and poetry without addressing the number of denominational distinctions between those critics—or those poets. In Mark Knight and Emma Mason's *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, they argue that what critics have often interpreted as secularization at the end of the century is more accurately a "diminution of the power and reach of the Established Church rather than a decline of Christian ideas and culture" (7). The breadth of denominational difference among the clerics considered here testifies to such a transformation. If secularization is better understood as an attempt to "rewrite religion" than as a movement to forgo religious constructs altogether, then a responsible attention to nineteenth-century literature will account for the variety of forms of faith available to Victorian Christians (8).<sup>7</sup>

Nineteenth-century poetry, like anything else, exists within a context of social and political concerns. Writers and readers bring their denominational

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7. Indeed, Knight and Mason are among many scholars of nineteenth-century literature and religion who take such account.

perspectives—and the attendant ideological distinctions—to bear on that writing and reading. The interpretation of a High Church Anglican, for example, must be read in the context of that perspective's social and national priorities, just as a Nonconformist must be read in the context of dissenting ideologies. While the century's denominational differences do not map perfectly onto the different political ideologies of the day, there are clear correlations. For instance, many supporters of the Anti-State Church Association in the 1840s (that is, Nonconformists) were also supporters of the Anti-Corn Law League. Later, many members of the Liberation Society also participated in the Reform Movement, the Ballot Society, and the Peace Society. Thus, as Frances Knight notes, Nonconformity was not only a religious position, but “a cry of protest at a multitude of injustices; an act of rebellion against a decaying social structure, with an appeal to...the social deviant, and [those] who were perceived by Anglicans (particularly clergy) as socially willful” (18). Knight and Mason concur, noting that “liberal, oppositional, and dedicated to reform, Dissent inevitably overlapped with radical politics” (18). In which case, making note of denominational distinctions in clerical interpretations should shed light on social and political distinctions as well. That is, denominational distinctions should help the reader see how certain poems may have been understood as responses to issues of poverty, classism, gender hierarchy, racial oppression, colonial expansion, national identity, and other pressing nineteenth-century concerns. Likewise, they should help the reader see how the poets' critics may have used such poems to advocate for or undermine these concerns out of the matrix of their religious, social, cultural, and political commitments.

At the same time, care must be taken to avoid reducing these denominational differences to two opposing perspectives—Anglican and Nonconformist. For one thing, nineteenth-century Anglicanism was too varied in form and participation to be reducible to a singular expression. Many Anglicans regularly attended both their parish church as well as local Methodist meetings, while others considered themselves faithful participants in the Church of England even though their practice rarely extended outside of private devotions in the home. Dissenters likewise came in a variety of forms, and this variety matters when denominational difference influences poetry and poetic interpretation. As Knight and Mason observe, “Divergent opinions in dissenting belief affected the individual’s everyday life: his or her politics, moral prerogatives, aesthetic inclinations, and literary tastes” (18). Orienting clerics in denominational space should shed light, then, on the priorities and perspectives of their poetic interpretations, even as they acknowledge particularity and variety between and within those denominational spaces.

Of course, attention to denominational differences can also suggest similarities in clerics’ understandings of poetry’s nature and purpose. For someone like John Henry Newman, for example, who famously converted from Tractarian Anglicanism to Catholicism, poetry serves as “the refuge of those who have not the Catholic Church to flee to, and repose upon...for the Church herself is the most sacred and august of poets” (442). Poetry acts for Newman as a liturgical encounter with the divine, a substitutionary means of transcendence from the disparate body to the unified Kingdom of God which a pure religious experience would fully embody. This is not a great stretch from the Unitarian James Martineau, who wrote in the preface to *Hymns for the Christian Church and*

*Home* (1871) that “all natural devotion is a mode of poetry; while no rationalistic devotion can ever reach it. The spontaneous overflow of the former has only to fall into regular and musical shape, and it becomes a hymn” (vii). Martineau positions poetry, and the arts generally, as submissive to religion, allied “not condescendingly, in order to improve it—but reverently, to receive from it their noblest consecration” (vi). Martineau ultimately addresses sacred poetry, that lyrical form which “becomes a hymn” given opportunity. But he also recognizes the poetic mode as sacred by nature. Like Newman, he has rewritten Romantic poetics into ecclesiological form. Meanwhile, many Broad Church clerics influenced by German Higher Criticism were increasingly open to reading Christian scripture as but another form of literature—not elevating poetry to the divine, but resituating the divine within the mundane. Poetry can thus serve as another kind of scripture simply because scripture is no longer *the* Word of God, even if it might *contain* the words of God (Knight and Mason 131-132). Attention to denominational difference helps highlight the nuances between these and other perspectives while also observing the ways they might reflect one another.

#### *Tennyson: Clerical Sermons and Lectures*

The next two chapters of this study are thus split between interpretations of Tennyson from Anglican and Nonconformist clerical critics respectively. Each chapter explicates publicly presented texts from clerics who interpret Tennyson’s poetry, reflect on his vocation, or engage with both. These texts were identified by searching digital archives such as *HathiTrust* and *Nineteenth Century Collections Online*, but also by reviewing bibliographies of secondary sources on the poet. If authorship for these sources was listed in the bibliography, I

identified whether the author was a cleric primarily through the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and then traced the medium of the text to discover whether it had been delivered as a sermon or lecture. The dominant presence of such responses to Tennyson within this study as a whole (he is the only one given two chapters of inquiry) reflects a similarly dominant critical response to Tennyson within his century. Devoting separate chapters to Anglican and Nonconformist readings highlights distinctions between the two denominational modes—and distinctions within them. The focus on sermons makes these denominational distinctions all the more clear, as the ecclesiastical context of the criticism is endemic to its medium. Clerical lectures also shared homiletic patterns of spiritual persuasion with the sermon, as we shall see, and brought denominationally distinct religious instruction out of church buildings and into public spaces. Where information on these physical contexts exists, their influence on the criticism is considered as well.

The printed versions of these sermons and lectures also influenced both their composition and their reception. Such clerical compilations were widely disseminated for private reading, bringing public discourse into domestic space. While critics today often comment on declining church attendance through the century, Frances Knight argues that domestic practices of religion, such as shared sermon reading, are often overlooked as evidence of committed religious life.<sup>8</sup> Family reading from the Book of Common Prayer, tracts, and sermon collections, as well as private prayer, were common practices throughout the century.

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8. Knight also argues that the recorded statistics of Sunday church attendance in the period should be considered fairly high given cultural shifts and denominational diversity. Thus, many sermons would have received a wide audience both in their written and in their publicly spoken forms.

Paraphrasing Walter Houghton's argument in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Knight notes that "Victorians increasingly saw family and home as the source of virtues and emotions that could not be found elsewhere, least of all in business and society, and...as institutional religion waned, the living church more and more became the 'temple of the hearth'" (58).<sup>9</sup> While Knight may overstate the significance of exclusively domestic religious practice, texts that brought the voice of the cleric into the home certainly became much more common in the period. The collected homilies of these clerics explicitly bridge the divide between public and private spaces.

As homilies were no longer exclusive to the space of a church building, clerics grew more attentive to how they might be encountered in written form—both by lay readers and fellow clerics.<sup>10</sup> Repeated sermons were often taken from published sermon collections, and extemporaneous preaching was often the result of a cleric's private reading of religious texts from his contemporaries prior to stepping into the pulpit. No religious speaking or writing took place in a vacuum. These practices encouraged clerics who shared their sermons in written form to be thoughtful about them as both oral and written texts. The sermons

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9. This emphasis on "family and home as the source of virtues" surely contributes to clerical preoccupation with the Brownings' marriage as a source of both their poetic and personal virtues, which we will glimpse in the final chapters.

10. That said, sermons and lectures published for public consumption are not necessarily representative of the average spoken sermon in nineteenth-century religious life. Citing Françoise Deconinck-Brossard's sermon study, Frances Knight suggests that published sermons may be "more informative about what the Establishment wanted to place in the public domain than about the reality of preaching" (82). They do not, for example, reflect the widespread tendency to repeat sermons, or in the case of more evangelically inclined ministers, to speak extemporaneously from the pulpit. Nor do they reflect the often significantly different concerns separating rural from urban parish life. But the prominence of published sermons and sermon collections nevertheless influenced clerical rhetoric throughout the century.



and lectures considered in this study are likewise of value for both their public and private reach.

Though the ensuing chapters illustrate different emphases between Anglican and Nonconformist responses to Tennyson, clerical critics were often influenced by quite similar concerns. Almost all of the Anglican clerics considered in the first chapter study—F. W. Robertson, William Boyd Carpenter, Alfred Gatty, Hugh Haweis, and William Anderson O’Conor—explore Tennyson’s role as prophet to the nation. They attribute to Tennyson a unique authority as wise mediator of truth within both their specific congregation and the nation at large. The second study’s Nonconformists—Thomas Campbell Finlayson (Congregationalist); Richard Roberts, Norman Macleod, and David Sutherland (Presbyterians or Church of Scotland ministers with Nonconformist sympathies); and Richard Acland Armstrong (Unitarian)—considered Tennyson’s intuitive faith as a response to the century’s crisis of belief. They saw Tennyson as a model for individuals on their own journeys of faith through doubt.

All in varying ways appropriated Tennyson’s poetry for pedagogical purposes. The Anglican clerics in the first chapter introduce a number of questions about the religious nature of the poet: How does the nineteenth-century poet’s prophetic work relate to the prophets of the scriptures? What kind of agency does the poet have in their prophecy? How is the prophetic work of the poet related to his role as priest? How does the priestly role of the poet relate to the priestly role of the Anglican critic? The Nonconformist criticism in the second chapter instigates questions about the poet’s relationship to faith and doubt. How does Tennyson’s poetic intuition contribute to his intuitive faith? Is

poetry a substitute for biblical scripture or a partner with scripture? To what extent, in the context of a homily, does the poet become the preacher? Their answers, or attempts to answer, are marked to some degree by their denominational priorities. But they are also shaped by the poet himself—the answers he chooses to write and withhold, to reveal or conceal.

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning: Periodical Reviews*

The questions asked of Tennyson by Anglican and Nonconformist clerical critics are less clear when applied to a female poet. Neither clerical nor lay critics assumed Barrett Browning wrote with the same authority as her male contemporaries, though they were clearly willing to be persuaded. In the fourth chapter, I turn from sermons and lectures to articles. I take this turn for a few reasons. Identifiable clerical sermons and lectures on Barrett Browning were scarce in the archives I searched. But the shift to periodicals also acknowledges the significant place journalism held in clerical discourse throughout the century. It was a journalistic age, an age of “tracts, pamphlets, and essays,” as Christopher Kent has observed. The most celebrated critical writers, from Ruskin to Arnold, wrote some of their greatest works in serialized form—not to mention the obvious popularity of the serialized novel. Kent attributes this tendency to the expansion of the periodical press coinciding with similar expansion in university education, such that journalism became “an organ of the mid-Victorian clerisy...an ideal medium of cultural authority” (181). Clerical journalists brought pastoral authority to bear on the genre, using it as a vehicle for homiletic discourse alongside of the pulpit.

Though, the anonymity of much nineteenth-century journalism also meant that clerical critics could engage culture apart from their clerical obligations. This anonymity presents the most obvious difficulty in studying clerically-authored articles. To compile the responses considered in the fourth chapter, I searched the Armstrong Browning Library's *Browning Guide* for reviews and articles on Barrett Browning whose authors were named. I identified whether the author was a minister, and referred to the *Nineteenth-Century Index*, especially *Wellesley's Index to Victorian Periodicals*, to confirm authorship and look for other articles by the same authors.<sup>11</sup> The results are both ecumenical and transatlantic. They include Anglicans Charles Kingsley and Arthur Thompson Gurney, Presbyterian George Gilfillan, Unitarian Charles T. Brooks, Methodist Gilbert Haven, and Congregationalist Edwin Paxton Hood. As in the chapters on Tennyson, these Anglican and Nonconformist responses to Barrett Browning are distinguished from one another in the chapter's order.

The denominational differences between their readings of Barrett Browning, however, are far less dramatic than those for Tennyson.<sup>12</sup> This accord may simply be due to the difference in medium between an article and a sermon or lecture. Or it may be due to the reorientation of the criticism around Barrett Browning's poetic identity as a woman. Every one of these clerics responds in

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11. While the majority of biographical information for all of the clerics in these chapters—and many nonclerical critics withheld from these chapters—came from the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* or the *American National Biography*, some were only identifiable through prefaces to their written collections, digitized church records, denominational chapter reports, and other archives.

12. Less dramatic but, of course, not completely nonexistent. When relevant, individual publications' denominational aims—and the clerics' responses to them—are specified in the chapter.

some way to her ministerial role as a female poet—and far less patronizingly than I anticipated before beginning my research. In *Imagined Spiritual Communities*, Joshua King has argued that print culture—including the periodical, poetry, and published sermons—offered a way to move religious experience out of the church walls and into the private sphere. It was, as he says, a century “in which it became easier to conceive of participation in Christian community as a virtual act that did not require being at church” (292).<sup>13</sup> Such a movement could undo formal hierarchies, or at least reconfigure them. And in this reconfiguration, the periodical might offer a more welcome space for the voice of the poetess as a subversive prophet. The Nonconformist readings are thus arranged to reflect correspondences between them on this subject.

Though, Barrett Browning’s writing itself compels such reconfiguration, as the chapter suggests. Dieleman argues that, while Victorian women writers certainly struggled with gendered expectations for their writing, their work actually more closely resembles work by male writers of their own denomination than other women writers of different denominations (2). Thus, while Barrett Browning’s critics might centralize the influence of gender in reading her poetry, she was just as consciously aware of the influence of her faith. Religious identity, Dieleman asserts, features “as importantly as—sometimes more importantly than—gender in the creation of distinctive religious imaginaries and religious-

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13. Though, as his work shows, private religious reading participated in a broad public religious culture. King notes that Matthew Arnold and F. W. Maurice “both reluctantly concluded that British citizens would ultimately awaken to their spiritual unity through reading rather than the services of the Church of England and its competitors” (96). Even supposedly secular reading could contribute to this, as he states: “The popular press would become almost a secular—as in extra-ecclesiastical—national scripture, a medium through which members of the national community would be kept attuned to the guidance of the Spirit and the ‘ultimate ends’ of their civic responsibility” (51).

poetic voices.” Barrett Browning herself aligns these concerns. The largely egalitarian critical response from clerical readers suggests that such clerics willingly attributed a priestly, preacherly, or prophetic role to Barrett Browning insofar as they resonated with her religious-poetic voice.

While I continue applying the methodology of the reception study from the chapters on Tennyson, this chapter also engages with dialogue on the configuration of the poetess. The clerics’ acceptance and rejection of poetess fictions within each article offer new perspectives for future research. Such contributions should be welcome for a field of scholarship so wide-ranging and ongoing. There is surely more work to be done by putting scholarship on the Victorian poetess in conversation with the quasi-scriptural role of poetry in the nineteenth century. This chapter on clerical receptions of Barrett Browning offers a starting point for such work.

### *Robert Browning: The Literary Society*

Browning Societies by nature introduce a number of fascinating complexities to clerical reception of the poet. While reading groups were a fairly common way to engage with literature in the nineteenth century, the societies devoted to Robert Browning were uniquely avid. These gatherings often took on religious significance, adopting liturgical forms in their proceedings, focusing on the poetry’s theological significance in their lectures and conversation, and orienting their membership around clerical representatives. Society members consistently treated Browning himself as a prophetic minister whose work could be read alongside scripture for its spiritual edification and instruction. In such interpretation, their lay readers thus took on clerical roles themselves, even

alongside the ordained clerics within the societies. Thus, there is no simple answer to the question of what constitutes a *clerical* interpretation within the Browning Society. Just as the following three chapters trace the expansion of clerical authority to the poet, the final chapter traces the expansion of clerical authority through the poet to lay readers in the quasi-ecclesiastical context of the Society.

My research on the Browning Societies was necessarily limited to available archival material from the Browning Society Papers at the Armstrong Browning Library and digital databases such as *HathiTrust*. Despite the widespread popularity of these Societies from the United Kingdom to the United States, extant papers from their meetings—clerical and otherwise—appear to be rare. The methodology of this chapter therefore differs from the others in response to this limitation. Rather than explicate clerical texts on the poet, the final chapter considers Browning's clerical significance through the available archival material. These archives include papers delivered in the early years of the London Browning Society and a short collection from the Boston Browning Society. But the majority of the archives consists of Society programs and invitations, membership lists, and annual study schedules. Such documents are surprisingly forthcoming about the role of clerics and the religious treatment of the poet in the Societies, and the implications both have on the clerical role of the lay reader.

The methodology of this chapter also responds to the uniqueness of the Browning Society phenomenon itself. Browning was the only poet in the nineteenth century to inspire the formation of societies devoted to the scholarly and religious study of his work during his own lifetime. No other nineteenth-

century author catalyzed such a vast number of literary gatherings in their own name—nearly a thousand distinct reading groups from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. And unlike the clerical contexts of the previous three chapters, very little scholarship has explored the Browning Societies generally. This chapter thus meets a felt need in scholarship on the poet and his readers while contributing to a growing body of research on the significance of reading clubs from the period.<sup>14</sup>

The chapter also continues exploring the significance of denominational commitments on interpretations of the poet. But these distinctions are less significant variables in Browning Societies than they are in the periodicals of chapter four—and far less significant than they are for the sermons and lectures on Tennyson. For one thing, the Societies' quasi-ecclesiastical characteristics made them function much like a denomination of their own. While a few Browning Societies can be distinguished by denomination (the London Society was primarily Anglican, for example, and the Chicago Society almost exclusively Unitarian), many of them were ecumenical spaces welcoming anyone willing to develop their spiritual life through the work of the poet. The shifting importance of denominational character from sermon to Society is a significant reason for taking into account both the religious character and the genre of criticism in each chapter.

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14. Consider Elizabeth Long's *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003), Jenny Hartley's "Nineteenth-Century Reading Groups in Britain and the Community of the Text: An Experiment with *Little Dorrit*" (2011), Elizabeth Long's "Aflame with Culture: Reading and Social Mission in the Nineteenth-Century White Women's Literary Club Movement" (2015), Katherine West Scheil's *She Hath Been Reading: Women and Shakespeare Clubs in America* (2012), and Ina Ferris's *Book-Men, Books Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere* (2015), among others.

This study begins from the established premise that poetry in the nineteenth century was widely treated akin to scripture and that the role of poets took on religious significance in public life. Discerning how actual religious figures from the period interpreted, applied, and responded to this significance is the project of the following chapters. The clerics in these chapters responded to Tennyson and Barrett Browning as religious teachers for their current moment. They understood that teaching role in various ministerial and prophetic ways, nuanced by classical, scriptural, and Romantic precedent. The literary societies explored in the final chapter took these interpretations of the religious role of the poet a step further, forming ecclesiastically shaped communities around Browning as divine mediator. Though this study responds to several threads of scholarly discourse—religion and literature, conceptions of the poetess, reception studies—it contributes something unique to each. More importantly, it introduces new areas for further inquiry, especially considering archival material unavailable during this project’s research.<sup>15</sup>

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15. As research for this dissertation began early in 2021, many of the methodological limitations of the study—particularly focusing on digital and local archives—were established to ensure that research could be completed within the bounds of Covid restrictions.



## CHAPTER TWO

### A Priestly Prophet for the Nation: Anglicans Preach on Tennyson

Critics had been writing of poets as prophets or priests long before nineteenth-century clerics interpreted them in these terms. And the association between poet, priest, and prophet only increased throughout the century. Percy Bysshe Shelley's Romantic declaration in *A Defence of Poetry*, that poets unite the characters of "legislators, or prophets," is a well-known example (677).<sup>1</sup> Prior to its publication, F. D. Maurice had stated in an 1828 *Athenaeum* article that the poet's "high calling" is fundamentally spiritual, consisting of the interpretation of "those universal truths which exist on earth only in the forms of his creation" (351). Shortly after, he makes a more direct comparison between the poet and both priest and prophet. Speaking of Byron as representative poet, he writes:

He who is such as has been now described, is indeed of as high and sacred a function as can belong to man. It is not the black garment, nor the precise and empty phrase, which makes men ministers of God; but the communion with that Spirit of God, which was, in all its fulness, upon those mighty poets, Isaiah and Ezekiel; which unrolled its visions over the rocks of Patmos, and is, in larger or smaller measure, the teacher of every bard.

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1. The full passage provides interesting context for what Shelley means by "prophet": Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition, which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not. (677)

Not only does Maurice conflate priest and prophet here, but he specifically names the biblical prophets as poets. The prophets' inspiration—that is, the Spirit of God who “unrolled its visions over the rocks of Patmos”—is the same inspiration that gives voice to the poet.

Likewise, in an 1840 lecture on “The Hero as Poet,” Thomas Carlyle observed that while the terms “poet” and “prophet” seem to communicate distinct ideas, they are in fact similar. “Fundamentally indeed they are still the same,” he writes, in that “they have penetrated both of them into the sacred mystery of the Universe; what Goethe calls ‘the open secret’ .... That divine mystery, which lies everywhere in all Beings” (129). Carlyle goes further, claiming, “The Hero can be Poet, Prophet, King, Priest or what you will, according to the kind of world he finds himself born into” (127). The common thread unifying these identities, he finds, is that they are “Great Men,” “leaders of men,” “modellers, patterns, and in a wide sense creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain” (1-2). The same man may be priest, prophet, or poet, insofar as he is also a hero.

Alfred Tennyson (1809-1892) himself conflated this notion of the poet-prophet with the priesthood. In a review of Hallam Tennyson's 1897 biography on the poet, an acquaintance of Tennyson claimed that the poet's sense of priestly calling was “*almost awful* to him in its intensity, because it made him feel as a priest who can never leave the sanctuary, and whose every word must be consecrated to the service of Him who had touched his lips with the fire of heaven which was to enable him to speak in God's name to his age” (Nicolson 16-17). The prophet receives a vision from God as Isaiah received the coal upon his lips, and the priest mediates that vision to God's people in inspired language.

The poet does all this as well. Tennyson (according to this reviewer), Carlyle, and Maurice all conflate the imagery of priest and prophet into one poetic role. And Maurice's criticism itself also illustrates a conflation between cleric and critic, as he would return to Oxford two years after his *Athenaeum* article to prepare for Anglican ministry. For the Anglican clerics considered here, the roles of priest and critic were often just as fluid as that of priest and prophet. Their ministerial commitments to congregation and community obligated them to compose their criticism as religious instruction.

This chapter and the following look at how nineteenth-century Anglican and Nonconformist clerical readings of Tennyson as priest and prophet were influenced by this ministerial vocation. While many clerics from the period wrote widely on culture and public life, I strictly consider clerical sermons and lectures—public deliveries before an ecclesiastical congregation or similar audience, such as a working-class gathering. This limitation to the pedagogical or homiletic form highlights the influence of the cleric's ministerial vocation in ways an unsigned article, for example, might fail to do. After all, the sermon and—given context—the clerical lecture contribute to the cleric's ministerial work of religious instruction to a specific set of people in his community.

The Anglicans considered here and the Nonconformists in the following chapter represent nearly all of the clerics that I could identify in bibliographies and extensive searches through digital archives of nineteenth-century criticism on the poet. While many surely published their sermons and lectures in periodicals, anonymity makes these difficult to identify. Omitted also are religious figures, such as the Unitarian William Johnson Fox, who delivered

lectures on poetry before or after their ministry.<sup>2</sup> Curious as such contributions might be, they are less representative of the kinds of reflections on poetry, and Tennyson's work in particular, that a cleric might have intentionally offered as religious instruction. Also omitted are sermons or lectures that reference Tennyson or his poetry anecdotally. The texts considered here offer lengthy evaluations of the poet, his poetry, or both. While Tennyson has been called the poet most frequently cited by preachers in the pulpit, attributable nineteenth-century sermons and lectures addressing him significantly are scarce among the databases and digitized sources I consulted. Likewise, they are unevenly distributed across denominations. Nevertheless, there are enough here to note interesting patterns, correlations, and distinctions of thought.

I have separated Anglican and Nonconformist sermons and lectures into separate chapters for a few reasons. For one thing, the volume of clerical reflection on Tennyson is greater than other culturally mainstream Victorian poets, in part because of the central place he and his poetry played in the nation as a result of his laureateship. Thus, there is more to consider in these clerical readings than there would be for a lesser-known poet. Furthermore, separating Anglican and Non-Anglican responses to Tennyson helps clarify the methodology utilized in ensuing chapters on critics of the Brownings. There, when relevant, I likewise attend to the differences of response within and between these two major divisions of British religious affiliation. As these first two studies on Tennyson show, Anglican and Nonconformist ministers

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2. In Fox's case, his lecture was delivered almost a decade after being expelled from the ministry following scandal. This certainly makes for an interesting context in which to read Tennyson as a religious figure, but arguably not a *homiletic* one.

concentrate their attentions on notably different aspects of the poet's religious role.

For example, in the following sermons and lectures, the Anglican priests are more likely to identify the poet as *priest* than the Nonconformist clerics who reject priesthood as a category of unique spiritual authority. While this may be unsurprising, it results in different treatments of the poet as prophet as well. Nonconformists and Anglicans both freely consider the poet as a prophet, but when one associates that role with priesthood and the other does not, the term "prophet" communicates distinct identities.<sup>3</sup> The poetic prophet of the Nonconformist is often understood as a passive recipient of divine truth and a model for the individual on a journey of faith. While, perhaps from suspicion of "enthusiasm," Anglican priests tend to portray poet-prophets as innately wise rather than passively inspired vessels. They attribute priestly agency and authority to the poet in his prophetic work as mediator of truth to the nation.

Many of these Anglican priests even felt that poetry participates in the work of Christian scripture, in part because they viewed scripture itself is a form of poetry. Charles LaPorte considers George Gilfillan's study *The Bards of the Bible* as an example of a poetic reading of the scriptures. He writes:

For Gilfillan, as for many of his contemporaries, the poetic nature of the Bible may be deduced like a syllogism from the two axioms that the Bible is God's eternal word, and that "the language of poetry...is the only speech which has in it the power of permanent impression." "Poetry" is not merely associated with religious truth here; they are effectively synonymous. (*Victorian Poetry* 10)

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3. Outside of the texts considered here, this distinction is difficult to generalize. For example, while still a Unitarian, before his conversion to Anglicanism, Maurice figures the poet as a prophet of special awareness and inspiration, set apart from the everyman. The uniquely Nonconformist William Blake, on the other hand, considered that every man is or could be a prophet.

While other clerical scholars, such as the eighteenth-century bishop, Robert Lowth, had been interested in the Bible's formal poetry (that is, the Psalms, Proverbs, and poetically structured passages from Ecclesiastes and the prophets), Gilfillan saw the whole of the scriptures, regardless of form, as being fundamentally poetic. In which case, all true poetry may communicate truth in the same manner as scripture. Thus, Alfred Austin's argument in 1868-1869 that "the poet's job is actually to speak the words of God," resonates as a familiar claim of the poet as a prophet, and the poet's work as divinely authoritative in the same manner of scripture (LaPorte 11). This is not to say that Tennyson's poetry was understood to displace scripture, but that it was held to participate in the work of scripture to instruct and inspire his generation.

There is reason to wonder if poetry might be displacing scripture in these Anglican homilies, though. After all, in many Christian traditions it was—and continues to be—common practice for a homily to be given in response to scripture read aloud as part of a liturgy. One reason for addressing clerical sermons and lectures on poetry is to observe how the homiletic form might respond to poetry in the same manner. If the poet shares in the instructive, inspirational work of the biblical prophets, then the poet's writing likewise shares in the work of scripture and is thus suitable as a centerpiece for either a sermon or a religious lecture. Many of the texts considered here were delivered as Sunday evening lectures for the clerics' church communities. Some were delivered to literary societies or working-class gatherings. While differences in the tone, content, and style of these sermons and lectures may be attributed to such variations in context, all of them engage with Tennyson's poetry as a source of spiritual formation for his readers.

Indeed, the examples in both of these chapters suggest that clerical critics are far more interested in poetry's spiritual efficacy than in its form. It would seem that the homiletic genre—whether sermon or lecture—inclines away from formal criticism. Elsewhere, differences in denominational affiliation correlate with differences in theological interpretations of poetic form. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Nonconformists were more likely to oppose traditional poetic forms, while traditionalist Anglicans considered form to be an asset in communicating truth. Kirstie Blair outlines this more concretely in *Form and Faith*:

Opponents of form tended to be drawn from Evangelical or dissenting religious traditions, which emphasized a personal and individual relationship with God, accessible without the trappings of organized religion.... Supporters of form, who correspondingly were much more likely to be somewhere on the Anglo-Catholic spectrum, argued in contrast that formal limits were enabling, in the sense that they allowed the speaker to express something inexpressible, and that formal structures acted as supports for human weakness besides creating a sense of historic continuity and community within the Church. (7)

Such an observation would lead us to suppose that the following clerical criticism addresses Tennyson's particular use of form with denominational distinctiveness. But there is, in fact, little attention to the form of Tennyson's poetry in these readings from any tradition. In the context of an instructive lecture or sermon, the cleric appears to be more concerned with religious interpretation and application than the poet's grasp of rhyme or meter. In some ways, this freedom to dispense with formal concerns typifies a poetic interpretation of scripture, much like Gilfillan's emphasis on the Bible's poetic quality rather than its form. Even scripture's own formal poetry, being primitive, follows unfamiliar poetic rules. The Anglican clerics addressed here treat

Tennyson's poetry as scriptural in multiple ways—by justifying the poet's spiritual authority as a priestly prophet, by emphasizing the poetry and the poet's efficacy for spiritual instruction, and by applying similar critical lenses to the poems as they might use with biblical texts.

These Anglican clerics broadly conceive of Tennyson as a faithful Christian, inspired with wisdom and insight for the attentive reader. While the Nonconformists in the following chapter use Tennyson as a model for triumphing over religious doubt, the Anglicans attribute his religious skepticism to the experience of profound grief, as explored in *In Memoriam*. Their focus, in fact, is less on Tennyson's argument for faith and more on the social and spiritual significance of poetry in the lives of their congregants. For example, Anglicans F. W. Robertson, William Boyd Carpenter, and William Anderson O'Connor all address the significance of poetry for the working classes. But while the first two emphasize the national glory of the lower class's unsung labors, O'Connor warns the leisured class of the spiritual and social immorality of hoarding leisure and culture. The other Anglican priests, Hugh Haweis and Alfred Gatty, address the significance of Tennyson's poetry in shaping a national consciousness or defining a national identity. While the Nonconformist clerics focus on Tennyson's poetic ministry to individuals wrestling with faith, the Anglicans regularly shape their religious instruction as national or class discourse. Thus, Tennyson and his poetry are read through interpretive lenses that reflect and advocate for these clerics' particular concerns. Their sermons and lectures offer instruction through the poetry in lieu of or in dialogue with biblical scripture for their congregations to live, work, relate, and understand themselves more fully.



*Frederick William Robertson (1816-1853)*

Frederick William Robertson, curate to the vicar of Christ Church, Cheltenham, focused his ministry on the poor (Cowie). Robertson preached Sunday afternoon sermons that would eventually lead to his lectures at the Working Men's Institute, an organization he founded in Brighton in 1848. It was in Cheltenham that his convictions shifted from Evangelical Anglicanism to a more liberal position, though his hesitation to identify as a "Broad Church" cleric may have helped him acquire positions in evangelical parishes such as Oxford's St. Ebbe's. While Robertson's preaching at Brighton's Trinity Chapel attracted the attention of such notable visitors as Lord Shaftesbury and Charles Dickens, it was not until after his death in 1853 that his published sermons brought him into wide public attention. These published sermons were cobbled together from written recollections and parishioners' notes, suggesting Robertson originally delivered them extemporaneously. Despite the popularity of written sermon collections, extempore preaching was not uncommon in the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

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4. In fact, Robert H. Ellison claims that many Victorian preachers preferred to deliver their sermons unscripted under the belief that a good sermon depended on passion rather than precision (34-37). This was, apparently, especially common among congregations of the lower classes and less educated, such as Robertson's own working-class congregants, and may have been especially true as the century progressed. Though, as early as 1863, Canon Robinson wrote: The practice of expository preaching, again, if sometimes adopted, and really well done, would probably do much to retrieve the reputation and increase the usefulness of the pulpit.... What is called extemporaneous preaching is strongly advocated by many as best adapted to interest and amuse the hearers. Whatever of clearness, accuracy, and order is secured by the written discourse, there is a counter-balancing loss of warmth and reality. The manuscript is only a moderate conductor of enthusiasm. (415-416) Regardless of whether Robinson's practice represented the majority, many clerics achieved extempore "warmth and reality" in different ways. Ellison suggests that those who preached from a written sermon or from notes were encouraged to infuse personal passion into their delivery and to avoid formality and "bookishness" (38). His conclusions make it clear that nineteenth-century clerical arguments on homiletic rhetoric influenced one another across denominational lines. Extemporaneous, or seemingly extemporaneous, preaching may well have grown in fashion in the Established Church precisely because of its appeal among Nonconformist congregations.

The unstated advantage of the written sermon, of course, was the ease with which it could find its way into print. Given the popularity of published sermons for domestic devotion throughout the century, this is a significant advantage. Robertson's sermons and lectures on poetry, expanded and published from a reporter's short-hand notes, illustrate his thoughtful engagement with the convergence of theology and poetics as found in Tennyson's work. Their publication brought more than his own theology to public attention. Kirstie Blair argues, in fact, that Robertson's lectures on Tennyson's *In Memoriam* "played a substantial role in disseminating religious views directly related to Tennyson's poem" (*Form* 175). Robertson's "Two Lectures on the Influence of Poetry on the Working Classes," delivered in February 1852, suggest a careful attention to the particular needs of the members of the Mechanical Institution to whom they were delivered. But these lectures speak directly to his readers as well.

The opening of Robertson's lectures justifies addressing the subject of poetry with the working classes. As the written lectures would likely have attracted a much wider readership than the audience of the Mechanical Institution, this justification functions as much to educate middle- and upper-class readers on the dignity of the working class as it does to elevate his listeners. An editorial footnote even acknowledges that the lectures' audience was "mixed," indicating that more than the members of the Mechanics' Institution were in attendance. Robertson may well be speaking directly to these additional attendees when he argues that resistance to discussing poetry with the lower classes ultimately stems from a lifeless, patronizing utilitarianism. He writes of the "great political authorities":

Persons of this class seem to fancy that the all-in-all of man is “to get on.” According to them, to elevate men means, chiefly, to improve their circumstances; and, no doubt, they would look with infinite contempt on any effort such as this, to interest men on subjects which, most assuredly, will not give them cheaper food or higher wages. (69)

Robertson identifies the clear prejudice in denying the working classes their access to that leisure which leads to culture.<sup>5</sup> Such freedom of cultural pursuits, he argues, is a fundamental human right—even a religious requirement: “Recreation is a holy necessity of man’s nature,” he writes, and “by no means unworthy of a sacred calling to bestow an hour on the attempt to impart not uninstrusive recreation to Working Men” (70). Robertson makes the lack of leisure a vital concern for the church broadly and for himself particularly as a cleric. If recreation is a “holy necessity of man’s nature,” then it should be the business of every man to pursue it. And if it is a “sacred calling” to instruct the working class in the nature of poetry, then it is likewise a function of his priestly role in the church to do so. Not only does this assertion legitimize his subject for his mixed audience, but it figures the lecture as a cultural homily. Like scripture, which forms the basis of a homily, the poetry that undergirds Robertson’s lecture is meant for all.

Robertson’s advocacy for the working class continues even in his definition of poetry. In addition to an obvious failure of egalitarianism, the “authorities” he speaks against also misunderstand the nature of poetry, which is “essentially of the people, and for the people” (73). If poetry is of and for everyone, then everyone—including the working classes—should understand its

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5. Robertson here prefigures Josef Pieper’s central philosophical work on the subject, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* (1952), which provides useful context for the cultural necessity of time, space, and resources for formative leisure regardless of class.

nature. Robertson frames this in clearly Romantic terms, even contrasting poetry worth studying with “the Poetry of the last age” which “was eminently artificial, unnatural, and aristocratic” (70). Such poetry is useless for the working classes, he suggests, and in being useless, fails to be good poetry. Robertson references Wordsworth with his first definition of poetry as: “the natural language of excited feeling. When a man is under the influence of some strong emotion, his language, words, demeanour, become more elevated; he is twice the man he was” (75). This definition helpfully expresses both the experience of the poet in writing out of that strong emotion and the experience of the reader who comes under poetry’s influence.

Robertson is much more concerned at this point with the working man’s experience of poetry than with the nature of the poet. In fact, he democratically asserts that “there is an element of poetry in us all” (77). Even if a reader fails to appreciate Milton or Wordsworth, he says, “there is something within him which may any day awake, break through the crust of his selfishness, and redeem him from a low, mercenary, or sensual existence.” Poetry, then, works upon the unformed individual much the same way the Holy Spirit works to redeem the fallen soul fashioned in the image of God.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Robertson goes on to describe this “element of poetry in us all” as a kind of virtue. He writes:

Any man who has for a single moment felt those emotions which are uncalculating, who has ever risked his life for the safety of another, or met some great emergency with unwavering courage, or felt his whole being shaken with mighty and unutterable indignation against some base cruelty or cowardly scoundrelism, knows what I mean when I say that

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6. Of course, despite the seeming generosity of spirit, this overtly democratic statement exposes Robertson’s classism, implying that those without middle-class poetry are selfish, sensual, and need to be lifted up by those above, like himself.

there is something in him which is infinite, and which can transport him in a moment into the same atmosphere which the poet breathes. (77-78)

Self-sacrifice, courage, and righteous indignation are all poetic instincts, then, expressions of right feeling that find their clearest voice in the form of poetry. In which case, the working-class reader has just as much right of access to poetry as anyone else, and maybe more so as he is more active and attuned to injustice than his upper-class neighbors.

Robertson offers Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as an example of poetry's capacity for expressing the inexpressible. Poetry communicates where more intellectual pursuits, such as philosophy or theology, fail. Precisely because *In Memoriam* is good poetry, it offers a more natural expression of grief and faith for working-class readers. Tennyson's poem succeeds in expressing "the grand, primary, simple truths of our humanity," which, in Robertson's terms, "underlie all creeds" (93). Kirstie Blair points to these words from Robertson in *Form and Faith* when she argues that *In Memoriam* contributed to the development of the idea of a "Broad Church" (170). In the poem, she writes, "Tennyson managed to express, consciously or not, a central tenet of Broad Church views on form: all religious forms deserved respect, but they were helpful rather than essential, and only to the degree that they reached towards shared truths." Robertson's interpretation likewise contributed to this Broad Church development, showing that the poem expresses something spiritually fundamental, if not formally religious. That is, the poem communicates an orientation toward the ultimate good of the universe, the governing rule of God, the primacy of love, and the immortality of the soul. This interpretation of *In Memoriam* suggests a scriptural—divinely inspired and spiritually instructive—role for poetry, but also

a consoling and restorative power, again, much like the work of the Holy Spirit upon the Christian soul. If the reader of biblical scripture requires the Holy Spirit to illuminate the text, the reader of poetry encounters inspired text and its illumination at once.

Robertson acknowledges that, especially for an Evangelical or Tractarian, *In Memoriam* may well seem to treat religious topics without proper theological clarity. But he considers this a feature, not a failure, of poetry. He writes: “It may be the office of the priest to teach upon authority—of the philosopher according to induction—but the province of the poet is neither to teach by induction nor by authority, but to appeal to those primal intuitions of our being which are eternally and necessarily true” (95). The office of the poet is not instructive or pedagogical in the manner of a priest, he suggests, any more than it is inductive like that of the philosopher. The poet’s work is to instruct through appeal. Robertson may be contradicting himself here, though. If, as Ellison has suggested, the Victorian homiletic ideal was primarily that the sermon persuade its listeners, then the work of the priest—at least in his sermons—is both to instruct *and* to appeal, just as it is for the poet.

Though Robertson maintains his distinction between poet and priest throughout his work, he complicates this distinction by treating poetry as a sacrament. Just as he gives space to defining poetry according to the Romantic tradition, he defines sacrament according to the Anglican tradition: “By a sacrament we understand a means of grace, an outward something through which pure and holy feelings are communicated to the soul” (96). Robertson is less traditional in what he considers to be sacramental. He argues that limiting the sacraments only to a small set of ecclesiastical practices risks degrading them

“to the rank of charms” (97). He writes: “The sacraments are honoured when they consecrate all the things and acts of life.... The simplest of all acts is sacramental, in order to vindicate God’s claim to all acts, and to proclaim our common life sacred.” The most sacramental experience of common life, Robertson suggests, is the remembrance of the dead. Thus, in *In Memoriam*’s poetic recollection of Arthur Henry Hallam, “Tennyson has deeply, no doubt unconsciously—that is, without dogmatic intention—entered into the power of the sacraments to diffuse their meaning beyond themselves. There is no irreverence in them; no blasphemy; nothing but delicate Christian truth” (97-98). Despite his assertion that the poet is not a priest because he does not “teach upon authority,” Robertson has here essentially ordained Tennyson as a priest through the sacramental offering of his poetry. After all, in Anglican tradition, only a priest can initiate the sacraments. If poetry is such a sacrament, the poet must also be a priest.

Arguably, if sacraments can be found in “the simplest of all acts,” then anyone could act as a priest in this way simply by engaging with poetry.<sup>7</sup> Robertson has, after all, expanded both his definitions of sacrament *and* poetry. In his second lecture, he argues that poetry includes all those arts that imitate feeling: “Poetry is the expression of imaginative truth *in any form*, provided only that it be symbolic, suggestive, and indirect.... Hence *all nature is poetical*, because it is the form in which the eternal Feeling has clothed itself with infinite suggestiveness” (106, italics mine). Thus, if all of nature is poetic, and poetry is sacramental expression, then anyone could also conceivably be a priest of poetic

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7. We will see more of this poetic ordination of the reader in the chapter on Robert Browning.

sacraments. Both poetry and sacrament are found in the common life of nature. The crucial difference between the poet and the layman, then, is that the poet “enters into the power of the sacraments” by inspiration.

The tension between Robertson’s sense of poetic sacraments being universally accessible and the poet being uniquely inspired might reflect his actual experience of meeting Tennyson. The poet and priest met during visits to Cheltenham sometime between 1846 and 1850, only a few years before these lectures were delivered. Hallam Tennyson records their first interaction in his memoir: “My father would say: ‘The first time I met Robertson I felt he expected something notable from me because I knew that he admired my poems, that he wished to pluck the heart from my mystery; so for the life of me from pure nervousness I could talk of nothing but beer’” (264). Though Robertson anticipated some kind of visible genius from the poet, what he found was a man like any other. To what degree Robertson’s interpretation of the poet as a uniquely inspired man of the people might come from this encounter is a matter of speculation. But if his ideal poet recognizes the sanctity of common life, Tennyson certainly gave him a unique example of that—both in person and on the page.

Tennyson thus serves as Robertson’s model for the ideal sacramental poet in these lectures. While a poet can be great by mastering form, the “faculty of divine imagination” is achieved through vision (107).<sup>8</sup> Poets of the

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8. As we will see, Browning also distinguishes these two types of poets in his “Essay on Shelley” as the objective and the subjective poet. Of course, Robertson notes that the greatest poets, like Shakespeare, will combine these two powers.



Enlightenment, such as Alexander Pope, represent poets of the first order—precise and masterful over form but deaf to feeling. Tennyson is the other kind:

With great mastery over his material words, great plastic power of versification, and a rare gift of harmony, he also has Vision or Insight; and because, feeling intensely the great questions of his day, not as a mere man of letters but *as a man*, he is to some extent the interpreter of his age, not only in its mysticism, which...is the necessary reaction from the rigid formulas of science and the earthliness of an age of work, into the vagueness which belongs to infinitude, but also in his poetic and almost prophetic solution to some of its great questions. (112, italics mine)

While Tennyson maintains the skill of more formal poets, he speaks out of a nearness to human experience in both its great questions and its infinitude.

Robertson suggests that these two modes—scientific and prophetic—represent two different ages—one past and one present. Tennyson is a poet for the *present*, for those on the other side of the Enlightenment, as he embraces and elevates the language of the people. Robertson argues that he writes “as a man: a man of large human heart” (113). But his description of this man again suggests a priestly persuasion, overcoming doubt “by appeal to the intuitions of the Soul.”<sup>9</sup> This intuition should be available to anyone, or at least ready to be cultivated within anyone, not as formal skill but as the work of the spirit. Poetic intuition, after all, is a spiritual quality.

Robertson seems quite egalitarian here, dismissing any suggestion that poetry might influence the working classes differently than others. He writes: “They feel, weep, laugh, alike: alike have their aspiring and their degraded moods: that which tells on one human spirit, tells also upon another.... If Poetry influences men, it must influence Working Men” (114). This argument reads as

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9. Incidentally, almost the exact terms Ellison uses to describe the Victorian’s ideal homily, here used to describe the work of the poet.

more pointedly directed toward Robertson's readers of other classes than the working-class men in attendance. His direct message to the working classes, on the other hand, is ultimately that poetry ought to come *from* them. Rather than suggesting that all classes experience poetry in the same way, Robertson shifts toward a valorization of the working-class experience as *more* suited for poetry than the "upper ranks" whose poetry has lost its power: "Poetry, so far as it represents their life, has long been worn out, sickly, and sentimental. Its manhood is effete" (121-122). Robertson implies that the upper class can no longer write real poetry because they have ceased to be real men. The working classes, on the other hand, have a more direct access to "tenderness, and heroism, and endurance," those qualities of virtuous, full human life which are deserving of poetic expression.

Robertson phrases his encouragement for these men to write poetry as though they are not already doing so, but he was well aware of the poetry of the Chartist movement and the working-classes which was being widely produced at the time.<sup>10</sup> In fact, his encouragement suggests they continue to do so, as he calls for more work like that of the eighteenth-century poet, Ebenezer Elliott, also known as the Corn-Law Rhymer, who advocated through his poetry on behalf of the poor. Like Elliott, Robertson writes, working-class poets of the nineteenth century have the opportunity to express their human experience in inspired tones. He frames this opportunity as a call to action on behalf of the nation:

Our soldier ancestors told you the significance of high devotion and  
loyalty which lay beneath the smoke of battle-fields. Now rise and tell us

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10. Mike Sanders's *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (2009) and Kirstie Blair's *Working Class Verse in Victorian Scotland: Poetry, Press, Community* (2019) and *The Poets of the People: Newspaper Poetry in Victorian Scotland* (2016) give thorough accounts of these working-class poetic traditions.

the living meaning there may be in the smoke of manufacturies, and the heroism of perseverance, and the poetry of invention, and the patience of uncomplaining resignation. (122)

Robertson offers a nationalistic call to the working class to recognize in their labors the same kind of poetic sacrifice that soldiers of the crown once found on the battlefield. Like the soldier's sacrifice, the factory laborer also has an experience worthy of memorializing in verse.

Despite his encouragement to the working class to produce their own poetry, Robertson's nationalism could well be read as an attempt to divert political dissatisfaction from public action to the page. Joshua King reads Robertson's lecture in this way, noting:

So long as working peoples' skepticism, anguish, and longing for a better world find expression through the ministrations of poets such as Tennyson, Robertson claims, these working-class readers will help preserve "England's freedom from revolution and conspiracies." Revolution and conspiracies are the consequences of bottled-up frustration and doubt. Yet high poetry, such as *In Memoriam*, acts as a "safety-valve to the heart," releasing negative emotions in noble expression. (222)

This reading reflects Robertson's conviction that the "tendency...of Poetry is to unite men together" rather than to encourage division (137). The poet, after all, "belongs to the world rather than to his party: speaks his party's feelings, which are human: not their watchwords and formulas, which, being forms of the intellect, are transitory, often false, always limited" (142). Robertson's praise of the working class's poetry is not, then, an incitement to revolution or a call for any kind of fundamental transformation of social institutions. Rather, it redirects the disruptive energies of the laboring class and sanctifies their labor on behalf of the state as a noble, heroic offering.

This praise of working-class poetry sits in strange tension with Robertson's praise of Tennyson. If, as he argues, the last "healthy tones" of poetry came from Scott and Byron, then Tennyson has actually failed where the working-class poets may succeed. In fact, Robertson does not return to Tennyson in the rest of his argument, relying largely on Shakespeare and the Romantics, or even the ancient Greek poets, as examples of the high, manly poetic arts. Perhaps Robertson hesitates to include Tennyson among these poets because he is still in the midst of his poetic career and has yet to prove himself. Or perhaps, while Tennyson offers an example of both skill and vision for the present age, Robertson hopes for an even better example to arise out of the poets of the working classes. In any case, his charge to working-class poets suggests that more work remains to be done. Tennyson offers a compelling prophetic voice for the present age, but not the only voice. Working-class poets should learn from him but also share in his work—inspiring and instructing out of the uniquely "tender" and "heroic" exertions of their national labor.

*William Boyd Carpenter (1841-1918)*

During the course of his career, William Boyd Carpenter served as Bishop of Ripon, Royal Chaplain to Queen Victoria, and clerk of the closet for Edward VII and George V (Major). It was perhaps in part because of these royal connections that he was asked to deliver a sermon on "The Message of Tennyson" at Westminster in 1893, six months after the Poet Laureate's death.<sup>11</sup> Boyd Carpenter also knew Tennyson well enough to have a sense of the poet's

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11. Boyd Carpenter later served as Canon and Subdeacon of Westminster.

religious convictions. He wrote of his familiarity with the poet in Hallam's collection of recollections, *Tennyson and His Friends*. Referring to him as "the oracle poet among the younger men" (296), he recalled: "[Tennyson] had drawn the younger generation to his side: they believed in him, and they were right. In spite of misunderstanding and misinterpretation, Tennyson followed the gleam: he would not stoop to make his judgment blind or prevaricate for popularity's sake. He beat his music out" (297-298). This language of Tennyson as "oracle," as guide, even as prophet, was reflected in his elegiac sermon at Westminster. Though an early evangelical, Boyd Carpenter credited Tennyson—as well as Robertson—for the religious liberalism he later became known for himself. His sermon on Tennyson addresses both religion and nationalism, framing the poet as a priest of the nation and of the "middle way" of the Anglican Christian faith.

He begins the sermon with a discourse on work, or labor that glorifies, showing how the poet's work serves to glorify the nation—and suggesting that his listeners' acts of labor, however simple or arduous, likewise participate in bringing glory to the nation. The sermon opens with a reading of 2 Chronicles 5, in which the Israelites' unified praise of the Lord ushers in his divine presence and "the sign of the glory of their nation"—the *Shechinah* (5-6). Rather than explicating this biblical text, Boyd Carpenter uses it anecdotally to argue that the glory of Tennyson's poetry comes from the unity of his powers directed toward a greater purpose. Boyd Carpenter draws on the aesthetic principle of unity to show that the poet's verse—like the Israelites' praise, the harmony of light, or the flat surface of a mirror—achieves eminence, or glory, through its unification of power and purpose. Many a good man, he argues, has led a wasted life simply by failing to achieve "a harmonious purpose prevailing over desire and thought"

(9). While they may have lived virtuously, “they have never been knit into one by the governing ascendancy of some great master passion or purpose.”

Tennyson, on the other hand, lived in just such a way. His life serves as a model of diffident virtue and coherent expression marked by unshaken faith in God.

The poet models not only virtue, but good labor as well. Through Tennyson, Boyd Carpenter suggests, we can better understand how to live and work with unity of purpose. Though, setting aside Boyd Carpenter’s eulogistic hyperbole, his description of the work of the artist finds little correspondence with any vocational efforts other than the arts. Tennyson’s model is expansive:

Let me ask you to see how he [Tennyson] gathered together his powers, concentrated them to one great, clear, and definite purpose, expanded the range of his sympathies, and drew into them the interests of the nation in which he lives, and the experiences of the age in which he was born, grasping firmly those great eternal verities, without which all the changes and chances of this moral life are but a dumb, meaningless show. (11)

As a picture of an inspired poet, this description of Tennyson’s work is hyperbolic at best. As a picture of work in general, it is unfeasible. The preacher suggests that work ought to be approached with the concentration, expansion, and inspiration of art—and all who work ought to do so as artists.<sup>12</sup> He argues that Tennyson, “set the example to us to reverence the work we have to do,” but immediately follows this argument with a description of the poet as type of divine bard who is both a child of his age and a voice set apart (15-16). The labor of Boyd Carpenter’s parishioners may be less worthy of reverence than the labor of the poet, which is by nature sanctified.

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12. Boyd Carpenter fails to address the implications this challenge has on the systems of labor available to the Westminster congregation. If his parishioners ought to approach their work with the zeal of the poet, should that work not also be as worthy of zeal as poetry?

This reverence of the poet's labor might be better understood by looking at the way Boyd Carpenter illustrates Tennyson's sympathy with the British people through references to his militant verse. He quotes briefly from Tennyson's "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington," stating that these lines rose "stern and strong" above the public's grief for their dead hero, voicing "the leading thought of the iron life: 'Not once or twice in our rough island-story / The path of duty was the way to glory'" (19). Here, Wellington's duty brings glory to both him and his country. And both the soldier's duty and his glory parallel the duty and glory of the poet. Boyd Carpenter follows this quickly with a patchworked excerpt from "The Charge of the Light Brigade":

Cannon to the right of them,  
Cannon to the left of them,  
Cannon in front of them,  
Volley'd and thunder'd.  
Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs but to do and die! (A. Tennyson 226)

Boyd Carpenter finds more triumph than ironic national critique in these lines, despite acknowledging that the poem was written in response to "the blundering at home and the blundering abroad" that put the British in jeopardy (19). For the cleric, each poem valorizes a life lived unhesitatingly toward an ultimate—nationalistic—purpose. Boyd Carpenter aims, then, not only to encourage his listeners to work well, but to work as good British citizens, pursuing the "interests of the nation," as the poet does, and allowing the nation itself to provide that higher purpose which the poet possesses by nature. Perhaps work might be worthy of reverence if, like that of the poet, it could be understood as participating in the progress of British exceptionalism. The citizen who embraces this calling will be satisfied with whatever work they are given as long as it

elevates the nation. Even a laborer can pursue the reverential patriotism of the Duke of Wellington or the soldiers of the Light Brigade. Such a reading clarifies Boyd Carpenter's opening interpretation of the Old Testament narrative in which he implies that the Israelites' unified praise of God reflects a nationalistic rather than religious unity. It might even suggest that nationalistic unity *is* religious unity—if the nation becomes a surrogate religion in Victorian consciousness.

Interestingly, this reading also serves to frame nationalism as a poetic impulse. If poetry is spiritual by nature, Tennyson's nationalistic verse serves to sacralize the nation, acting as nationalistic "scripture" for the empire. Boyd Carpenter quotes from "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights" to illustrate the poet's faithfulness to "those great and dominant traditions of English life, the love of freedom and the reverence for order" (20):

Of old sat Freedom on the heights,  
The thunders breaking at her feet;  
Above her shook the starry lights,  
She heard the torrents meet.

Her open eyes desire the truth;  
The wisdom of a thousand years  
Is in them. May perpetual youth  
Keep dry their light from tears. (A. Tennyson 60)

The nation that loves freedom is one that shares in freedom's sublime vision, that pursues truth and brings the best of what has past ("the wisdom of a thousand years") into the present. These are qualities of the poet as well. Furthermore, Boyd Carpenter lauds Tennyson as a poet of the nation with an empirical awareness of what lies beyond its borders. His repeated acknowledgment of Tennyson's "devotion to the pure home life of England," and his unity "with all English life" despite his ability to "look beyond one land," centralizes England



while obscuring “abroad” (20). Tennyson’s poetry thus participates in a narrative of empire. If Tennyson is the nation’s prophet, he is the empire’s prophet as well.

Boyd Carpenter further argues that the life of the English nation served as Tennyson’s muse, a kind of proto-poem, a wind upon his Æolian harp. Lest this image suggest Tennyson as a merely passive receptacle for the “passing breeze of popular feeling,” Boyd Carpenter quickly repeats the description of the divine bard as a prophet: “The poet must be one who descends from his height, and his harp must be within his grasp; his fingers must strike the strings, and his own hand must bring forth the music. He must not only give voice to a people’s thoughts: he must have a message for their hearts” (22). The nationalistic poet does not merely reflect the nation to itself, but “must always have a touch of the prophet in him,” teaching and declaring to a people “those great and eternal realities which are the background of all human life,” and which are necessary for a nation’s “fruitfulness” (23). Without the nationalistic framework, Boyd Carpenter’s reflections on Tennyson as prophet would resonate clearly with Romantic conceptions of the poet. Instead, his vision of the poet as religious prophet of the national spirit reflects his particular role as the queen’s chaplain. His interpretation of the poet’s role, then, mirrors his own understanding of his role as a priest. While Anglicanism was always a national institution, his own ministry to the royal family embodied an intersection of church and state that necessitated serious reckoning with the shared values of nationalism and religion.

Boyd Carpenter implicitly acknowledges that his reading of Tennyson as a prophet of the nation is threatened by critiques of the poet’s orthodoxy. Thus, he follows his description of Tennyson’s inspired nationalism with a justification of

the poet's Christian faith. Boyd Carpenter was clearly concerned with Tennyson's faith during the poet's life as well, given the reflections he offered Hallam in "Tennyson and His Talk on Some Religious Questions." There, he gives a much less confident account of Tennyson as a Trinitarian.<sup>13</sup> In his sermon, however, he identifies proof of Tennyson's Trinitarian faith within the verses of *In Memoriam*. He finds evidence of Tennyson's belief in the Father in these lines, which Boyd Carpenter says speak of a world "ruled over by a fatherly love" (27):

Who trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law—  
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw  
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed. (A. Tennyson 176)

Evidence of the Son, or "a redeeming love and influencing force," he finds in the poem's preface, "Strong Son of God, immortal love" (Boyd Carpenter 28):

Thou seemest human and divine,  
The highest, holiest manhood, thou.  
Our wills are ours, we know not how;  
Our wills are ours to make them thine. (A. Tennyson 163)

And finally, the priest claims that evidence of Tennyson's belief in the third person of the Trinity can be found in these lines speaking of "a Divine spirit which can sooth our sorrows, stimulate our energies, and by inward help lift us up above the shocks of chance, the changes of circumstance, and the depressions of temperament" (Boyd Carpenter 28):

Be near me when my light is low,  
When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick  
And tingle; and the heart is sick,  
And all the wheels of Being slow. (A. Tennyson 175)

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13. Boyd Carpenter may have felt the urgency of justifying the poet's Trinitarian orthodoxy more fully because of the many ways Tennyson was appreciated by theistic Unitarians, as we will see in the following chapter.

These generalized statements of faith in both sermon and poem accord with Boyd Carpenter's praise of Tennyson's sympathy toward "those who were impatient of the formal statement of truth" (Boyd Carpenter 24). However, apart from the legitimate question of whether this really offers a reliably orthodox description of the Christian God, these stanzas make no explicit declarations about Tennyson's religious belief.

The last stanza in particular is a prayer, not a proclamation—but the priest reads this prayer as confirmation of Tennyson's belief in the prayer's unheard answer. This is especially curious when considered in light of the full passage.

The next three stanzas are similar prayers:

Be near me when the sensuous frame  
Is rack'd with pangs that conquer trust;  
And Time, a maniac scattering dust,  
And Life, a Fury slinging flame.

Be near me when my faith is dry,  
And men the flies of latter spring,  
That lay their eggs and sting and sing  
And weave their petty cells and die.

Be near me when I fade away,  
To point the term of human strife,  
And on the low dark verge of life  
The twilight of eternal day. (A. Tennyson 175)

These prayers are immediately followed in the next canto with:

Do we indeed desire the dead  
Should still be near us at our side?  
Is there no baseness we would hide?  
No inner vileness that we dread?

Shall he for whose applause I strove,  
I had such reverence for his blame,  
See with clear eye some hidden shame  
And I be lessen'd in his love? (175)

Tennyson's prayers are directed to Arthur Hallam, then, not to the Trinitarian God. Perhaps this might serve as evidence of Tennyson's belief in the immortality of the soul or even the resurrection of the dead, but they actually say nothing directly or indirectly about his belief in God—Trinitarian or otherwise.

It might be helpful to note here that while Boyd Carpenter's argument is directed against those who criticize Tennyson for being "half a Pagan," he does not say that these stanzas explicitly illustrate the poet's orthodoxy so much as his "Christian spirit" (23, 24). This generalization of Tennyson's Christianity also supports Boyd Carpenter's reading of Tennyson's nationalistic religion. After all, a religious impulse so generically defined makes its appropriation by nationalistic rhetoric a simple piece of work.<sup>14</sup> In order to read Tennyson's religion nationalistically, in fact, the poet's Christian faith must necessarily be undogmatic in its "formal statement."

Boyd Carpenter acknowledges the danger of holding dogma too loosely, though, advocating for an eminently Anglican *via media* between fundamentalism and free-thinking. He seems to understand this middle way as an embrace of divine mystery and argues that, for Tennyson, "truth is so infinitely great that all we can do with our poor human utterances is to try and clothe it in such language as will make it clear to ourselves, and clear to those whom God sends us with a message" (26-27). This description likewise expresses Boyd Carpenter's own role as a priest, aligning his vocation with Tennyson's vocation as poet. In taking a middle way between fundamentalism and free-

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14. In this way, Boyd Carpenter's generic religious impulse participates in that semi-religious legitimization of state and imperial power that often relies on such liberal theologies to erase doctrinal competition to its authority.

thinking, Tennyson acts much like Boyd Carpenter himself. Like Tennyson, the priest sympathizes with religious liberalism, but hesitates to align overtly with the Broad Church movement. Boyd Carpenter's justification of Tennyson's orthodoxy, then, simultaneously works to communicate the priestly or clerical role of the poet.

Boyd Carpenter continues to engage with *In Memoriam*, suggesting that the poem's narrative of progress from doubt to faith is intentionally pedagogical—illustrating the security of faith despite doubt rather than authenticating that doubt through the poet's own experience. In other words, in order to offer a convincingly orthodox reading of Tennyson the poet, Boyd Carpenter reads *In Memoriam* as a reassuring account of certainty rather than a realistic encounter with disbelief. He follows Robertson in this regard, who described *In Memoriam* as “one of the most victorious songs that ever poet chaunted” (“Two Lectures” 94). Boyd Carpenter and Robertson are hardly alone here. Many readers felt the poem's faith was all the more triumphant because of its progress through doubt. King argues that for many Christians across denominations, “Tennyson confirmed a bedrock of faith within the human soul, below which doubt could never plummet, and on which more explicit, public forms of Christian confession could be raised” (161). King addresses the many ways Victorian critics were concerned with the poem as a confirmation of faith, observing how widely they “glossed over” the poem's negotiation of doubt (162). Boyd Carpenter likewise treats Tennyson's faith as a triumph over doubt, reassuring his listeners that the poet can be trusted to guide them securely through their own doubts to a more triumphant certainty as well.

He does not rely exclusively on *In Memoriam* to make this point, either. For example, Boyd Carpenter quotes from “Doubt and Prayer”—“Let blow the trumpets strongly while I pray / Till this embattled wall of unbelief, / My prison, not my fortress fall away”—to illustrate Tennyson’s confidence that “the forces which seemed adverse to man might yet cooperate to his higher good” (31). While this may minimize the experience of Tennyson’s disbelief, it also incorporates that disbelief into the progress of faith. Tennyson’s doubt could eventually lead to a comfortable Christian certainty and security. In this, the poet again serves Boyd Carpenter as a sanctified model. Like the poet, readers may rest secure in the certainty that their labor, however humble, brings glory to God and country, and that their religious doubts will be answered by God’s goodness. And these are not unrelated concerns. Insofar as Anglican faith and British identity are intertwined, the nation’s glory is dependent upon its people’s secure faith. Furthermore, by implication, if Tennyson is the nation’s priest, then he also offers something priestly to the Anglican church as well.

*Alfred Gatty (1813-1903)*

Alfred Gatty’s interest in Tennyson forms a helpful contrast to the liberal Anglican perspectives of Robertson and Boyd Carpenter. Gatty was a moderately High Church Anglican who served as vicar of Ecclesfield near Sheffield from the age of twenty-six until his death (Hey). Gatty understood the role of the parish vicar to include active involvement in all the particulars of its life, and his whole family participated in these efforts—his daughters in many ways acting as unofficial curates in their parish work. During his tenure, he worked actively to restore the fifteenth-century church in his care, wrote prolifically on a breadth of

topics, helped to build more churches and schools, and gave regular lectures on cultural subjects. This expansive local involvement was as essential to his ministerial role as the homilies he preached on Sundays. His writing on cultural subjects constituted a significant portion of his public work in Sheffield. In addition to several volumes of sermons, Gatty published local histories, a collection of poetry, and *A Key to Tennyson's In Memoriam*, which explicated the poem's obscure references line by line. This "key," first published in 1881, may well have developed out of his 1859 lecture on the poet to the Literary and Philosophical Society in Sheffield.

Though Gatty argued in this lecture that poetry is "an instinct in man like music," and "his natural language to the Deity," his extant sermons record almost no references to poetry except in relation to the work of the biblical prophets (*Poetical Character* 3).<sup>15</sup> Only once in his recorded sermons does he briefly reference a poet from his own age—that is, Tennyson. In the sermon "Private Confessions" (1867), Gatty tries to allay a congregational dispute about the sacrament of confession, one of the most contentious of his sermon topics. Here, he appeals to the poet in order to justify his advocacy of Anglicanism against detractors who consider the middle way between "Geneva and Rome" to be a weak compromise (13). Gatty argues: "I believe in the words of the greatest poet and the deepest thinker of the age, when he speaks of the 'falsehood of extremes.' In the centre, and not at either end of any subject do you find its real meaning." The phrase "falsehood of extremes," comes from the end of

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15. See Gatty's *Sermons* in two volumes, *Twenty Plain Sermons for Country Congregations and Family Reading*, and miscellaneous individually published sermons, most of which focus on explication of scripture.

Tennyson's "Of Old Sat Freedom on the Heights," describing the figure of Freedom:

That her fair form may stand and shine,  
Make bright our days and light our dreams,  
Turning to scorn with lips divine  
The falsehood of extremes! (61)

In referencing this poem without context, Gatty appeals to nationalist ideals to solidify an ecclesiastical argument. He treats the concerns of church and nation as one. And by not naming Tennyson directly here, he highlights the poet's intellectual and spiritual authority—for he does not need to be named to be recognized—and functionally uses the poet to enhance his own credibility on a fraught concern.

Tennyson's authority makes him a fitting model of the "poetical character" as Gatty describes it. The 1859 lecture unifies Gatty's academic and religious concern with poetry. Like others before him, he orients poetry's roots in the oral history of the Israelites. The poetic genius is that same divine impulse that "made Jacob wrestle with the Lord" and "inspired the Prophets" (4). Gatty formally distinguishes poetry from prose as being "constructed in measured verse, and in terms of closest concentration" (3). In prioritizing form, Gatty decentralizes without dismissing emotion as a characteristic of poetry. This formal distinction differs from the Romantics but shares with them the sense of poetry as a mode of expression. He writes, "Poetry seems to be the highest expression of thought of which the human mind is capable. It is the great vehicle for conveying the noblest sentiments, the tenderest feelings, the most stirring appeals, and the profoundest moral truths." Interestingly, these aims of poetry are also the aims of the sermon. Though their means are formally distinct, both



poet and the priest pursue noble sentiment, tender feeling, and an appeal to truth.

However, the genius of the poet, according to Gatty, also distinguishes his work from that of the priest. Poetic genius is “a gift of our Maker to a few”—a gift of temperament, perspective, and language (*Poetical Character* 4). Inspiration is given the poet in the same way foreknowledge is gifted the prophet. In fact, the poet is himself a kind of prophet, according to Gatty:

As a moral and political teacher, his lessons are not merely for the day, but for all time, and constantly include a power of prophetic vision. He not only observes and discriminates, but even foretells; as if, thinking more profoundly than the rest of mankind, he sometimes caught glimpses from behind the veil of futurity. (5)

These prophetic glimpses “lead him” to that verse form that likewise distinguishes the poet from the priest. Of course, Gatty’s description of the poet-prophet nevertheless retains the priest’s work as preacher, or “as a moral and political teacher.” The poetical character thus unites the instructive work of the priest with a divinely bestowed prophetic genius. Gatty considers Tennyson a rare present example of this poetical character in Victorian England. His works achieve those post-Romantic homiletic qualities Gatty prizes in poetry, appealing to the intellect as well as the feelings, and leading to a “refinement of the character” (6). Gatty admits that Tennyson’s work is somewhat more difficult to understand than popular writers such as Burns or Byron. But, “like high art, in all its branches,” this challenge leads to that very intellectual, emotional, and personal growth that makes poetry worthwhile in the first place.

In fact, Gatty argues extensively that the virtue of Tennyson’s poetry actually serves to counteract the vice in other poetry, namely the “moral poison”

of Byron's verses that "tend to a degrading estimate of woman's character" (8).<sup>16</sup>

While Gatty recognizes a degree of genius in Byron's work, he also sees that work celebrating regressive tendencies. Tennyson's, by contrast:

...is elevating the national morality—sympathizing with the wonderful advances of European progress—at the same time, warning against its excesses—directing also men's affections into the purest channels; and without dogmatic teaching (which is beyond the province of the poet) inculcating the holiest religion by penetrating more deeply into the spiritual world. (10)

Good poetry, then, serves as an antidote for vice, offering the kind of religious and spiritual instruction more commonly associated with the work of the church. Like Boyd Carpenter, though, this sacralization of the poet's work also encompasses a nationalistic sense of morality. Gatty expands the work of the poet to include spiritual, emotional, and intellectual instruction essential for the development of the national character.

Despite reserving dogmatic instruction for the province of the ordained minister, Gatty expresses interest in the practical value of Tennyson's poetry. "Mariana" restores the proper, progressively English value of women against Byron's regressive, "eastern" tendencies; "The Vision of Sin" serves as a warning against vice generally; and *In Memoriam* offers comfort, sympathy, and guidance. Gatty carefully reminds his listeners that *In Memoriam* is "less descriptive than speculative," emphasizing the point by referencing the poet's curiosity about the eternal destiny of the animal world (*Poetical Character* 17-18). Gatty is not unsympathetic with Tennyson's theological speculation, offering a reminder that

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16. Lest this statement give an inaccurate sense of Gatty's estimation of women, he returns to this theme later in the lecture to clarify that, while Byron's "eastern" tendencies demean women beneath their proper place, "the new world of America has shown a tendency to elevate her above her proper level, and to bring her into ridicule, rather than respect" (19). So much for Gatty's feminism.

“able and sound divines have entertained the expectation of this world being restored to its paradisiacal condition, when everything in both vegetable and animal life shall be again as it was in Eden” (18). The lines he references from *In Memoriam*’s Canto 53 make no direct claims for the perpetuity of an animal’s spirit, necessarily, but express trust in the face of ignorance:

O yet we trust that somehow good  
Will be the final goal of ill,  
To pangs of nature, sins of will,  
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

That nothing walks with aimless feet;  
That not one life shall be destroy’d,  
Or cast as rubbish to the void,  
When God hath made the pile complete;

That not worm is cloven in vain;  
That not a moth with vain desire  
Is shrivel’d in a fruitless fire.  
Or but subserves another’s gain.

Behold, we know not anything;  
I can but trust that good shall fall  
At last—far off—at last, to all,  
And every winter change to spring. (A. Tennyson 175)

While this passage certainly invokes an eschatological hope (“I can but trust that good shall fall / At last”), it seems just as concerned with the unanswered tension between nature’s cruelty and God’s goodness (“Behold, we know not anything”). Thus, although Gatty distinguishes the use of Tennyson for speculative instruction from his own ministerial work, he exegetes the poem in ways that reinforce his dogmatic concerns by reading this passage as a claim about animals’ eternal destiny.

The remainder of Gatty’s lecture returns to his nationalistic reading of the poet. Even his reflections on women in *The Princess: A Medley*, explore the character of the British nation. And the further Gatty moves from his religious

interpretations of the poems, the more the poems themselves take over the lecture. He summarizes and quotes extensively from “Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington,” *Maud*, and *Idylls of the King*, closing with a complete transcription of “the short patriotic appeal” of the poem “Riflemen Form!” (29). Each of these poems, in one way or another, illustrates Gatty’s assertion that “Tennyson is a true patriot—a real lover of his own country” (28). Their moral influence, for Gatty, increasingly serves to improve the moral nature of the nation. The genius of Tennyson’s poetry, then, lies in its patriotic rather than spiritual or religious appeal. Unless, of course, as Gatty’s initial definition of poetry suggests, the religious and the patriotic are related.

Gatty’s emphasis on both the religious and nationalistic impulses of poetry resonates with Robertson’s and Boyd Carpenter’s readings of the poet’s relationship to the nation. Despite differing from them in treating poetry as a distinctly formal expression, he shares with them a conviction that the work of the poet contributes to national virtue. Robertson encourages the working class to share in that effort in both labor and poetic expression. Boyd Carpenter makes the nation’s glory contingent on its faith. Both of these encourage their listeners toward action and religious confidence. Gatty’s nationalist reading of Tennyson, on the other hand, is more descriptive than prescriptive. Tennyson’s poetry, for Gatty, not only offers antidote to vice but also helps the British people understand themselves in a long tradition of virtuous strength and freedom.

*Hugh Haweis (1838-1901)*

While Robertson, Boyd Carpenter, and Gatty emphasize the poet as prophet, Hugh Haweis explicitly refers to the poet as a priest. Moreover, he

conflates this role with the poet's prophetic vision as if in justification for using the poems as instructive texts in place of scripture within the liturgy of his Sunday evening services. These services were a significant part of Haweis's curacy at St. James, Westmoreland Street, Marylebone (Baigent). For thirty-five years, after taking orders in 1862, he threw his energies into revitalizing the community through compelling preaching and Sunday evening gatherings featuring musical performances, sermons and lectures, and art exhibitions. Haweis's collection of reflections on Tennyson and other poets, *Poets in the Pulpit*, was originally recorded in shorthand during some of these Sunday evening services, then revised for publication in 1880.<sup>17</sup>

One of Haweis's motivations in forming the Sunday evening services was to bring extra-scriptural instruction to his congregation. He prefaces the sermon collection with a benediction, which also serves as a brief explanation for the series as a whole: "May the sphere of the Church of England Pulpit be annually enlarged, and may her Preachers learn to press all that is good into the service of God" (1). How the sermons themselves might serve to enlarge the Anglican pulpit is unclear, but they certainly serve as a model for bringing "all that is good," namely poetry, "into the service of God." Haweis reiterates the point at the beginning of his first collected sermon, offering poetry as a substitute for the text of scripture in the liturgy of the Sunday evening service: "It is sometimes thought that an address from the pulpit cannot be good unless it starts with a text. But a right grasp of the Bible should teach us how to find 'sermons in

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17. It is unclear whether these sermons were delivered shortly before the publication date or over a longer period of time. Haweis seems to have led Sunday evening gatherings throughout much of his ministry, excepting when he would travel to lecture.

stones, and good in everything” (3). Poems are particularly suited to act as these “stones,” as the poets who craft them may be just as inspired as the prophets of the Bible. In fact, Haweis argues, “The poet and the prophet in old days meant almost the same thing.... When you study the utterances of contemporary poets, you are really mastering the springs of contemporary life, and, insofar as the poet himself is religious, the central religious thoughts and aspirations of the age” (5-6). Indeed, if the poets Haweis considers in his collection—Longfellow, Tennyson, Browning, Keble, Herbert, and Wordsworth—have already pressed the good of poetry into God’s service, then they have done the work of England’s preachers for her.

Haweis identifies the poet as priest, preacher, and prophet throughout the sermons—characteristics which all contribute to his giving voice to his age. The other clerical critics also explored the significance of Tennyson as prophet of his current culture. Gatty, for example, emphasized the poet as “the appointed medium” of experience (*Poetical Character* 5). Robertson framed Tennyson’s work as an appeal to the working classes, stating that, “Poetry is essentially of the people, and for the people” (“Two Lectures” 73). Boyd Carpenter likewise called him “no vassal of the past, but the child of his age” (17). He explicitly references Friedrich Schiller here, who declared: “No doubt the artist is the child of his time; but woe to him if he is also its disciple, or even its favourite” (41). This tension Schiller identifies between the artist as a cultural mouthpiece and as a figure set apart defines Boyd Carpenter’s treatment of Tennyson. In the same way, Haweis illustrates that Tennyson is a poet of and for the people, “emphatically the man of his age” (35). He composes out of an awareness of “the political, social, and intellectual, as well as the poetical and spiritual, movements of the nineteenth

century.” Perhaps Haweis and Boyd Carpenter express themselves all the more forcefully on this point because they speak at a further remove historically from the poet’s peak. Haweis published his sermon in 1880, while Boyd Carpenter spoke at the end of the century in 1893. Looking back from the century’s close, they treat Tennyson’s poetry as a touchstone of a past or passing age.

The priestly or prophetic work of the poet comes out of what Haweis refers to as his active and passive sensibilities. The poet’s expression actively changes the way readers perceive the world around them as the poet “imposes his own emotional atmosphere on his surroundings” (39). This active expression is not didactic, but suggestive, welcoming the readers into the poet’s perception indirectly, as if letting them in on a private confidence (38). The poet sees and expresses with poetic clarity, but at a distance, “standing apart,” and as if speaking to himself. Haweis draws from John Stuart Mill’s definition of poetry here, as “the expression of thought coloured by emotion or feeling, expressed in metrical language, and overheard” (37). In a sense, a poem’s readers are not being spoken *to*, but spoken *near*. As Emily Dickinson would say, the poet persuades by telling the truth “slant.” In concert with this active work, the poet also passively receives impressions from the world around him. Like Robertson and Boyd Carpenter, Haweis uses the image of an Æolian harp to describe the poet’s receptivity to nature. And this receptivity is a priestly posture, as he explains:

The poet stands with open heart and mind, ready to receive and register impressions. He is the great High Priest of nature. He is here to interpret her mandates, to overhear her secret whispers long before he himself is overheard of men. His heart beats in time with the universe; he is one with all nature in praise, and in sympathy with all human beings in sorrow and joy. (39)

This priestly sensibility is also prophetic, as “heaven and earth, and the glory of them” reveal themselves to the poet’s open perceptions. Through these active and passive sensibilities, Tennyson perceives not only the natural world outside of himself, but the truth of human nature as well. Haweis traces the poet’s explication of that nature through the remainder of his sermons on Tennyson.

Tennyson is, in fact, the only poet in Haweis’s collection to be addressed more than once. Three of the priest’s sermons explore his work—first the poems “St. Simeon Stylites” and “St. Agnes,” then “The Vision of Sin” and “The Palace of Art,” and finally *In Memoriam*.<sup>18</sup> Haweis explicates each poem to illustrate a different aspect of the spiritual nature of the tripartite human person. “St. Simeon Stylites” and “St. Agnes” treat the elevation of the spirit to the detriment of body and mind, “The Vision of Sin” and “The Palace of Art” consider the elevation of body and mind over spirit, and *In Memoriam* traces the progress of a person in whom body, mind, and spirit are unified. Haweis thinks that “we are too cunningly made” to completely live out of only one element of our tripartite whole. Nevertheless, Tennyson’s treatment of such imbalanced figures functions as prophetic allegory, a warning to readers against the vices that appeal to each separate part of the human person. Through the imbalance of the allegory, readers may see the “right proportion” of the appetites “in the general economy of human life” (69). The poem serves as a moral lesson, then, and the poet a moral teacher. Glossing the poems in this way, Haweis treats them as sermons in

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18. In publications from 1855 on, Tennyson changed the title of “St. Agnes” to “St. Agnes’ Eve.” The titles of both “St. Agnes” and “St. Simeon Stylites” are often published without an abbreviating period (as “St Agnes,” for example). The titles here are rendered as Haweis uses them in his sermon.



their own right, even as they fulfill the liturgical role of scripture in his Sunday evening homilies.

Haweis' impulse to preach through the poems, however, risks reading them poorly. The priest takes Tennyson's "St. Simeon Stylites," for example, as a serious reflection on an age of religious experience now largely foreign to Christendom, in which ascetic fervor might have been a natural reaction to the licentious excesses of the surrounding society.<sup>19</sup> By drawing attention to Simeon as a prophetic respondent to his age, Haweis subtly draws another connection between the prophet and the poet. Both emerge out of their time, reflecting the age back to itself. Of the ascetic prophet, he writes:

He who did believe, was constrained to sum up his belief in some immense symbol—nay, to become himself that symbol, as did Simeon upon his pillar. That spectacle meant—there is something in man that is greater than his body, that can master and even extinguish all its natural hunger and appetite—this body, which is always getting in the way of soul-progress! (56)

Haweis sympathizes with this motive for asceticism, nearly affirming the stylite's gnostic impulse in an attempt to make him sympathetic to contemporary religious readers.

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19. Other readers of the period were less inclined to read "St. Simeon" as evidence of Tennyson's spiritual or religious sympathies, as Haweis does, than as evidence to the contrary. The British academic William Macneile Dixon argued in his 1896, *A Tennyson Primer*, that the poem is a companion piece to Tennyson's *Ulysses*, "in fuller sympathy with the ethics and ideals of Greek philosophy than with the self-effacing spirit of the Middle Ages" (56). Dixon suggests that "St. Simeon Stylites" reflects Tennyson's sympathetic critique of medieval Christianity that comes into its fullness with *Idylls of the King*. He sees the symbolism of the *Idylls*, and by extension "Simeon," as more neo-Platonic than Christian, an "allegory of 'the soul at war with sense'... pervaded by conceptions which have their root in the poetic mysticism of Plato's many-sided mind" (57). To Dixon, though Tennyson affirms the Christian creed, he does so in a way that suggests that creed is "grafted on the tree of high pagan speculation." Though the paganism Dixon refers to is Greek in origin, Tennyson's medieval verses do reflect the syncretistic experience of medieval Christianity and pagan Britain. Haweis's treatment of the poems does not address this syncretism—with either Greek or Celtic paganism—at all. Rather, his efforts work alongside the poet, he suggests, to justify and make familiar a mode of Christianity that would otherwise feel foreign to Victorian readers. This should perhaps come as little surprise given the context of Haweis's treatment; a Sunday evening sermon to his congregation seems a poor place to reflect on Tennyson's possible paganism.

But this results in a strangely serious interpretation of the poem, given its self-satirizing character. Herbert F. Tucker, Jr. identifies the poem as the precursor to Browning's dramatic monologues, calling it "a perennial surprise in the Tennyson canon" (126), and quoting Edward FitzGerald as saying that Tennyson would read the poem "with grotesque Grimness...laughing aloud at times" (127). Tucker wonders if Tennyson may well have been laughing along with St. Simeon, as the saint laughs within the poem itself: "Am I to blame for this, / That here come those that worship me? / Ha! Ha! / They think that I am somewhat. What am I?" (A. Tennyson 81). Here, St. Simeon ostensibly laughs at both his worshippers and at himself, "at the same bittersweet blend of humbuggery and aspiration, at the inability of even this apparently most stable of selves to know just where it stands" (Tucker 127). Nevertheless, the saint is an untrustworthy witness of his own experience. Tucker goes on to argue, "Simeon's situation within the Christian polarity of spirit and flesh thus résumés a problem that the modern dramatic monologue has tended to place in the foreground since its inception: the philosophical split between mind and physical nature, or between consciousness and history" (130). In other words, the poem explores a fundamental and universal failure to unify tripartite human nature. Haweis, on the other hand, considers the stylite's failure a unique and extreme case.

The failure of the stylite illustrates as much about the poet as it does human nature. Without affirming the stylite's excesses of asceticism, Haweis treats the poem as an example of Tennyson's ability to sympathize with people very different from himself. Not only does Tennyson exert an "imaginative hold

over past religious phases of Christian thought and feeling,” but he models how to extend such efforts toward strangers in his own age (53). Haweis writes:

The sympathetic exercise of the imagination which enables a man to live and move in alien atmospheres—to realize other men’s notions of life, to see things through their eyes—is the power which will alone enable us to take a wide interest in the condition of others, or to do justice to their religious, political, and social views when differing from our own.... The moral lesson of a great imaginative effort like the poem of St. Simeon Stylites is—put yourself in his mental atmosphere, live in his age. (53-54)

With sympathy as his guiding hermeneutic, it is perhaps little wonder that Haweis employs so little irony in reading Tennyson’s dramatic monologue. Instead, the poem serves to illustrate the “moral lesson” or spiritual discipline of sympathetic imagination. The more thoroughly the poet exerts such sympathetic imagination, the more thoroughly readers can as well, immersing themselves in the poem to experience authentically a world apart from their own.

Haweis’s refusal to read “St. Simeon Stylites” ironically is further reflected in how little he acknowledges Tennyson’s authorship throughout his explication of the poem. After all, recognizing dramatic irony necessitates acknowledging the difference between an author’s agency and a speaker’s unreliability. Haweis’s interpretation so concentrates on the poem as an exercise of imaginative sympathy that he fails to recognize Tennyson’s dramatic mode. Instead, he encourages his listeners’ own exercise of sympathy by providing context for the poem as though it were a work of history rather than imaginative speculation. In a sense, Haweis treats the poem as scripture in this way. A preacher might acknowledge a scriptural text’s human author, but if scripture is by definition “inspired,” the reader may treat it as existing apart from or regardless of that author. Its origin is divine. In fact, the work of the prophet is to act as vessel for language not his own. By situating Tennyson as a prophet, Haweis may gloss

over the poet's primary agency—and the critical interpretations that would follow that agency.

His treatment of "The Vision of Sin" considers the poet more directly as he conflates the poet with the poems' speaker. Haweis treats the "I" of this opening stanza as Tennyson himself:

I had a vision when the night was late:  
A youth came riding toward a palace-gate;  
He rode a horse with wings, that would have flown,  
But that his heavy rider kept him down. (A. Tennyson 111)

It is "*the poet*" who has this vision and is then "suddenly rapt away in contemplation" (Haweis 70-71, italics mine). Shortly after, "*The poet* stands in the midst of a solemn landscape...absorbed in the contemplation of eternal principles" as another vision comes rolling over the heights (71, italics mine). And again, "*the poet* finds himself once more contemplating the eternal results of inexorable and Divine principles" (74, italics mine). In this last instance, however, Haweis observes that the poet follows his contemplation by uttering moral instruction. In other words, the poet transcribes his prophetic visions and then interprets their moral significance with a kind of priestly instruction, all within the space of the single poem. Vision, contemplation, and composition bring priest, prophet, and poet together in one person.

In considering "The Palace of Art," Haweis is less particular about treating the poet as the poem's speaker. In fact, he is keen to state that even though the "selfish, solitary, isolation of self-culture is a besetting tendency of the age, both in art and literature," it is nevertheless impossible for anyone to actually *do* what the poem describes (75). After all, the narrative of this poem is not a stated "vision," but an action of the interior soul who isolates herself in a

palace of beauty and intellectualism. Though, Haweis seems to sense that this tendency is not only a temptation for the age, but for the poet himself. This might explain why he shifts the speaker's gender—which the poem treats in the feminine, at least in reference to the speaker's disembodied soul—to masculine pronouns. But if intellectual isolation is Tennyson's temptation, it is not one the poet succumbs to. Curiously, the speaker of "The Palace of Art" cannot actually be a poet at all. In order to write a poem, the poet must be able to perceive truth in nature. Haweis figures the ideal poet not as Tennyson but as the biblical King David: "To the Psalmist, the vision of 'a tract of barren sand,' which in the 'Palace of Art' is a mere imaginative freak, was a symbol of the soul without God: 'in a barren and dry land, where no water is'" (79-80). Indeed, this perception is available to anyone with a "loving heart," who looks upon the beauty of the world. Thus, the lesson of the poem is a lesson for all people—not simply instruction for the poet.

Haweis continues to treat the narratives of these poems as parables for his listeners. Rather than teaching them something about poetry as a craft or the poet as a cultural figure, he uses the poems homiletically, "with the poet as my teacher" (85). For Haweis, *In Memoriam* completes the lesson, as it depicts "the whole man...displayed in right proportion" (86), or "the sublime humanity as conceived by God—like God himself, tripartite and triune" (90). *In Memoriam* was not commonly considered in conversation with "The Palace of Art" and "The Vision of Sin," in the same way the two poems were with each other. But if they, along with "St. Simeon Stylites" and "St. Agnes," work as allegories of disordered, dehumanizing types, *In Memoriam* could offer an alternative narrative of the grieving individual's movement through disorder into

humanizing union. For Haweis, the poem's observations of grief appeal to the reader because "they reflect some of the deepest and most universal aspects of our common humanity" (92). Sorrow has a "cleansing and purifying effect," arousing and exposing the inner life to reveal a person's true quality. Thus, through the experience of the speaker's grief, we witness his gradual rejection of disorder and acceptance of a higher, unified individuality. In all of this, the speaker's particular experience represents humanity broadly—not necessarily Tennyson specifically.

Rather than treating the poet as the poem's speaker—which would have been a much more common mode of reading *In Memoriam*—Haweis correlates the speaker with the reader. He refers to the speaker as "the friend of the dead" (103) and as "a man or woman"—including any reader who mourns the death of a friend (108). He even explicates the poem as a narrative about "you," his listeners, rather than about Tennyson specifically:

Sooner or later the sane voices of common day make themselves heard. *You* have no right to be prostrated in such a manner as not to rise out of sorrow, misfortune, or calamity; it may press *you* down, but *you* should struggle out of it, and face life again, with all its great responsibilities; *you* should return to life a deeper, truer, more many-sided human being, than *you* were before. (106, italics mine)

Tennyson himself tried to present the poem as open to this interpretation, stating, "It must be remembered...that this is a poem, *not* an actual biography," and, "'I' is not always the author speaking of himself, but the voice of the human race speaking thro' him" (Hallam Tennyson 304, 305). He reiterated this in conversation with James Knowles, who recorded the poet's reflections on *In Memoriam*: "It is rather the cry of the whole human race than mine.... It is a very impersonal poem as well as personal" (182). Thus, Haweis's "you should

struggle out,” and “you should return to life” resonate with Tennyson’s own sense of the poem as representative of broader human experience. Moreover, Haweis’s imperative “you should” draws on the natural tone of a sermon. Because the poem represents “the whole human race,” he is able to instruct his congregation through its narrative.

But the homiletic mode has interpretive consequences. If the poem’s purpose for Haweis is to teach his congregation how to live in holistic virtue, attentive to body, mind, and spirit, then Tennyson’s role also must be instructive. He may speak out of his personal experience of grief, but the poem is a distillation of that experience for the benefit of others. Haweis even identifies the poet by his instruction: “So the poet *and teacher* speaks aloud to all prostrated by sorrow, failure, disappointment, or loss, of ‘the mighty hopes which make us men’” (107, italics mine). The work of the poet is also both perceptive and judicial: “The Poets of the age—those who read the inner life of the time, and form it—are ever the measure of its conduct, philosophy, and achievement” (111). For Haweis, these qualities shape Tennyson’s identity as priest and prophet, sharing in and contributing to his own ministerial work.

Haweis necessarily reads Tennyson’s poetry through a hermeneutic of religious instruction, which leads him to read the poems’ speakers in ways that contribute to that instruction. As a result, the parodic “St. Simeon Stylites” is treated as serious historical reflection. The speaker of “The Vision of Sin” is conflated with the poet because the speaker narrates a poetic vision. And the speaker of *In Memoriam*—who is more often read by critics as the poet himself—represents broad human experience instead. Again, these readings grow out of the sermons’ instructive purpose. Haweis uses the poems to preach his vision of

the whole tripartite human being. His interpretation of poetry is shaped homiletically. And this, in turn, encourages him to read the poet as co-teacher, a priest in instruction and a prophet in perception.

*William Anderson O'Connor (1820-1887)*

Like Haweis, William Anderson O'Connor reads "The Palace of Art" almost exclusively in the homiletic mode, using the poem as proof text for a religious lesson in holistic human virtue. His address on Tennyson to the Manchester Literary Club opens with a reflection on "the soul of man," and the work of God in nature and the inner life (26). Like Haweis, O'Connor treats the cultural artifact of the poem with religious sensitivity. In fact, in some ways, his priesthood was marked more by explicitly cultural contributions than by spiritual or religious ones. The Irish clergyman in the Church of England served most of his career in the small parish of Granby Row, Manchester (Sutton). Though his priesthood was often discouraging, he flourished in cultural scenes such as Manchester's Literary Club and Statistical Society. The Literary Club consisted mainly of middle-class men who were either in business or from merchant families, much like O'Connor himself (Swann 7).<sup>20</sup> For these forums, as well as the pulpit, he wrote a significant body of biblical commentary, histories, criticism, and sermons. His collection *Essays in Literature and Ethics* consists of texts mostly composed for presentation to the Literary Club that illustrate his capacity to move effortlessly between religious and cultural considerations.

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20. The Club's founders consisted of printer and secretary Edwin Waugh, antiquarian and artist Charles Hardwick, and teacher and architect Joseph Chattwood, among others. These were middle-class men like O'Connor—himself the well-educated son of a merchant.



This movement could well be attributed to O'Connor's belief that the purpose of art is fundamentally spiritual. In the opening of his lecture on "The Palace of Art," for example, he suggests that art is an embodiment of the human soul's pursuit of the divine, despite its limitations. Our inner reach is beyond our natural grasp, he argues: "Our thoughts swell beyond the compass of possible achievement. Our desires outstrip our knowledge. Our distinct conceptions are fertile spots amid wildernesses of vagueness and obscurity" (27). Art offers a way forward, bridging the inner and outer nature. Art "undertakes to embody, to arrange into rule, and to mirror back on the soul its own grandeur, its own ever-widening universality, imprinted upon it by the universality of external nature" (28). O'Connor quotes the final lines of *In Memoriam* to conclude his definition of the purpose of art, which he claims is to usher the soul "onward to the one far-off divine event to which the whole creation moves." That is—for O'Connor if not for Tennyson—the purpose of art is to usher the soul toward unity with God. Art does this by helping nature "in imprinting the likeness of God on the soul of man" (29).<sup>21</sup> O'Connor sees art as crucial to the development of the spiritual life. Thus, his work in the Manchester Literary Club, in a sense, fulfilled an essential aspect of his work in the church. His lectures on art and poetry form a natural and necessary corollary to his sermons in the pulpit at Granby Row.

Unlike the other clerics under consideration here, O'Connor writes little to nothing about the poet himself. Rather than justifying Tennyson's merits, he

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21. Not an original aesthetic theory, as Thomas Aquinas indicates as much throughout his work. Hans Urs von Balthasar would later suggest more explicitly that art unifies humankind with the Creator because beauty is most fully manifest in the person of Christ. See Umberto Eco's *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* and Balthasar's *Seeing the Form*.

assumes them, plunging almost immediately into the poem as a picture of distorted aesthetic experience. Though nearly all of his lectures in the essay collection address literary texts, none of them give much attention to the writers and poets themselves. The work, not the author, is his subject. Like Haweis's interpretation of "The Palace of Art," O'Connor's suggests a number of implications about the work of the poet without mentioning Tennyson much at all. In fact, O'Connor only names Tennyson once in his lecture, and that in his penultimate paragraph. This attention to the poem without reference to the author contributes to O'Connor's treatment of the text as a kind of scripture. That is, the poem carries its own inherent authority to speak to his listeners about the state of their soul. The priest even draws direct comparison between a passage of the poem and a passage from the book of Revelation, suggesting that the Palace within the poem serves as the antithesis of the City of God. O'Connor quotes from Tennyson's depiction of "the ranged ramparts bright" where "my soul would live alone unto herself / In her high palace there" (A. Tennyson 43), and contrasts that palace with the image of the marriage of heaven and earth found in Revelation 21:

Let us contrast for a moment with this unscaleable, impregnable, entranceless fortress of unsocial refinement and uncommunicated joy, the divine idea that warmed the hearts of men of a former time, whose inspired labours have all but shared the fate of ordinary struggles for the good of mankind, and been diverted from ministering to the elevation of the multitude to giving a zest to the pleasures of the chosen few. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and I saw the holy city coming down from God out of heaven saying, Behold the tabernacle of God is with men...and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes." (O'Connor 32)

O'Connor here implies that Revelation's vision of the Kingdom of God may be inadequate, referring to it as a compelling idea for people "of a former time." If

the biblical promise of the City of God has been appropriated or “diverted” by “the chosen few,” a new vision may be necessary to speak to his current age.

The relationship O’Conor draws between the Palace of Art and the Kingdom of God also provides interesting implications for the poet as participant with the Creator God. If the subject who hoards his aesthetic vision builds a palace of art at odds with God’s Kingdom, by contrast, the poet who shares his aesthetic vision participates in the building of that Kingdom. O’Conor continues to contrast the “four courts” of the aesthetic hedonist facing “East, West and South and North” (A. Tennyson 43) with the twelve gates of the city of God to illustrate the difference between the enclosed palace and the welcoming city (O’Conor 31-32). In such an enclosed palace, “the God of heaven will not deign to dwell” (33). Of course, as the palace is “the soul of the worshipper that is walled in by symbols, that loads itself with God’s gifts, clothes itself in His beauty, arms itself with His power, and sullenly refuses to be governed by His all-embracing love,” the structure of the city of God likewise reflects the soul of the individual open to God, generous with his gifts, and willing to be governed by love (33-34). The speaker in *In Memoriam*, then, is not just an example of the soul, mind, and body at one with itself as Haweis suggests, but of that tripartite person giving itself in the work of the poem to the reader as an open, generous, and willing “city of God.”

O’Conor furthers the comparison by aligning the hedonist of “The Palace of Art” with the aristocratic temperament that fails to see in his own experience a brotherhood with common man. O’Conor quotes from the poem to illustrate this failure:

So that she thought, "And who shall gaze upon  
My palace with unblinded eyes,  
While this great bow will waver in the sun,  
And that sweet incense rise?" (A. Tennyson 43)

Just as the architecture of the palace of art illustrates the speaker's "latent and unloving exclusiveness," so do the "delicate disguises and graceful dissemblances of art, if confined to a class, engender a fictitious sense of superiority" (O'Connor 34). When aesthetic culture is used to disguise common needs and wants, it heightens the barriers between the rich and the poor. The wealthy can forget that their wants and needs are common to all—are indeed a sign of our common humanity. In O'Connor's words: "Every device that distinguishes the common wants of men, their common dependence on the bounty of nature, raises barriers more insuperable than any legal privilege could create. The very fabric of the mind becomes imbued with a different colour." The forgetfulness of the wealthy changes them, and not for the better. O'Connor's concern is not only about material inequality on the life of the poor, but about the consequences of hoarding on the minds and hearts of the rich.

Furthermore, O'Connor includes himself in this censure. Though he served in a poor parish, his lecture shows an awareness of the dangers of forgetting his own common humanity with the poor through the temptations of aesthetic indulgence. He writes: "Because we drape our daily needs in elegance, we suppose that they are not the same as the urgent necessities of the uncultured man.... This delusion grows until it becomes the instrument of repulsion and the justification of contempt" (34-35). While O'Connor's own interest in poetry, art, and culture could well participate in that delusion, the egalitarian nature of the poem reminds him—and his middle-class listeners—of their shared humanity

with “uncultured man.” He may be especially sensitive to his context with this critique, as he delivers his lecture in Manchester—a city whose oppressive slums came to represent capitalist degradation of the proletariat in Friedrich Engel’s *The Condition of the Working Class in England* about forty years prior. O’Conor sees Tennyson’s poem as a reflection of that degradation and a warning for a culture that has failed to dismantle the barrier between the cultured and uncultured, the rich and the poor.

Nevertheless, “The Palace of Art” is also an exercise in hope. O’Conor reads the poem as an argument about the work of the artist as fundamentally oriented toward humanity’s spiritual progress. The aesthetic hedonism of the speaker desires not only beauty, but knowledge. Yet knowledge amounts to nothing without love of humankind and faith in “what Christ did to establish the dignity and the destiny of man” (45). O’Conor quotes from 1 Corinthians 13 to emphasize the point, arguing that “all knowledge is nothing unless it is conditional”—though in this case the condition is not love but belief in “the unbounded progress of man on earth” (45). This is not the progress of the industrialist or the imperialist, but of the soul in pursuit of union with God—progress toward becoming that city of God whose spiritual gates are open on all sides.

Interestingly, O’Conor is the only Anglican critic considered here who does not treat poetry’s progressive impulse as a nationalistic virtue. Even Haweis digresses on Tennyson’s monarchical devotion, commitment to freedom, and optimism about national security. His celebration of Tennyson’s nationalism acknowledges the poet’s “sound and sweet” words on reducing the gap between rich and poor, quoting Tennyson’s poem, “The Golden Year”: “When wealth no

more shall rest in mounded heaps, / But smit with freer light shall slowly melt /  
In many streams to fatten lower lands" (A. Tennyson 87). But this acknowledgment does not temper or qualify Haweis's own nationalist pride. And it fails to acknowledge the spiritual consequences of material inequality. O'Connor's ideal of progress, on the other hand, is both spiritual and material. Without echoing Robertson and Boyd Carpenter's condescension to the lower classes, he nevertheless expresses concern for the progress of the individual soul as well as the consequences of that progress on the material separation between the classes.

O'Connor avoids that condescension by focusing on censure of the privileged rather than the elevation of the poor. He warns that the absence of love that enlightens knowledge is "characteristic of the gifted and the privileged," which encompasses not only the wealthy who can cloak their common wants and needs with aesthetic disguise, but also the wealthy in intellect (46). Those who refuse to use their privilege for the benefit of others will fail to meet well with God. As they fail to "open the kingdom to others," so they fail also to "constitute a kingdom in themselves." Yet the hedonist's lack of love may be overcome by a single movement toward the good. Intellectual privilege, after all, is a relative good. "Art without love," O'Connor writes, "is stunted, maimed abortive, but on the verge of symmetry. The tongues of angels without love are a tinkling cymbal, but with it they are the harmony of heaven" (49). The "The Palace of Art" depicts the speaker falling short of the good, not actively pursuing evil. This comparison is where O'Connor finds "The Vision of Sin" a helpful corollary, for there, "the course and result of positive evil is described." The palace of debauchery appears devoid of art or beauty, except in the sunrise

every morning, which heralds “the awful gift of a better life” held out by God (50). O’Conor finds greater hope of redemption in the palace of art that is built on “a single flaw,” than in the numbed sensuality of the brutish sinner (51). He closes his lecture with encouragement to those sensible of beauty, a reminder that this lecture is essentially a homily for Manchester’s Literary Society. O’Conor has his audience in mind when he suggests that “the soul that has fed on the beautiful” will ultimately be driven away from death to love as they reject ugliness and disorder for beauty (55). While there is danger in aesthetic pursuit, there is great promise as well. All that is left for the aesthete to do is to open the doors of his palace—his soul—to the other, to generously welcome them in, as if to the city of God.

Regardless of whether Tennyson intended “The Palace of Art” to serve as a personal warning about the dangers of excluding others from his aesthetic vision, O’Conor’s image of the aesthete’s open doors offers a compelling interpretation of the poet himself. To read poetry well, to appreciate art and beauty with openness and generosity, is in a sense to be like the poet. This is a very different charge than Robertson’s call to the working class to produce poetry instead of revolt. O’Conor is not asking the poor to make art out of their own unique experience, but enjoining rich and poor alike to make all forms of art and art-making available to everyone. The priest and poet share a common egalitarian charge. O’Conor’s own work as cleric and critic—or perhaps more accurately as clerical critic—is an exercise in opening the doors of Tennyson’s poetry up to others. This opening is essential, as poetry meets certain needs and wants that are common to all of humanity—not limited to the privileged.

### *Conclusion*

The clerics considered here almost universally consider Tennyson as a prophet. But how they understand that prophetic work depends on how they read Tennyson in agreement with their own theological convictions. As Anglicans, Tennyson's role as prophet appears inseparable from their understanding of him as a priest—especially as a priest of the nation. Even Robertson, who resists calling the poet a “priest,” nevertheless explicitly suggests that Tennyson's poetry offers sacramental efficacy for his readers—framing the poet as priest by implication. Boyd Carpenter and Gatty understand the poet's priesthood in reference to their own patriotism, considering the nation itself as a kind of poem, nationalism as a religion, and the poet as its prophet and priest. Haweis and O'Connor are less concerned with the poet's role in shaping national identity and encouraging the reader toward national virtue. Rather, they consider poetry in more explicitly instructive terms, treating Tennyson's work as religiously instructive parables for the reader in pursuit of the fulness of the Kingdom of God. O'Connor in particular recognizes that the poet and priest share in the common work of making art, poetry, culture, and beauty available to all equally. His sense of the relationship between poetry and freedom may be different from Robertson's or Boyd Carpenter's, then, but Tennyson's poetry serves as catalyst for all in discerning what that relationship might be.

Most of these clerics address Tennyson's prophetic or priestly role as representative of the work of poets broadly. Tennyson serves as a notable example of the ideal poet—though the clerics unapologetically filter their interpretation of his prophetic vision and priestly instruction through their own theology and ecclesiology. The Broad Church Anglican reads Tennyson liberally,



while the conservative Anglican reads him more dogmatically. This is small wonder given the contexts of these sermons and lectures. The kind of gatherings where they preach or teach influence their interpretive choices. Those clerics, such as Robertson and O'Connor who address public working- and middle-class audiences, read Tennyson in terms of class and labor, showing in different ways how the poet's work, and poetry generally, is for everyone equally. Clerics preaching on Tennyson from the pulpit, such as Haweis and Boyd Carpenter, emphasize the poet's orthodoxy within their own traditions as well as the poet's prophetic power for the religious needs of the current day. Each cleric addresses congregations and communities under their religious charge. Their convictions about what it means to minister or how a sermon should be preached influence both their communication and their interpretation, as we shall continue to see.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### A Prophet in the Valley of Doubt: Nonconformists Preach on Tennyson

As with the Anglicans in the previous chapter, the clerics considered here represent nearly all of the Nonconformists that I could identify in searches through online databases and digital archives of nineteenth-century criticism and bibliographies on Tennyson. Their explicated texts consist of Sunday evening sermons, public lectures, and eulogy. Though these clerics reject priesthood as a category of unique spiritual authority, they nevertheless freely treat the poet as a prophet of their particular age. Rather than engaging sacramentally with divine truth, the Nonconformists' prophet passively receives that truth and communicates it to the reader through his poetry as to a fellow congregant.

The differences between these clerics' interpretations of the poet mirror differences in their own denominational or theological persuasions. Joshua King has observed this tendency in interpretations of Tennyson's *In Memoriam* in particular. In his *Imagined Spiritual Communities*, he writes, "Religious commentators found *In Memoriam* valuable for projecting the identity of their own religious subcultures or counterpublics within the British reading public" (186). Tennyson's poetry was valuable not only for understanding one's individual faith, but also in a sense for arguing its primacy. This was especially true for *In Memoriam*—the most frequently examined of Tennyson's poems among the critics considered here. Through these clerics' poetic interpretations, the reader can begin to discern both their separate religious perspectives as well as their common ground.

One thing these interpreters share is a concern over how the poem might help them navigate the problems of doubt and disbelief. *In Memoriam*'s narrative of grief explored a universal human experience, and with it the "minimum of faith" that Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Unitarian alike could share.<sup>1</sup> I have taken the phrase, the "minimum of faith," from King, who likewise takes it from Henry Sidgwick's reflections on *In Memoriam*: "These lines I can never read without tears. I feel in them the indestructible and inalienable minimum of faith which humanity cannot give up because it is necessary for life; and which I know that I, at least so far as the man in me is deeper than the methodological thinker, cannot give up" (H. Tennyson 303). Sidgwick's psychological distinction between "the man in me" and "the methodological thinker" suggests a specific way in which the reader might encounter both poetry and faith—beyond the limits of reason, in the realm of human intuition. As King notes, Sidgwick's view was not shared by everyone. But for those who embraced the poem's "minimum," he observes, "Tennyson confirmed a bedrock of faith within the human soul, below which doubt could never plummet, and on which more explicit, public forms of Christian confession could be raised" (161). Many of the critics considered here turn to Tennyson precisely for this confirmation. And clerical critics on both sides largely agree that poetry is inherently suited to express this minimum of faith.

Unlike the Anglican clerical critics, though, the Nonconformists considered in this chapter are less inclined to attribute Tennyson's religious skepticism to his grief and more inclined to explore it as a response to the

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1. Indeed, Anglican as well. Though, their nationalistic readings nuance the anxiety of disbelief, as with Boyd Carpenter's conviction that the nation's glory lies in the people's faith.

broader skepticism of his age. They are more concerned with Tennyson's intellectual skepticism than with his poetry's spiritual significance for the individual and the nation. Thomas Campbell Finlayson, Richard Roberts, Norman Macleod, David Sutherland, and Richard Acland Armstrong each explore Tennyson's faith as a consequence of or a companion to doubt. Their distinct denominational persuasions nuance these readings. And the contexts in which they explicate the poet's life and work contribute to their reading of this narrative as an intellectual argument or as a model for their listeners to likewise overcome—or reconcile—doubt in the midst of faith. As with the Anglican clerics, then, Tennyson and his poetry are read through an interpretive lens that reflects the Nonconformists' unique concerns for their congregations, listeners, and readers. Tennyson serves as prophet, priest, or preacher to the Broad and High Church Anglicans, the Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Unitarians alike—though his message may be heard differently by each.

*Thomas Campbell Finlayson (1836-1892) – Congregationalist*

Born in Glasgow to Presbyterian parents, Thomas Campbell Finlayson was strongly encouraged to pursue ordination in the United Presbyterian Church of Scotland (Wilkins xvi). Following advice from professors and ministers, he entered the United Presbyterian Theological Hall in Edinburgh in 1854. But his public disagreements on the doctrine of election convinced him that he could not enter Presbyterian ministry in good faith. Other friends encouraged him to pursue ordination in the Church of England, but Finlayson, largely influenced (like Robertson) by the teachings of F. D. Maurice, found himself too convinced of the “universal extent of atonement” to be content in the Established

Church (xxv). By 1858, he had moved across the border into England and was eventually introduced to the Congregational Church at Cambridge where he served for about six years before taking a post at Rusholme, Manchester.<sup>2</sup> He remained there until his death. The egalitarianism that led Finlayson to Congregationalism was reflected early on in his open, confident disagreement with the administrators and professors at his university, and throughout his ministry in the free communion he offered to his whole congregation. In one of Finlayson's first sermons at Rusholme, he spoke movingly of the importance of a minister's character, asserting that he was to bear witness to God by offering equal brotherly attention to all, regardless of social distinctions, to "look at all men—as much as he possibly can—in the light of God" (xxxiii). Finlayson's universalism was no mere doctrine; he was as committed to the universal love of mankind in his own ministry as he was in his creed.

This egalitarian perspective might help explain the tone of his critical writing. In March, 1871, Finlayson delivered a lecture on "Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'" in Rusholme's Public Hall that was later included as an essay in a posthumous collection of literary addresses. Finlayson spoke on Tennyson often, in fact, and repeated this particular lecture on multiple occasions. Originally composed as a rebuttal to James Hain Friswell's scathing critique of Tennyson published the year before in *Modern Men of Letters Honestly Criticised*, Finlayson's

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2. According to his biographer, Nonconformist religious communities were rare at Cambridge and "virtually unknown" at Oxford at this point (Wilkins xxviii). While the university tests requiring students to subscribe to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Established Church were outlawed for Oxford in 1854 and for Cambridge two years later, the requirement was still in place for higher degrees (Manning 373). Thus, most students and fellows in the 1850s were Anglican, and the Congregational Church in Cambridge was unusual. After preaching a few sermons there, Finlayson was offered a three-month post that led to a full pastorate the following year (Wilkins xxix-xxx).

lecture opens with praise.<sup>3</sup> He compares the poet's craft to the careful landscaping of a gardener—"To read the works of Tennyson is like walking through such a garden," the work of a painter—"he had been touching and retouching the poem with the loving hand of the artist," and the craft of a sculptor—"Such, then, is the likeness that Tennyson has here carved for us; and the sculptor has done his work so well that the world cannot soon overlook the name of Arthur Hallam" (2, 6, 14). He argues that *In Memoriam* is both a kind of garden in its precision and a memorial—comparable to the memorial of Sir Walter Scott's majestic monument in Edinburgh. These metaphors frame Tennyson's craft within the context of landscape and architecture—crafts both beautiful and practical—but not quite, in the way music or poetry is often framed, spiritual.

Unlike Haweis, who reads *In Memoriam* as a parable of tripartite man, or O'Connor, who barely addresses the poet at all, Finlayson reads *In Memoriam* as a biographical narrative. His lecture considers the poem in four movements: first as a memorial to Arthur Henry Hallam, second as a confessional expression of Tennyson's private grief told through specific personal memories and associations, third as a chronological history of the process of Tennyson's grief, and lastly as a depiction of the struggle for faith against the naturalistic

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3. Friswell's critique is almost farcically brutal. It is not difficult to understand why Finlayson rose in Tennyson's defense against such a comedically self-indulgent description of the poet:

An age that calls Dickens *deep* reading, and picks up the sixpences, will appreciate Alfred Tennyson. Look at his photograph. Deep-browed, but not deep-lined; bald, but not grey; with a dark disappointment and little hopeful feeling on his face; with hair unkempt, heaped up in the carriage of his shoulders, and with his figure covered with a tragic cloak, the Laureate is portrayed [*sic*], gloomily peering from two ineffective and not very lustrous eyes, a man of sixty, looking more like a worn and a more feeling man of fifty. His skin is sallow, his whole physique not jovial nor red like Shakespeare and Dickens, but lachrymose and saturnine. (Friswell 147-148)

tendencies of the age. The first three of these movements emphasize the poem's biographical composition and the universality of that experience. Rather than seeing the poet speak authoritatively, instructively, or through divine inspiration, Finlayson's picture of Tennyson is as a man like anyone else, articulating the universal experience of grief through his particular context.

If Finlayson aggrandizes anyone, it would be Hallam, as he reiterates Tennyson's praise of the poet's lost friend with nearly equal appreciation. The cleric notes that "the idea of Arthur Hallam dominates and pervades the whole poem," and he allows that same idea to dominate and pervade his own lecture (8). Finlayson takes these interpretive cues from the poet himself, arguing that Tennyson gestured to the poem's "private and personal character" by publishing the poem anonymously (15). It is only his love for Hallam, grief over the young man's silenced voice, and conviction that he must not be forgotten that moves him to make these private and personal reflections public: "He must admit the world so far into the privacy of his own heart. To publish some of these odes was like publishing extracts from a diary that had been kept under lock and key. Yet he will venture to reveal even his own secret emotion rather than allow his friend's worth to remain unrevealed." Tennyson risks being misunderstood as sentimental and unmanly by dwelling on his grief. But Finlayson considers this a worthwhile risk given the alternative: Hallam being too soon forgotten.

Finlayson's treatment of the poem as deeply confessional, at odds with the masculine tendencies of much Victorian verse, was a common reading. But such a confessional reading also offers a subtle acknowledgment of the homoerotic subtext some contemporary critics observed in the poem. Jeffrey Nunokawa outlines many of the correlations between *In Memoriam* and Shakespeare's

Sonnets that, he argues, had developed a “homoerotic reputation” (432).

Tennyson’s deep fondness for Shakespeare was a problem for friends such as Benjamin Jowett, for example, who “was relieved by what he regarded as Tennyson’s retreat from his devotion to the Sonnets,” precisely because it distanced the poet from homoerotic confessionality. Finlayson’s reading offers a justification in response to such accusations. He sanctifies the poet’s intimacy with Hallam—as well as Tennyson’s seemingly feminine tearfulness—by comparing their friendship to that between the Old Testament figures David and Jonathan and reminding the reader that Christ himself wept at the grave of Lazarus (19, 17). These allusions offer biblical justification for Tennyson’s intimate expressions of grief, framing them (and Tennyson) as healthful and even holy. For Finlayson, the experience of grief is fundamentally human; denying the experience, or minimizing it as feminine or sentimental, is a spiritual failure.

In the third movement of his lecture, Finlayson sets out to explain *In Memoriam* as a general history of “the Sorrow of Bereavement,” which could be considered a step away from the confessional mode into a more instructive, homiletic address. But even here, his justification for this reading further emphasizes the particularity of Tennyson’s grief, charting the specific chronological correspondence between events in the poet’s own life and the poem’s narrative. Rather than showing how the poem instructs readers about the natural phases of grief, Finlayson maps these phases onto Tennyson’s experience. The poem does not offer explicit priestly instruction about grief, then, but serves as a narrative model for others to understand their own.



This use of the poem as model rather than instruction reflects Finlayson's belief in the importance of imagination in homiletic address. In 1883, Finlayson spoke to the Manchester Congregational Board of Ministers on the subject of "The Uses of the Imagination in the Christian Ministry," arguing that even the Bible is primarily a historical narrative, "and our appreciation of the scripture-narrative depends, to a large extent, on the vividness with which we realize in our own minds the characters which it portrays, and the events which it describes" (155). This almost Ignatian practice of imagination is a very different way of addressing scripture as a liturgical text for a sermon. Here, scripture teaches through embodied story.

Finlayson's treatment of *In Memoriam* as history works in the same way. If, as he argues, "our own heart, conscience, and experience, utilized by our imagination, are the best interpreters of Bible history," they are likewise the best interpreters of Tennyson's verse (156). Finlayson's hermeneutic for scripture transposes easily onto poetry because, as he states, "the Bible is largely a book of *Poetry*" itself, and our ability to interpret it well depends on the capacity of our imagination (157). Here, Finlayson has in mind the formally poetic passages of scripture, such as the Psalms and prophecy. He even goes so far as to suggest that the biblical prophets were both poets and preachers (158). We cannot understand their sermon-poetry, he says, "unless we throw ourselves back in thought into the circumstances in which they were placed." Finlayson echoes Hugh Blair here who wrote of Old Testament verse:

In order to do justice to these, it is necessary that we transport ourselves as much as we can into the land of Judea; and place before our eyes that scenery, and those objects with which the Hebrew writers were conversant. Some attention of this kind is requisite, in order to relish the writings of any poet of a foreign country, and a different age. (3, 174)

Blair—who himself drew on Robert Lowth in these ideas—likewise argued that this exercise of entering the “thought and circumstances of those we read has a purifying effect, helping us to “feel what a good man feels,” even as the writer must likewise “feel virtuously in order to write that which elevates” (1, 14).

Lowth summarizes this conviction concisely: “The purpose of Poetry is to instruct while it gives pleasure” (3). Finlayson follows in their tread when he figures the work of interpretation occurring in the “heart, conscience, and experience” motivated by imagination (156). Historical narrative contributes to this interpretive work of the imagination. Thus, Finlayson’s emphasis on Tennyson’s poem as personal narrative does not dismiss the spiritual lessons of the poem but makes way for the reader to encounter them more fully.

The biographical sections of Finlayson’s lecture can then be understood as necessary imaginative scaffolding for the fourth movement, in which he argues that *In Memoriam* embodies the pursuit of faith in the face of grief. Here, he outlines the kinds of questions that the loss of a loved one might inspire: “That friend whom I so dearly loved, does he still exist, or has he ceased to be? Is there, after all, a soul that survives the dissolution of the body? And, if there *is* a soul, is it at death re-absorbed into the universal spirit, or does it still exist as a separate individual?” (30). Finlayson’s list of questions takes up almost a full page as he speculates in the mode of the bereaved. Tennyson’s poem, he admits, has only barely touched on these skepticisms. “*Touched*: that is all. The poet does not profess to discuss them. He attempts no philosophical investigation. He enters into no theological argument. He simply brings the questions, as a poet may well do, into the light of imagination and affection” (30-31). Even these questions are more Finlayson’s than Tennyson’s. The poet’s skepticisms are “echoes,” not real

doubts, and they simultaneously “embody the protest of the heart against” such doubt (32). Finlayson emphasizes Tennyson’s personal narrative as an aspect of his “protest.”

The poetic narrative then serves to imaginatively fortify the reader in their own skeptical inquiries. These inquiries are almost inevitable in an age besieged by scientific rationalism, as Finlayson intuitively: “The great battle which Christianity has now to fight is the battle with scientific materialism, and in this conflict the *In Memoriam* of Tennyson, appealing as it does to cultured minds, and the outcome, as it evidently is, *of a personal experience*, is fitted to render valuable service to the cause of spiritual faith” (33, italics mine). Tennyson’s supposed triumph over his doubt in the final sections of *In Memoriam* show readers how to triumph over their own, and the poem’s narrative of loss and grief serves as empirical evidence against materialism. King notes, however, that a review published the same year as Finlayson’s lecture in the Wesleyan Methodist periodical the *London Quarterly Review* comes to the opposite conclusion. The reviewer argues that Tennyson’s poetry, “in yielding nature to agnostic physical science, has encouraged free-thinking young readers to ignore signs of a loving God in creation and view it as only ‘red in tooth and claw’” (King 178-179). Tennyson’s answer to religious doubt, for this critic, is “one of sentiment, and not of faith and doctrine” (“Birmingham” 320). Finlayson, by contrast, seems to celebrate sentiment as a necessary precursor to the imaginative work necessary for faith and doctrine. King goes on to argue that “*In Memoriam* became central to these irreconcilable efforts to imagine religious community in part because, by enshrining faith in ‘my spirit,’ it participated in the long process by which ‘religion’ in modern Western societies was coming to seem ‘more

personal, more mental, and more voluntary’” (179). In which case, Finlayson’s imaginative reading of the poem may be motivated by the poem’s own argument rather than by his personal conviction about encountering scripture narratively. If, as King suggests, the poem is already participating in a “more personal, more mental” experience of religious faith, then Finlayson’s “more personal, more mental” manner of reading is called for by the poem itself.

Whether the poem calls for this imaginative reading or Finlayson brings such a reading to the poem of his own accord, *In Memoriam* nevertheless offers readers a particularly contemporary way of encountering and responding to doubt and faith. By emphasizing Tennyson’s personal narrative rather than reading the poem as a universal experience of grief, Finlayson invites readers to process their own religious doubt with Tennyson as their model. He brings his hermeneutic of imagination to the poem, treating Tennyson’s verse in the same way he treats biblical prophecy, and treating Tennyson in the same way he treats the biblical prophets. Tennyson then both prophesies and preaches to the reader through his particular history, modeling the progress of love, grief, doubt, and faith for readers who might need to navigate their own histories.

*Richard Roberts (1874-1945) – Presbyterian*

Unlike Finlayson’s lecture, Richard Roberts’s Sunday evening homily to his congregation at St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Westbourne, explored *In Memoriam* without addressing the narrative of Hallam’s death or Tennyson’s grief. Rather, Roberts’s explication of the poem narratively explores Tennyson’s religious belief. Though, like Finlayson’s, this narrative serves as a model for Roberts’s congregation as they navigate the difficult question of faith in the face

of scientific materialism. Writing at the turn of the century, Roberts incorporates fifty years' of critical consideration of *In Memoriam*. His lecture was included in the 1906 collection, *The Meaning of Christ as Interpreted by Poets and Patriots*, later expanded and polished in *The Jesus of Poets and Prophets*. The original lectures appear "as they were spoken" to his congregation with the aim "to enrich their thought and experience of Christ, and to lead them to fuller devotion and larger obedience to Him" (7-8). This goal is much more explicitly homiletic than many other clerical lectures considered here—and the lecture considers the theological implications of *In Memoriam* far more coherently than it does the poem *as* a poem.

Like Finlayson, Roberts argues that Tennyson's verse counters rather than contributes to the scientific agnosticism of the age. His lecture serves as a piece of religious apologetics, with Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as proof text. Roberts treats the poem as Tennyson's argument in response to Darwinism, even though the poem was published almost a decade before *On the Origin of Species* was released in 1859. He writes:

Tennyson was compelled to live in an intellectual atmosphere which was in a state of much confusion. The impact of new knowledge upon old beliefs created a condition of things which necessitated a recasting of the forms of thought and a severe scrutiny of the foundations of faith. Darwinism in particular seemed to imply a view of the universe which could not be reconciled with the traditional faith of Christendom in an omnipotent and benevolent Creator. (75)

Lecturing in the first years of the twentieth century, Roberts could look back at the previous century's progressive scientific materialism as one long movement typified by Darwin's work. Though, as Michael Tomko argues, Tennyson was likely responding to texts such as Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1831-1833), which offered a narrative of natural history that implied impersonal

development of life through accident and competition prior to Darwin. Furthermore, as Tomko observes, Tennyson's response to such "new knowledge" was not wholly resistant. He suggests that *In Memoriam* "exposes a crisis in natural theology only to offer other religious consolations that consolidate the role of belief and spirituality in Victorian society" (115). Tennyson does this, he argues, by "introducing a strict impassable division between the natural and spiritual." King traces this "impassable division" through the poem, writing that as the poem progresses, "Inward intuitions of a benevolent providence that guarantees an afterlife...seem entirely at odds with the chaotic and cruel natural world revealed by the developing sciences of astronomy, early evolutionary biology, and, especially, geology" (175-176). Rather than rejecting faith in consequence of this dissonance, *In Memoriam* offers intuition as the true "ground of faith."

Roberts vocalizes the religion of intuition, arguing alongside Tennyson against "sense-impressions, reason and logic" as "the sole determinants of truth" (77). Reason is essential but inadequate. "The outmost limit of our knowledge," Roberts suggests, lies beyond our rational capacities (78). There, the "witness of the spirit," or "the witness of our highest intuitions" speaks of the immortality of the soul and the nature of God (80). This is certainly a Romantic notion of interior life, inherited from Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* and Maurice who, as King notes, brought *Aids* to the Cambridge Apostles, of whom Tennyson was a member (174). But this is also a major trend in Victorian thought generally, found throughout the century in commentary on the poem.<sup>4</sup> Even Tennyson's son

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4. In addition to the other clerics discussed here who likewise indicate such a trend, consider Congregationalist James White's article, "Tennyson on the Philosophy of the Future

Hallam attributes a similar conviction in the power of unprovable knowledge to his father:

Assuredly Religion was no nebulous abstraction for him. He consistently emphasized his own belief in what he called the Eternal Truths; in an Omnipotent, Omnipresent and All-loving God, Who has revealed Himself through the human attribute of the highest self-sacrificing love; in the freedom of the human will; and in the immortality of the soul. But he asserted that "Nothing worthy proving can be proven," and that even as to the great laws which are the basis of Science, "We have but faith, we cannot know." He dreaded dogmatism of sects and rash definitions of God. "I dare hardly name His Name" he would say, and accordingly he named Him in "The Ancient Sage" the "Nameless." "But take away belief in the self-conscious personality of God," he said, "and you take away the backbone of the world." "On God and God-like men we build our trust." (311)

Roberts quotes carefully from this passage of Hallam's memoir in his lecture, highlighting Tennyson's committed belief in the "self-conscious personality of God" as made evident in the interior life of "each individual soul" (80). The predominant quality of this divine personality, for Roberts as for Tennyson, is the immortal strain. The individual bears witness to the Christian God against the mortal auspices of Nature as he yearns toward incorruptibility.

Roberts's reading of *In Memoriam* as an exploration of this immortal instinct or intuition stands in contrast with those of critics like Finlayson who

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Life," in *The Baptist Quarterly Review*, where he examines Tennyson's "The Two Voices" and *In Memoriam*: "As regards the value of its leading argument for immortality, that of inward conviction and unconscious intimation, while it may not strongly appeal to those who trust the fuller light of revelation in the Scriptures, yet it is perhaps, on scientific grounds alone the most unanswerable" (170-171). The same argument can be found in clerical commentaries on faith and doubt generally. Consider the American Congregationalist minister Washington Gladden's lecture "Is Death the End" (1888):

The great multitude of people who are working away so busily with microscopes and retorts and balances forget that there are any other methods of investigation but their own, any truths that cannot be subjected to their measurements, any forces that cannot be estimated in foot-pounds.... Proof of immortality, indeed, science does not furnish. The subject, in its largest relation, is outside of her domain. If any part of man is immortal, it is that part of man with which physical science has nothing to do. (168)

read the poem as an extended response to grief. Finlayson does not ignore the scientific context of the poem, but he also does not treat it, as Roberts does, as Tennyson's primary catalyst. In fact, he addresses Tennyson's scientific skepticism only briefly at the close of his argument, stating:

[Tennyson] looks at the analogies of nature and of human experience. He considers the various questions in relation to his own deepest feeling. He lays weight on spiritual intuition.... His heart refuses to accept the doctrine that what he loved was merely a piece of organized matter, now mouldering in the churchyard. (31)

Finlayson sees both Tennyson's intuition and his skepticism motivated by the poet's grief and love for the dead. Roberts, on the other hand, distinguishes the two. He grounds Tennyson's intuition of immortality in the work of Christ, and his skepticism in scientific inquiry. Roberts does not address Tennyson as a man wracked by grief, but he also barely addresses him as a poet. Rather, he treats Tennyson as a scientist: "It was indeed through the eyes of the scientist that he looked at Nature" (78-79). This portrayal of the poet makes his intuitions all the more evidence of God. For if the poet is fundamentally scientific, his intuitions must come from outside of himself.

This internal conviction about the immortality of the soul ties the individual to the person of Jesus, the Incarnate Word. In Christ, our "dim intuitions" are fully revealed, as he "bring[s] to light all that range of intuitions in which we recognize the self-communication of the divine nature to our souls" (81, 82). The figure of Christ in scripture and the Spirit of Christ within us offer reassurance that all things work for our good—even in the face of the seeming cruelty of Nature. Roberts draws a correlation here between the apostle Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13:12—"For now we see through a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face"—and Tennyson's lines in *In Memoriam*: "Tho' truths



in manhood darkly join, / Deep-seated in our mystic frame" (172). Roberts argues something similar to O'Connor, even quoting from the same passage of scripture, that the trajectory of our spiritual intuition is progressive. O'Connor addresses this more broadly, emphasizing "the unbounded progress of man on earth" (45). For Roberts, this progress is more individual. In the "mystic frame" of our own human bodies we apprehend the person of Christ, declaring our immortality and the origin of our love in the nature of God himself.

Roberts's emphasis on Tennyson's preference for undogmatic theology supports his own ecumenical principles. His father had been a minister of the Calvinist Methodist Rhiw Chapel in Blaenau Ffestiniog, Merionethshire, Wales, and Roberts followed in his footsteps, serving from 1896-1898 as a minister with the Methodist Forward Movement in Cardiff (D. Jones). When he moved to London in 1900, he served as a minister to the Calvinistic Methodists worshipping at the Welsh Chapel of Willesdon Green, who were there known as Welsh Presbyterians.<sup>5</sup> And it was at a Presbyterian congregation at St. Paul's that Roberts served from 1903 to 1910. During those years, Roberts also held the post as president of the Metropolitan Free Church Federation in Great Britain that brought nonconformist churches together on behalf of social causes. Later in life, after emigrating to the United States, he helped found the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith organization that emphasized pacifism and equality. And in 1925, when the United Church of Canada unified Methodist, Congregational, Presbyterian, and provincial churches, he joined its ranks.

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5. Janice Holmes gives helpful orientation for the distinct community of Welsh Calvinist Methodists in "Methodists and Holiness," explaining that they were theologically reformed and later took the more doctrinally representative title, the Presbyterian Church in Wales. Accordingly, as she writes, "Many standard histories of Methodism do not include them" (129).

Roberts's Nonconformist principles were open-handed with ecclesiastical forms, and he found clear resonances with his convictions in Tennyson's work. Even in his opening arguments against agnosticism, he positions Tennyson's view as his own: "who faced the new knowledge with equanimity, confident that increase of knowledge could in no wise destroy the essence of faith, however necessary it might make a change in the *forms* of faith" (76). This willingness to see faith's forms undergo transformation returns at the lecture's end. Just as Hallam's memoir indicates Tennyson's reticence to affirm "dogmatism of sects" and "rash definitions of God," Roberts praises the poet for resistance to "forms of faith" that are "provisional and temporary" (87). Attributing his own ecumenical principles to Tennyson, the cleric implies that the poet would welcome religious practices that free the individual to cast off narrow prejudices and the passions of those who believe that "formulae contain all the faith."

Roberts was certainly not the first to observe the ecumenism of Tennyson's expressed faith. King notes that in addition to being embraced by liberal Anglicans like Robertson and Maurice, "the elegy was being recognized for its religious power by commentators from directly opposed groups, such as conservative Anglicans, Anglo-Catholics, and Nonconformists" (160). The clerics considered here are clear evidence of this. In *Form and Faith*, Kirstie Blair addresses Boyd Carpenter's comments on Tennyson's ecumenism, quoting from Hallam's memoir where he states that "he had sympathy with those who feel that faith is larger and nobler than form, and at the same time he had tenderness and appreciation for those who find their faith helped by form" (310). Blair notes, "The only group who might miss out on Tennyson's sympathy, this suggests, would be those who believed strongly that faith was not simply 'helped' by

form, but adhered within the particular and specific forms of their Church” (*Form* 165). This would ostensibly include High Church Anglicans as well as anyone unwilling to exercise ecumenical sympathy. Roberts’s acknowledgment of Tennyson’s ecumenical rejection and appreciation of forms, however, grows less out of his reading of either the poet or the poem than it does from his own theological perspectives on religious practice, natural theology, and spiritual intuition. He integrates the text of the poem with scripture—rather than treating the poem as scriptural text on its own—to form a homiletic argument on the reliability of faith and the person of Christ.

This method is certainly different from the lectures on Tennyson’s national poetics from Robertson, Boyd Carpenter, and Gatty; the transformative nature of poetry from Haweis and O’Conor; or many of these clerics’ use of poetry in place of scripture. Most of these critics attach far greater importance to Tennyson’s personal narrative, often justifying his faith as precursor to considering his poetry rather than, as Roberts does here, treating his poetry as a justification for faith generally. Though he ignores Tennyson’s inspiration for *In Memoriam* in Arthur Hallam’s death, Roberts grounds his reading of the poem in the poet’s narrative of belief—particularly those observations on faith enunciated in his son’s memoir. Roberts seems less interested in the poet as a prophet or priest than the other critics. But he sees Tennyson speaking alongside himself and in harmony with scriptural texts to the congregation. The poet may not be a priest, but perhaps he is a kind of preacher.

*Norman Macleod (1838-1911) – Church of Scotland*

Dr. Norman Macleod was a minister in the Church of Scotland from 1860 to 1906 (Scott). Though a national church can hardly be considered “nonconformist,” (and so surely presses at the bounds of this chapter’s methodology) Macleod’s ecumenical commitments align him closely with Nonconformism in England. Indeed, in his work *Church, Ministry, and Sacraments*, he clearly distinguishes between the three formally organized church bodies—Greek, Roman, and Anglican—and the “vast proportion of the most intelligent and active-minded Christians” (10). The Scottish Kirk, for Macleod, would be a part of the latter. More broadly, in fact, he defines the Church “in its essence” as “simply the association of those who profess belief in Christ and obedience to Him.” In which case, he admits, Christian history has been burdened by the law over the spirit. Church forms are not meaningless to him, but there is no theological error in “diverse forms of administration” (12). On the contrary, this diversity may be divinely ordained as the means by which the individual Christian grows into Christ.

While Macleod’s writing shows a clear and unsurprising preference for Presbyterian forms of ministry and sacrament, he is ultimately committed to ecumenical unity. This unity is grounded in a bare minimum of faith in Christ. “Even in the Church visible,” he writes, “there is a unity deeper and wider than is apparent on the surface.... The more nearly we approach the heart of Christianity and realise its essential elements the more plainly does this unity appear. The headship of Christ is the true basis of the Church’s unity” (16). This emphasis on Christ as the minimum of faith resembles not only the other Nonconformists considered here, but many of the Anglican clerics as well.

Robertson and Boyd Carpenter, for example, would both champion a shared grounding of faith across denominational lines. For them, the virtue of *Anglican* forms of worship primarily depends on their national character. Macleod would not wholly disagree with them in this. Though ecumenical, his Presbyterian commitment also, in part, depends on the church's Scottish character. He quotes Robert Story's 1882 lecture, *The Continuity of the Church of Scotland*, which distinguishes the Anglican and Catholic belief in apostolic succession from "belief in the historical continuity and identity of the Church as a national branch of the Church Catholic preserving through many centuries its national characteristics and its own ministry" (Story 4). Macleod reads the history of the Church catholic through a hermeneutic of continuity and considers the many movements of the Church of Scotland itself as evidence of this continuity. He does not consider this a contradiction of his ecumenism but a basis for it. Furthermore, his emphasis on ecumenical continuity contributes to his sense of progress in both church and nation. Rather than denominational divisions serving as signs of fracture within the church, they promise growth.

This attention to ecumenical and national progress shapes Macleod's eulogy for Tennyson, recorded following an announcement of the poet's death in the *Inverness Courier* on October 11, 1892. At the time, Macleod was ministering in Inverness, having recently moved from St. Stephen's in Edinburgh. The sermon was given at an evening service at the Inverness High Church the Sunday prior to the article, apparently directed to an audience of young men. While the accounts of Tennyson following his death were almost universally steeped in praise, Macleod's address on Tennyson is compelling for a few reasons. First, he conscientiously addresses Tennyson's influence over his

present audience, stating, “Perhaps no poet has ever exerted an influence more powerful or more healthful every way, especially over young men of this and the preceding generation, than Alfred Tennyson.” Superlatives aside, this is the first cleric considered here who has noted Tennyson’s influence over a specific demographic—though it was certainly not a unique observation. As King notes, Charles Kingsley encouraged “a new generation of skeptical British males” to study *In Memoriam* “as their best chance of joining a renewed British community,” while a reviewer in the *London Quarterly* warned that the poem would be a spiritual danger to “free-thinking young readers” (178). Tennyson’s significance for a generation of young men, for good or ill, may have been widely recognized, but in Macleod’s case, it was also contextual. His focus on the poet as a voice of progress may well have been a consequence of speaking directly to such young men in his congregation.

Like other clerics before him, Macleod calls Tennyson a “true prophet,” a gift from God, an interpreter of “all that was noblest and best in the stirring age on which his lot fell.” Tennyson also, according to Macleod, expressed his genius in sharing a vision for “a better age to come.” The verse Macleod quotes to support this does not reference the “better age” of the Kingdom of God, as one might suppose from a minister’s eulogy. Rather, he quotes the following from “Locksley Hall”: “Forward, forward let us range, / Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing groove of change” (A. Tennyson 94). Macleod recognizes the “better age” of Tennyson’s poetry as an age in *this* world, not the world to come. His prophecy is one of human progress, not heaven or the Kingdom of God. Macleod suggests later in the sermon, though, that like God’s Kingdom, the better age of progress must run contrary to the current spirit of the age.

Tennyson's poetry acts as "a protest against the materialism, the greed, the earthliness of much of our modern life." And yet, Macleod sees no inconsistency between this protest and "the purest patriotism." A minister of the Church of Scotland may be under little obligation to advocate for the empire, but Macleod admires Tennyson's nationalism. In fact, he suggests that Tennyson's nationalist poetry will be remembered far more than his other verse.

The eulogistic nature of the sermon shapes Macleod's reading of Tennyson in new ways. While Macleod identifies *In Memoriam* as Tennyson's primary vehicle of religious teaching, he finds the entire body of the poet's work attests to a persistence in faith and virtue that extends beyond the work of prophet or priest (which latter title Macleod notably does not give to the poet).

He writes:

[Tennyson's] work lives after him, and there is in it nothing that is evil. Though no man ever realized more deeply or sadly the awful problems of life and death which confront us all, his faith in the Divine, in the Invisible, in the Eternal, never faltered, albeit he could but cast himself at times on "*The great world's altar stairs / Which slope through darkness up to God.*"

This description, especially of Tennyson's humble pursuit of faith, resembles the Anglican Haweis more than his fellow Presbyterian Roberts. In eulogy, the spiritual progress of the poet becomes the progress of a saint. Though, as Tennyson's purest faith was that which participated in the shared life of the faithful, that of the "humble worshiper," his sanctity is, in fact, available to anyone.

*David Sutherland (1859-1898) – Presbyterian*

Delivered several years after Tennyson's death, David Sutherland's "Tennyson's Message to Our Generation" sounds remarkably like a eulogy. Like Macleod, Sutherland was a Scottish Presbyterian. But he completed his education in Canada and served the majority of his ministry in Zion Presbyterian Church, in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. It is unclear where he delivered his eulogistic lecture, but it was published the same year he died in 1898, and was delivered sometime after Hallam Tennyson's memoir was released in 1897.<sup>6</sup> In it, Sutherland treats the narrative arc of the poet's life as one rising into and fulfilling the role of prophet. Unlike many of the other Nonconformist clerics, Sutherland does not take seriously Tennyson's doubt as a challenge to or aspect of his personal faith. Rather, his poetry embodies the doubt of his age. His faith, on the other hand, constitutes a constant certainty throughout his individual life. This faith seems to run hand-in-hand with the poet's prophetic gift. What the poet is a prophet *of*, according to Sutherland, is "the marvel of the Everlasting Will" (4). The poet receives his prophetic calling from God as well as the message of that prophecy.

Sutherland gives background for his conflation of poet and prophet, referring to *A Defence of Poetry* to illustrate what sort of prophet the poet might be. According to Shelley, he explains, the prophet "is in reality the preacher of righteousness rather than the predictor of future events, the man of *insight* rather than of *foresight*, the *forthteller* of eternal truths rather than the *foreteller* of things

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6. Sutherland quotes frequently from the *Memoir* in support of his conviction regarding Tennyson's unwavering faith, dwelling especially on that passage cited earlier in these pages: "Religion was no nebulous abstraction for him..." (H. Tennyson 311).



which are to come to pass" (5). Sutherland here gives a view of the prophet that not only quotes Shelley but also resonates with a statement of William Blake's in his notes on Bishop of Llandaff, Richard Watson's *Apology for the Bible*:

I cannot concieve [*sic*] the Divinity of the books in the Bible to consist either in who they were written by, or at what time, or in the historical evidence which may be all false in the eyes of one man & true in the eyes of another, but in the Sentiments & Examples, which, whether true or Parabolic, are Equally useful as Examples given to us of the perverseness of some & of its consequent evil & the honesty of others & its consequent good. This sense of the Bible is equally true to all & equally plain to all. None can doubt the impression which he recieves [*sic*] from a book of Examples. (Rowland 8)

Christopher Rowland uses precisely the same distinction as Sutherland—between *forthteller* and *foreteller*—to clarify the difference Blake enunciates here between prophecy that sees into the future and prophecy that encourages virtue in the present age.

Furthermore, as Charles LaPorte suggests, this configuration of prophecy and poetry had become relatively commonplace among clerics by the end of the century. LaPorte quotes the Reverend Robert S. de Courcy Laffan, who claimed in a sermon that, "surely we should look in the great poetic utterance of our own English speech, for the same guidance, the same insight into the truth of things, which we have learnt to associate with the function of the poet and the prophet in Israel of old" ("Shakespearean" 43). Likewise, the Dean of Ely, C. W. Stubbs, wrote that Shakespeare, as a poet, "rises above mere morals, and preaches to us, prophecies to us, of life" (43).<sup>7</sup> Sutherland's conflation of these identities of poet, preacher, and prophet clearly resonate with debates about prophecy and poetry

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7. LaPorte also notes that Stubbs was an advocate for the beatification of Shakespeare as a "national saint," which resonates with much of the treatment of Robert Browning observed in the fifth chapter of this study.

circulating throughout the century that considered the prophetic “not merely a matter of otherworldly expectation” but having “bearing on current politics and the role of human agency in establishing God’s Kingdom on earth” (Rowland 2).

For Sutherland, this distinction means that Christian poets ought to be counted among the prophets—at least “in the present dispensation” (5). This definition of the prophetic work of the poet also helps explain how poetry so often accomplishes the work of the theologian—albeit with less doctrinal specificity. Sutherland boldly goes so far as to suggest that poets like Tennyson, Browning, and MacDonald, “have exercised a greater influence on the moulding of contemporary theological thought than any dozen of the most famous theological teachers of our century” (4). There is, he believes, a close relationship between “noble” poetry and theology (5). While Sutherland would hesitate to *equate* poetry with faith, he does believe that theological “themes” are nearly identical with poetry in their truth (6). The truth or “nobility” of the poem matters, though. Not all poets are seers. Only those, like Tennyson and Browning, who “have opened up to us the freshness of life and the wonder of God’s presence in all things” show themselves to be prophets (7). And this work of prophecy is also instructive. Sutherland does not use the word “priest” like the Anglican clerics do, but he refers to these poets as “our teachers” for the same reasons they are prophets—“for they reveal mysteries and suggest meanings.” The prophetic poet is also a preacher.

Sutherland describes Tennyson’s role as a prophetic teacher or preacher using a curious combination of Bunyan-esque language and sermonistic rhythms. The poet does more than reason or inspire; he guides the reader on a journey: “He leads us through the darkest valleys of Apollyon, but he does not leave us

there, for if we follow him all the way he will escort us to the Beulah Land where the light shines sweet and fair, and where heavenly voices tell us we shall walk in night no more" (8). This is a preacher's language—there is rhythm and rhyme in it, almost in the meter of a hymn. It connotes Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress* and Dante's Virgil, too, casting Tennyson as the knowledgeable seer who directs the Christian in the way he should go. There is no hint of Tennyson's own doubt here. The journey from doubt to faith belongs to the reader. Sutherland reviews in sweeping terms how, through *In Memoriam* especially, the poet minimizes the conflicts of disbelief and confirms the legitimacy of Christian faith. Unlike his Nonconformist clerical contemporaries, however, he makes no appeal to Tennyson's "intuitive" faith in the face of scientific materialism. The poet is able to guide with confidence because his faith is rooted in childlike certainty.

The poet's only journey, Sutherland suggests, is the one that took him from boyhood into manhood, and in so doing, from poetic aspiration into prophetic conviction. None of the other clerics consider a biographical origin to Tennyson's prophetic identity, even if they consider his history from earliest childhood, as we shall see Armstrong doing shortly. Sutherland compares the transformation in "The Lady of Shalott" to the poet's prophetic epiphany. Burdened early in life by a Byronic melancholy, Tennyson, like the Lady, has his face "turned towards the realm of mere imaginings" and his back "towards the actual world of suffering and sorrow" (9). Then, Tennyson has "a vision of the world's woe" that strikes him. The poem's narrative, Sutherland suggests, is the poet's own:

For often thro' the silent nights  
A funeral, with plumes and lights  
And music, went to Camelot:

Or when the moon was overhead,  
Came two young lovers lately wed;  
"I am half-sick of shadows," said  
The Lady of Shalott. (A. Tennyson 27)

Sutherland argues that Tennyson's half-sickness with "empty sentiment and mere intellectual enjoyment, changed the centre of its aspiration and achievement from self to humanity" (9). The poet's dissatisfaction turns him toward the world in "sympathy and toil for the brotherhood of man." Sutherland returns to this theme of "brotherhood" throughout the lecture, as if to clarify Tennyson's prophetic call out from among the common mass of humanity and on humanity's behalf.

But again, this "conversion" experience of the poet is toward his divine vocation, not away from doubt. His faith appears to be a constant—and, indeed, looks remarkably like the Presbyterian's own. Tennyson "makes us feel how passing and temporary are the creeds and forms" that have shaped much nineteenth-century theological controversy (8). His poetry communicates the deep struggle between the spiritual world and the world of the flesh. Quoting from Professor Rentoul (likely John Laurence Rentoul, though what source is unclear) Sutherland argues that the real conflict in the *Idylls* is a war of the soul. King Arthur represents "the war of sense against the soul of man—the Christ-illuminated conscience in man.... Through and by union with the purified flesh they must be fought" (15-16). This war of the soul's Christ-illuminated conscience finds its way into the poet's verse, an exercise of sympathy perhaps with the "brotherhood of man." But Sutherland depicts the poet himself at perfect ease in his faith, pulling the following image from Hallam's *Memoir*: "At home and in his ordinary moods he was one of the most simple-hearted among the faithful,

receiving the Bible like a little child, and sitting at the feet of Christ with all the unquestioning devotion of an ardent disciple" (19). Surprisingly few clerics considered here have commented even briefly on the poet's attention to the Bible. Though they might give attention to Tennyson's wrestling with critical methods of reading the Bible, his actual devotion to scripture figures little into their concept of the poet or his poetry. Sutherland's Presbyterianism values these things, however—truth over form, the soul sanctified by Christ, and the steady certainty of the scriptures.

Sutherland does not conflate the poet's own work with that scripture, despite emphatically and repeatedly dubbing him a prophet of the present dispensation. The poet's writing functions more like a religious tract, or scripture in paraphrase. Sutherland again appears to be quoting from Hallam Tennyson's *Memoir* when he gives an account of someone reading *Enoch Arden* during a visit to a poor woman, who later confused it for a tract. "Tennyson was never better pleased," Sutherland records, "than when he learned that his great and beautiful and touching poem *Enoch Arden*, had served the purposes of a tract for a district visitor" (11). There is a long history of Nonconformists using tracts to clarify the distinctions of their theological precepts. Sutherland treats this endearing narrative with an earnestness that suggests Tennyson's poetic tract carries the same sort of significance for him that a religious tract in his own community might have.

Even the poet's attention to beauty serves an earnest theological function for Sutherland. The poet's prophetic work is directly related to his attention to nature's beauty, he argues, stating: "The poet has been defined to be 'God's prophet of the beautiful....' Tennyson is pre-eminently the poet of beauty" (13).

He excels Wordsworth in this, Sutherland suggests, even though his greatest work actually explores the beauty of holiness rather than nature. In fact, Tennyson's prophetic work "reaches its climax and its noblest expression in his emphasis upon the beauty of holiness" (15). Sutherland provides the war of the soul in *Idylls* as an example of this emphasis. In this poetic cycle, King Arthur's ultimate triumph over temptation forms an allegorical struggle toward "the higher life." In all of Tennyson's poetry, the cleric argues, it is the religious strain that is most beautiful and profound.

Sutherland's interpretation of Tennyson's poetry, more than any other cleric's here, is expressly Christological. While clerics like Boyd Carpenter strain to confirm Tennyson's Trinitarianism, Sutherland sees Christ throughout the poet's work. In this, he argues, Tennyson most strongly differs from contemporaries like Swinburne or Arnold. He sees in Tennyson an "overwhelming conviction of the truth that the one hope of mankind lies in God revealed in Jesus Christ" (19). The primary example he gives of this is in Tennyson's poem *Children's Hospital*, in which the dying child Emmie is "the type of humanity" in whom "the one hope for the sorrows and pains of the world lies in the power of Christ" (20). Sutherland narrates the following from the poem:

The doctor sneered at her faith in Christ, and said that "the good Lord Jesus has had his day." She is told to pray to him to-night, and lest He should pass through the crowd in the ward, and not know who is praying, she put her arms out, and said, "It's the little girl with her arms lying out on the counterpane." Next the nurse says:

"He had brought his ghastly tools: we believed her asleep again—  
Her dear, long, lean, little arms lying out on the counterpane;  
Say that His day is done! Ah why should we care what they say?  
The Lord of the children had heard her, and Emmie had passed  
away." (19-20)

Sutherland interprets the sentimental close of this stanza as an exaltation of Christ, the “one Saviour of humanity.” And in his own narrative of the poet’s peaceful death, he clearly aligns Tennyson’s faith more directly with the young Emmie, despite the poet’s famous doubts that invite as much comparison with the skeptical doctor.

Sutherland consistently views the poet’s prophetic calling as one that keeps him outside of the vacillations of his age, offering hope through his certainty rather than his experience. Tennyson is for him “the poet-prophet of all that is high and holy in life,” who “makes men feel the weakness and irrationality of unbelief, and the strength and saneness of belief. The one thing that is certain to his mind is the existence of an ‘increasing purpose that through the ages runs.’ The world is not a system of forces that grind on blindly, but it is ordered within the thought of God” (18). While Tennyson may well have had such confidence, the other clerics here are more comfortable showing that confidence arising on the other side of doubt. Sutherland’s encomium on Tennyson’s faith sounds eulogistic not only because he closes by reiterating the *Memoir’s* account of the poet’s death, but because his faith serves the cleric as an unvaried, unnuanced narrative. He writes:

It is a remarkable fact that in a century which more than any other century has cast doubt and discredit upon the future life, the man who beyond all question was the greatest man in England in the century, the man who has exercised the widest influence and been the most universally known and loved, should have been from the first to last the prophet of the faith that the soul cannot die. (20)

For Sutherland, it seems, the poet can only serve as prophet if he models perfect faith in his own prophetic message—“from the first to the last.”

*Richard Acland Armstrong (1843-1905) – Unitarian*

Richard Acland Armstrong inherited the Unitarianism of his father, who left the Established Church of Ireland for a ministry with the Unitarians in Bristol in pursuit of a “rational Christianity based on supernatural guarantees” (*Memoir* 20). The social and theological persuasions of his father’s faith—from his active role in the abolitionist movement to his belief in “the supernatural origin” and authority of Jesus and the Bible—shaped the younger Armstrong’s life and work (33). Like his father, he pursued an ecclesiastical vocation, studying under the notable Unitarian minister, James Martineau, at Manchester New College. The relationship between Unitarianism and Presbyterianism was complicated during the nineteenth century. As Michael Ledger-Lomas explains: “Unitarians struggled to decide if they wished to regard themselves as a denomination or just as Presbyterians with distinctive, brave theological opinions” (101). Distinguishing the theological orientation of the Unitarian Armstrong from that of the Presbyterian Roberts, for example, requires close attention to the particulars of their expressions of faith. Martineau’s influence helps clarify Armstrong’s Unitarian identity. But Armstrong also launched a quarterly periodical, *Modern Review*, during his ministry in Nottingham, whose stated aims further reveal his denominational commitments. The journal embraced “simple Theism..., a truly scientific biblical criticism and a truly Catholic church polity” (*Memoir* 72). One can reasonably consider this a clarification of Armstrong’s own particularly Unitarian beliefs. Ledger-Lomas discusses how the Unitarian position sometimes affirmed a specific kind of faithfulness to scripture, even “a truly scientific biblical criticism,” as their “naïve love of a pure New Testament encouraged an interest in the lower critical and hermeneutical studies required to



scrape away the Trinitarian glazes imposed on it in the King James Version” (Ledger-Lomas 108). Yet, when Martineau and others encountered higher criticism, their “solution” was to “relocate the ‘seat of authority’ from a disintegrating historical text to the enduring conscience,” resembling many Broad Church clerics in a reliance on intuitive spiritual experience over biblicism (110). As we shall see, the Universalist principle that most matters for Armstrong’s consideration of Tennyson, however, is not his interpretation of scripture or even his anti-Trinitarian theism, but primarily his universalism.

During his ministry in Liverpool, where he served in the final years of his life, Armstrong delivered a series of Sunday evening lectures to his congregation considering the poets of the age. His lecture on Tennyson was delivered at some point within the brief window between the release of Hallam Tennyson’s *Memoir* in September, 1897, and the collection’s publication in February, 1898.<sup>8</sup> Though he subtitles his lecture on Tennyson, “The Larger Hope,” he begins by giving greater attention to Tennyson’s larger faith. Like other clerics before him who’ve felt obliged to insist on Tennyson’s orthodoxy, Armstrong summarizes the poet’s religion in terms that reflect his own Unitarian convictions. Tennyson’s faith, he suggests, escapes precise definition. It is rather:

a vast, deep, strong trust...that the universe rests in Divine Love, that Love can never fail, that the God Unseen and Undefinable at the back and

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8. It is evident from the lecture’s own rhetoric that his references to the *Memoir* were not incorporated only for print but were a part of the original public delivery. It begins: Since I announced this present series of discourses, the splendid Memoir of Alfred Lord Tennyson by his son has been published; and after its perusal I am doubtful of the adequacy of the sub-title which I had affixed to the present lecture.... For one realizes as one reads page after page of the communion of the man with his friends, as one beholds the very processes by which his verse framed itself in his soul, that his are songs of a very real Faith, not merely of a Hope. (67)

basis and summit of all things cares and will care for His own; that there is a life for us beyond, beautiful, sacred, the conditions and circumstances of which, however, we can here and now in no way picture or conceive. (68)

By orienting Tennyson's religious position around Unitarian principles, Armstrong effectively uses the poet to enunciate the foundation of his belief and instruct his congregation in their own. Like Tennyson, Armstrong implies, they ought to recognize the "God Unseen and Undefinable." He invites his congregation into the poet's belief by narrating an imaginative biography—in a sense, embodying Finlayson's homiletic principles from "The Uses of the Imagination in the Christian Ministry." Armstrong encourages his listeners to envision Tennyson as a child, speaking in the present tense of young Alfred stretching his arms out in the Rectory garden to feel the wind awaken a "mystic poet-sense" within him. Of course, the suggestion that Tennyson's poetic instinct is both innate and awakened by nature contradicts the invitation to his congregation to live and believe like the poet. Insofar as Tennyson's spiritual and poetic sense are the same—as Armstrong implies here—his spiritual faith cannot be learned any more than can his poetic gift. They are gifts from the Divine, awakened by nature, more like a prophetic commission than a priestly ordination.

Armstrong follows suit with many of the clerical critics considered here who look for evidence of Tennyson's spiritual faith in the opening verses of *In Memoriam*. He begins his inquiry by quoting the first line of the preface followed by its final two stanzas:

Strong Son of God, Immortal Love,...  
Forgive my grief for one removed,  
Thy creature, whom I found so fair.  
I trust he lives in Thee, and there  
I find him worthier to be loved.

Forgive these wild and wandering cries,  
Confusions of a wasted youth;  
Forgive them where they fail in truth,  
And in Thy wisdom make me wise. (A. Tennyson 163)

Armstrong treats these lines as a summary of the full thrust of the poem and, likewise, a summary of Tennyson's faith. King considers different perspectives on these opening stanzas of *In Memoriam*, showing how contemporary readers like Sidgwick felt they were unrepresentative of the poem's religious complexity (167). Shatto and Shaw argue that since Tennyson wrote the stanzas separately, he also intended the stanzas to be read separately from the poem itself. As King points out, though, many others read these verses as confessional creeds—including Tennyson's wife Emily, who added them to the family's book of prayers (168). King compares this credal reading with John Keble's popular devotional poetry, *The Christian Year*. He writes, "For a broad spectrum of Victorian middle- and upper-class Christians, then, *In Memoriam* would have appeared to open with a poetic 'Creed' and 'Doxology' that invited them into the elegy on terms resembling those made familiar by *The Christian Year*" (171). Though the body of *In Memoriam* offers a very different narrative of faith than Keble's collection, "Comparison between the poetic cycles," King argues, "would have felt intuitive, even solicited." It is clear that Armstrong's reading of the stanzas as Tennyson's credal confession represents not only a widely held view, but a welcomed one.

Of course, Tennyson wrote other works that nuance the explicit reading of *In Memoriam* as reasoned triumph over doubt. R. L. Brett argues in his book *Faith and Doubt* that reading *In Memoriam* as a full expression of Tennyson's faith misses everything else the poet indicates in those other works, especially those

written in the decades between Hallam's death and *In Memoriam*'s completion. Brett suggests that works like Tennyson's "Supposed Confessions" or "Ulysses"—both written before *In Memoriam*—complicate the later poem's seeming resolution. He quotes Tennyson in conversation with James Knowles, stating: "There is more about myself in 'Ulysses,' which was written under the sense of loss and that all had gone by, but that still life must be fought out to the end. It was more written with the feeling of loss upon me than many poems in *In Memoriam*" (125). This trajectory of the poet's work suggests that the consolations of *In Memoriam* came not with reasoned faith—if they came at all—but with time and distance. LaPorte has done similar work considering Tennyson's *The Idylls of the King*—published over the course of twenty-six years following *In Memoriam*'s release—as the poet's "most arduous intervention into the Victorians' changing understanding of scripture" (*Victorian* 68). He argues that the *Idylls*' more public expression offers an "appeal to religious affect that nonetheless remains impersonally grounded in culture." By distancing the poem's content from personal experience Tennyson is able to grapple with more complex intellectual skepticism through its verses. Brett argues—using the poet's own language—that the *Idylls* represent Tennyson's increasing pessimism about the "Soul of Man" in conflict with "the warring elements of the flesh" (133). But LaPorte suggests that the imperfections of the *Idylls* are calculated to mirror the inconsistencies Victorians wrestled with in the Bible itself. "*The Idylls* may indeed be old and 'imperfect,'" he writes, "but Tennyson's poetry seems calculated to reconcile his readership to the fact that so is the Holy Bible itself, and that this imperfection cannot diminish its religious value" (110). This reading resonates with Armstrong's "truly scientific biblical criticism," which would have helped him

feel at home in Tennyson's "imperfect" poetry. Indeed, clerical critics like Armstrong interpreted Tennyson's narrative of doubt and faith in the reverse of Brett's analysis: Behind the poet's insecurity, fear, and alienation lay an enduring friendship with God.

Interestingly, Armstrong's analysis of *In Memoriam* resonates with many of the Anglicans considered here in its nationalist aspect. The cleric considers Tennyson's grief a necessary trial in the path of the poet's divine commission as the nation's Laureate. Between the awakening gift of nature and the sobering experience of loss, Tennyson has been shaped to give the Laureateship "a more reverend meaning" (74). Armstrong emphasizes Tennyson's democratic inclinations, how the poet states even in his benediction to the Queen—and despite his peerage—that "all mankind is one." His message of hope and faith is "for England and the nineteenth century"—a kind of prophetic nationalist message of religious confidence (75). While this nationalist reading is secondary for Armstrong, it puts his exploration of Tennyson's doubt and faith in an interesting light. If, as we shall see, Tennyson's intellectual struggle with doubt is necessary for true faith, necessary for leading the nation into true faith, and also an aspect of Tennyson's Nonconformist sympathies, then perhaps the "true" religious expression for the British people is Nonconformity rather than the Established Church.

Like Roberts, Armstrong frames Tennyson's religious doubt primarily as an intellectual struggle rather than the consequence of grief. In which case, as an intellectual, Tennyson can have the strength to "measure it and try it; and beat out new faith for the days that lie before [him], all purified and etherealised by the questionings which they have dared to face" (76). Armstrong draws directly

from the poem itself here, echoing and finally quoting the following rearranged stanzas from *In Memoriam's* Canto 96:

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

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

Perplexed in faith, but pure in deeds,  
At last he beat his music out;  
There lives more faith in honest doubt,  
Believe me, than in half the creeds. (A. Tennyson 187)

Intellectual doubt can be addressed with intellectual faith for those, like Tennyson, who have “unflinching sincerity of thought” (77). Armstrong suggests that Tennyson’s is not a doubt to be overcome, but one “which remains alongside of the purer faith.” While many of the clerics considered here have discussed the necessity of Tennyson’s doubt as a precursor to his greater faith, this serves as an explicit acknowledgment of doubt’s necessary continual coexistence with that faith.

The consequence of such rigorous attention to truth, Armstrong suggests is “a scathing scorn of mere professional religion” and of dogma that might be “narrow or hard or cruel.” Again, the cleric attributes to Tennyson a religious conviction more in line with his own universalism than with Tennyson’s loosely practiced Anglicanism. Not that a Unitarian reading of Tennyson is far-fetched. In fact, as King observes, the stanzas from Canto 96 were criticized by Coventry Patmore in 1855 for their theological carelessness, as they belied the “secure faith in God’s laws” at the heart of High Anglicanism (204). The Unitarian’s less

dogmatic faith, by contrast, is flexible enough to embrace the uncertainty displayed in these stanzas. King notes that Patmore, who converted to Roman Catholicism almost ten years later, considered *In Memoriam*'s consistent metrical form a reflection of this "secure faith," as did another High Church reviewer in 1850, who admired the poem's "'measured language' as an anodyne to intense emotional pain."<sup>9</sup> However, the metrical continuity of Canto 96, as it embraces doubt rather than faith, troubled these reviewers considerably. King records the latter referring to the verses as "'mischievous language' waiting to be 'caught up as the catchwords of unbelievers'" (206). Tennyson's doubt apparently has no home in these critics' formal expressions of faith. For them, such doubt is the first step toward unbelief. For Armstrong, on the other hand, doubt is not only the first step toward true faith, but a necessary correlative to faith throughout the life of a Christian.

Significant evidence exists elsewhere in Tennyson's oeuvre to support Armstrong's association between the poet and his own theological persuasions. Armstrong moves from *In Memoriam* to Tennyson's poem "Rizpah," for example, to emphasize his Universalist position. In "Rizpah," the speaker of the poem rejects the doctrines of election and damnation as being incompatible with parental love:

Election, Election and Reprobation—it's all very well;  
But I go to-night to my boy, and I shall not find him in Hell...  
And if *he* be lost—but to save *my* soul, that is all you desire:

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9. King references Blair's *Form and Faith* here. Blair likewise considers Patmore's reading of Tennyson's metrical continuity and contrasts that with Robertson's conviction that "the unity of form desire by parties like the Tractarians is 'lifeless'" (187). Again we see Robertson's Broad Church views aligning more closely with the Nonconformists than with the conservative members of the Established Church.

Do you think that I care for *my* soul if my boy be gone to the fire? (A. Tennyson 455)

Armstrong must assume “Rizpah” reflects Tennyson’s own view in order to make his point, but the assumption is not without sense. After all, Rizpah’s argument against infernalism is reasonable,<sup>10</sup> and Tennyson takes no pains to contradict it. Armstrong builds off this assumption about Tennyson’s convictions to suggest that if the poet’s doubt leads him to reject infernalist doctrine, then his doubt truly is moving him toward faith rather than away from it. And while the poem certainly offers a logical argument against the infernalist position, it is also emotional and experiential. Tennyson’s doubt seems to come from both a logical and an emotional dissatisfaction with the doctrine of election and its implications. In this light, his wrestling with “Nature, red in tooth and claw” in *In Memoriam* takes on new significance (A. Tennyson 176). Nature’s cruelty and human suffering truly do seem meaningless in a world damned to destruction. By contrast, the “immortal Love” of the “Strong Son of God” that opens *In Memoriam* is worthy of faith if mankind is “not made to die” (163). Armstrong’s reading, then, implies a relationship between the developing spiritual trust of the poem and Tennyson’s affirmation of the Unitarian’s universalist principles. Though he does not state this explicitly, his argument suggests that Tennyson might be overcoming the obstacle of scientific rationalism simply by rejecting the doctrine that makes nature’s cruelty a final word for those who are not among the elect.

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10. cf. David Bentley Hart, “Third Meditation: What Is a Person? A Reflection on the Divine Image,” *That All Shall Be Saved*, Yale UP, 2019, pp. 130-158.



Ultimately, Armstrong considers the argument for or against trust in God to be less interesting than the challenge of the human will. After all, once doubt is overcome, the believer is left with both freedom and responsibility. Armstrong sees this “miracle of free partnership with God” and its subsequent “human responsibility” as the essence of “man’s nobility” (82). He is not speaking here of a general sense of human dignity, but a precise kind of “purity of manhood” (84). Tennyson’s vision of this manly partnership and responsibility confirms him, in Armstrong’s estimation, as a “seer” or prophet. While Brett sees the *Idylls* as evidence of Tennyson’s waning faith in humanity, Armstrong, by contrast, sees them as a depiction of “that law of utmost purity by which alone men reach their noblest selves.” Armstrong seems to undo some of his universalist argument here, much as he did in offering the specially ordained divine inspiration of the poet as a model for anyone to pursue spiritual transformation. The knights of the *Idylls* represent those who struggle in pursuit of a spiritual rather than external vision. And yet, these knights are “called” to make the quest, specially selected for the task by virtue of their unique manhood. Such knights are not like normal men, but set apart like the poet himself.

The doctrine of election holds for the prophet-poet, then, who “stands before us in his purity and strength, an exemplar of practical life, an inspirer of ethical aspiration, a leader on the path of manly faithfulness. He is one of those to whom it is given to fill us with a longing to be like him” (88). In the end, Armstrong has read and interpreted the poet far more than the poetry. This biographical reading of the poems contributes to his sense of Tennyson’s prophetic agency. The poems serve as proof of Tennyson’s unique will, his courageous acceptance of responsibility, and his creative partnership with God.

### *Conclusion*

Like the Anglicans discussed in the previous chapter, the clerics considered here likewise treat Tennyson as a prophet—but they do so in the context of their unique theological convictions. Their emphasis on the poet's prophecy is complicated by the inherent egalitarianism they find within his work. Blessed with a divine poetic gift, Tennyson is both representative of the individual and set apart or chosen. Regardless of this tension, Tennyson teaches his readers through his rejection of agnosticism, resistance to dogmatism, pursuit of humanistic progress, and individual holiness. While the Anglican clerics only touch on Tennyson's "triumph" over doubt, the Nonconformist lectures and sermons are almost entirely dominated by this concern. Tennyson may not be a priest for the Nonconformist, but his poetry nevertheless preaches. And it does so in response to a clearly prophetic vision of his age, accessible to anyone with eyes to see.

Just as the Anglican clerics understood Tennyson's prophetic role in relation to their own understanding of theology and ecclesiology, so to do the Nonconformists. The Unitarian identifies Tennyson's rejection of dogma, and the Congregationalist emphasizes his egalitarianism. These emphases overlap in accordance with the interrelationships of the denominations themselves. Overall, these clerics complicate our understanding of the nineteenth century's preoccupation with poetry as scriptural text. What that text says and how it is interpreted varies as significantly as denominational interpretations of the Bible itself. Despite their emphases on Tennyson's life and faith, they are more concerned with their own theological convictions than with the poet's.

The commonality between these disparate Christian voices, however, is that they are all drawn to Tennyson for his confirmation of a minimum of faith. How Tennyson expresses that minimum is understood differently by each. Whether the poet's doubt grows out of his grief or his skepticism makes a difference for the reader whose own doubts may be more or less experientially or intellectually driven. Faith may be understood as the ultimate "triumph" of the progress of doubt—offering hope for the reader seeking to live as a faithful Christian citizen. Or faith may necessarily coexist alongside doubt—offering a more difficult life of belief, but perhaps one more honestly attentive to the challenges of scientific materialism. This minimum of faith seems to hold greater significance for Christian traditions that more openly defy fixed forms and celebrate fluidity in forms of faith. As a result, Nonconformists who resist the forms offer a more holistic reading of Tennyson's doubt than the Anglicans who are eager to read the poet nationalistically or triumphantly. The prophetic power of the poet offers the skeptic a way forward through faith *with* doubt.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Minister to Ministers: Clerics Review Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) was one of the best-loved poets and certainly the most highly praised female poet in the nineteenth century. Though she inspired far fewer clerical lectures and sermons than the Laureate Tennyson, a vast number of articles were written about her and her poetry during and after her lifetime. Even so, only a few are clearly attributable to clerical writers. In part, this clerical silence stems from the tendency of critics or their periodicals to publish anonymously. The tide of this tendency toward anonymity turned in the latter half of the century, after much of Barrett Browning's work had been published, critical response had waned, and eulogies were spent. A number of these attributable clerical voices are considered in this chapter.<sup>1</sup> They include Anglicans like the notable Broad Church priest Charles Kingsley and the old High Church priest Archer Thompson Gurney, as well as Presbyterian George Gilfillan, Unitarian Charles T. Brooks, Methodist Gilbert Haven, and Congregationalist Edwin Paxton Hood. These clerics ministered in parishes in England, Scotland, Paris, and the United States. Their writings on Barrett Browning range from reviews to eulogies, biographies, and brief notices in literary periodicals, miscellanies, and newspapers.

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1. In compiling this chapter, I confirmed clerical authorship of anonymous articles through *Wellesley's Index to Victorian Periodicals*, *The Nineteenth Century Index*, and attributions given in *The Brownings' Correspondence*.

The variety of these clerics' denominational affiliations, publications, and written forms of criticism contrasts with the surprising uniformity of their praise. Given the patriarchal nature of most clerical vocations in the nineteenth century and the clerical role of the poet observed in the previous chapter, I began research on Barrett Browning under the presumption that she would be treated differently than her male contemporaries. In some non-clerical cases, this was true in the extreme. For example, in 1842, an American lay critic, W. A. Jones wrote a critique of "Ladies' Libraries" in *Graham's Magazine*, so stereotypically chauvinistic as to make even the most hardened twenty-first-century feminist scholar cringe.<sup>2</sup> Jones's prejudice against women, and especially women who write, is all the more galling as *Graham's Magazine* was one of the first American periodicals to feature Barrett Browning's poetry—in the very same issue as his article.<sup>3</sup> Thirty pages after four beautiful sonnets by Miss Elizabeth B. Barrett, Jones claims that, "A poet is, from the laws both of physiology and philology,—masculine. His vocation is manly, or rather divine" (334). According to this logic, women are not constitutionally suited to be poets, as they are earthly, not divine, and made to inspire rather than create. Women who do write, Jones says, write

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2. Barrett Browning was familiar with many of these negative reviews. In a letter to Jane Wills-Sanford, she writes:

The criticism...is depreciatory & grudging, it seems to me.... What is curious in the reception of this poem is the violence on both sides about it. I could'nt repeat the great things, the extravagant things, said in its praise by men & women,—while, on the other hand, I hear of ladies of sixty who complain of the "risk to their character & morals" in reading it. Yes, seriously. In fact, it has given great offence to conventional persons who hate plain speaking, & prefer to ignore a subject through what is called delicacy, rather than help to better the world by dealing with it.

3. Though *Graham's* is sometimes named as the first American periodical to publish Elizabeth Barrett, a month prior to their debut of her four sonnets, *The Boston Miscellany of Literature and Fashion* printed her poem "The Cry of the Human." Both periodicals acquired these selections from *Arcturus*, where the poet had originally submitted them. When *Arcturus* closed operations in May 1842, the editor passed the poems on to *Graham's* and *Boston Miscellany*.

for other women, not for men. “They may entertain, but cannot, from the nature of the case, become instructors to men.” After all, he argues, what can a woman teach a man when her sphere of life is so much smaller?

If Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar needed any further proof texts for their seminal indictment against masculine literary constructs in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they could do no better than Jones’s article. After all, these are precisely the assumptions the two theorists have in mind when they write of western patriarchy that, “the text’s author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6). There is, in the patriarchal mode, something inherently masculine about authorship. A woman who picks up the pen then becomes, in their words, a eunuch.<sup>4</sup> What critics today praise as a female writer’s independence could, in the nineteenth century, be critiqued as a poor attempt to write in a “masculine” mode.

Jones articulates the assumptions many men—and women—in the nineteenth century held about feminine and masculine constitutions and their implications for female writers. They understood authorship as a paternal act, making the male writer, according to Gilbert and Gubar, “like his divine counterpart, a father, a master or ruler, and an owner: the spiritual type of a patriarch” (7). That is, both a creator, like God, and a kind of priest, mediating between God and his creation. This reading of the writer as spiritual patriarch further bars woman from creative acts, treating her as both passive inspiration (a

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4. A more appropriate metaphor might be that the female author, writing in masculine dress, becomes transsexual. Such behavior would likewise have been received as a “monstrous” transgression against womanhood.

muse) and passive receptacle of man's procreative energies (a mother). Literary criticism in periodicals of the day, like Jones's article, provides ample evidence in support of Gilbert and Gubar's picture of gendered writing, but it also provides evidence of divergence from these prejudices. The woman question, contra Jones, was far from settled.

While the voice of the female poet was often both prescribed and proscribed by her critics, women writers nevertheless worked to rewrite the feminine affective mode to explore in verse the violence of their experiences. Isobel Armstrong suggests that this rewriting led to a weakening of the "category of the poetess," opening the door for more expansive, "unmasked" expressions of feminine poetics (373).<sup>5</sup> The seeds for the weakening of this category were planted throughout the century, often in communities of faith that explored widely different ideas about human equality. Female poets, and Barrett Browning in particular, challenged restrictive views about women and gave evidence to those with eyes to see and ears to hear that women's capacities were only as limited as their education.

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5. Armstrong's reference to the "poetess" rather than a female poet gestures to a larger conversation about the distinction between these two categories. Tricia Lootens refers to the "poetess" as an empty category, a "part-fictional" heritage enacted as public performance by choice or by force (4). Anne Mellor defines the conventions of the category as:

the adoption of the mask of the improvisatrice, the insistence on the primacy of love and the domestic affections to a woman's happiness, the rejection or condemnation of poetic fame, the embracing of Edmund Burke's aesthetic of "the beautiful" as the goal of female literary desire, and the acceptance of the hegemonic doctrine of the separate spheres. Mellor distinguishes this fictional figure of feminine virtue from the female poet, whose legacy traces back to female preachers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because such poets drew their authority from faith and scripture, they "could and did claim a moral and literary authority equal to—or even greater than—that of those male poets who worked within a neoclassical literary tradition." The critical response to such female poets is often censorious or celebratory in direct relation to how thoroughly the critic has rejected or accepted the category of "poetess" as an ideal fiction.

The diverse critical responses included here participate in this project of undermining paternalism in poetic criticism while providing further commentary on the relationship between poetry and religious experience. As the previous chapters attest, clerical critics frequently interpret poetry religiously and pedagogically, and Barrett Browning's work certainly lends itself to such interpretation. After all, as Kirstie Blair notes, both Brownings considered religion to be the most essential element of poetry, and poetry as likewise "vital for the understanding and practice of religion" ("Dissenting" 122). Barrett Browning believed poetry could serve as an access point to spiritual truth, and her critics largely agree with her.<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen with Tennyson, clerical critics often find concord between their personal commitments and the work of a complex poet, whether that poet has explicitly stated such agreement or not. But Barrett Browning may be harder for clerics to use in this way, as her religious commitments are far more explicit than Tennyson's. Both Browning poets directly address religious debates, and, as Blair observes, "emerge as powerful advocates for religious ideals broadly held by Congregational or Independent dissent in the early to mid-nineteenth century" (161). It is more difficult, then, for priests of the Established Church to appropriate the poets' work for pedagogical purposes when their dissident commitments have been made so explicit. For similar reasons, critics struggle to appropriate Barrett Browning's work for nationalistic purposes as well. Her poetry cannot be read as national prophecy in the way

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6. Kirstie Blair and others have written exhaustively on the Brownings' dissenting poetics in relation to the more dominant Tractarian poetic mode. But as Blair notes, Barrett Browning's "argument about poetry as a means to access spiritual forms via the material was crucial in Victorian religious discourses across denominations" (161).



Anglican ministers read Tennyson's work. Granted, his laureateship inclined critics toward nationalistic readings. But nationalistic interpretations of religious poetry are also reasonable when a nation and church are as intertwined as the British state and Anglicanism. Barrett Browning's explicit Congregationalist convictions, however, made such intertwining more difficult. As Dissenters were, according to Blair, considered second class citizens, Barrett Browning's work was nationally marginal at best. This distance from a national center allowed her greater freedom to critique, bringing the social implications of her religious convictions to bear on poverty, slavery, and other national ills.

This chapter explores specific examples of clerical responses to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life and work. A recurring theme running through all of them—often increasing as the cleric's theological commitments align with her own—is the conviction that Barrett Browning's poetry functions as a prophetic text. These clerics are largely interested in the poet's work for its power rather than its delicacy. They use designations of "feminine" and "masculine" voice to distinguish different modes of expression that might be available to any poet rather than to suggest restricted categories for female and male poets. In this, they are certainly not portraying a critical consensus on Barrett Browning. But they do highlight the lack of critical consensus in ways that contribute to current discussions on the poetess. Though many of the critics considered here published anonymously and so are less obligated to address the poet pedagogically, they nevertheless interpret Barrett Browning in accord with their religious convictions. Clerics who embrace Barrett Browning's vocal commitment to social

justice, for example, treat her as a prophet of her particular age.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, they contribute to the weakening of critical attachment to poetess fictions.

But Barrett Browning herself makes such weakening inevitable. With its increasingly explicit attacks on the restrictive category of the “poetess,” Barrett Browning’s work necessitates reconsideration of the limitations of female poets by these clerical figures. Though all of these clerics admire her poetry, they do so for a host of reasons ranging from her intellectual acuity to her religious integrity. And their different religious commitments correlate with some of those differences in admiration, as we shall see. In order to better trace the distinctions between these differences as they relate to the cleric’s own commitments, I have again separated Anglican and Nonconformist responses to Barrett Browning in the study that follows. I have arranged the clerical responses within these two categories according to correspondences in their commentary, charting dialogues between them related to the priestly, preaching, or prophetic role of the poet. The study closes with a Congregationalist who not only most directly reflects Barrett Browning’s own denominational commitments but who also expresses the most profound openness to the prophetic power of the poet—declaring her, in no uncertain terms, the “minister’s minister” (Hood 194).

*Charles Kingsley (1819-1875) – Anglican*

Charles Kingsley was a Broad Church Anglican, an advocate for women’s education, and a prime example of what was known as “muscular Christianity”

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7. Tennyson’s critics in the second and third chapter likewise saw him as a prophet of their particular age, though his prophetic message of national and intuitive faith overlaps little with Barrett Browning’s social justice concerns.

(Vance).<sup>8</sup> Long an admirer of the Brownings' work, Kingsley read them with the attention of an Anglican cleric, a literary critic, and a writer in his own right. In 1851, he published two articles on Barrett Browning in *Fraser's Magazine*. The first addresses both the poet and her husband, and the second considers her lengthy political poem, *Casa Guidi Windows*, published that year. The year before, Barrett Browning had published her *Sonnets from the Portuguese* in a new edition of her collected poems. *Aurora Leigh*—her clearest expression of the work of the female poet in the world—would not be published for another five years.

*Fraser's Magazine* had only recently come under the editorship of William John Parker (whose father, by the same name, acted as publisher) when Kingsley submitted his reviews of the Brownings. *Wellesley's Index* divides the life of the magazine into two phases—the first, more radical in character, defined “by the dash and ‘riotous mirth’ of the Regency,” and the second—begun with Parker in 1847—more earnest, steady, and “Victorian” (“Fraser’s” 310). Kingsley was invested in the development of the magazine’s new character, writing to Parker a year after the editor’s installment that “the want which people feel in Fraser’s is a want of earnest purpose and deep faith of any kind” (qtd. in Thorp 56). Writing for the magazine, then, may have been Kingsley’s own attempt to address this want. Indeed, Kingsley first found a literary home at *Fraser's* with his diatribe

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8. Among many other things. John Maynard’s description of Kingsley’s interests and accomplishments is overwhelming:

He was a decent artist, an impressive and moving preacher (despite a bad stutter in private conversation), a good poet, an enthusiastic if none-too-professional instructor and professor, a moralist, an amateur scientist, a great writer of descriptions and a good architect of fast-moving adventure plots, a committed if none-too-radical social reformer, a leader of movements and generator of public opinion, a tireless crusader for sanitary improvements.... He was given ecclesiastical preferment—to Dean of Westminster Abbey—academic recognition—by appointment to the Regius Professorship of history at Cambridge (a position for which he was barely qualified, or not at all, as a writer of historical novels and enthusiastic amateur)—and social recognition, first as a royal chaplain, then as tutor and even friend to the Prince of Wales. (86)

against anti-Catholic fearmongering, “Why Should We Fear the Romish Priests?” in 1848. As a *magazine* rather than a *review*, the periodical embraced such works on religion, as well as articles on politics, social issues, literature, and culture—all marked by Parker’s liberal Conservatism. *Wellesley*’s introduction to *Fraser*’s remarks that this liberalism was less activist than open-minded, and that while Kingsley became one of the magazine’s foremost contributors, Parker welcomed wide divergence of views in its pages.

Barrett Browning met Kingsley at some point after these early reviews. Her correspondence from the period gives no indication of having read them, though she did not avoid reviews generally. As both reviews were published anonymously, it would have been easy for her not to have known he wrote them before their meeting. In September of 1852, she wrote to her friend Julia Martin, stating, “Few men have impressed me more agreeably than Mr Kingsley. He is original & earnest, & full of a genial & almost tender kindliness which is delightful to me. Wild and theoretical in many ways he is of course, but I believe he could not be otherwise than good & noble, let him say or dream what he will” (205). Barrett Browning introduces Kingsley in the letter as “the ‘Christian Socialist,’ author of ‘Alton Locke,’ ‘Yeast,’ &c.” His reputation as an author, it seems, is as relevant to her as his reputation in the church. To Mary Russell Mitford, who had previously met Kingsley and heard him preach, she also wrote in 1852, “That man impressed me much, interested me much. The more you see of him, the more you will like him, is my prophecy” (214). She follows this with anticipation of Kingsley’s forthcoming volume of poetry, again considering him more as a writer than as a cleric. As Mark Knight and Emma Mason have observed, though, Kingsley’s literary works served as a vehicle for

communicating his religious convictions (164). Novels like *Alton Locke* popularized the social gospel Kingsley gleaned from F. D. Maurice. Kingsley himself, then, might not have separated his identity as Anglican cleric from his identity as novelist and poet.

Kingsley's "muscularity" was a significant aspect of that identity. Barrett Browning objects to Kingsley's "muscular" or masculine reputation in her letters. In 1853, she responds to Mitford's description of Kingsley as "manly": "'Manly', do you say? But I am not very fond of praising men by calling them manly. I hate & detest a masculine man. Humanly bold, brave, true, direct, Mr Kingsley is,—a moral cordiality and an original intellect uniting in him" (238). Whether Mitford had referenced Kingsley's masculine demeanor or his muscular Christianity is unclear. But in either case, "manly" for Barrett Browning is neither a compliment nor an accurate description of Kingsley himself. Perhaps this is due to her recognizing such qualities as boldness, bravery, truth, and directness in her own character. In any case, Kingsley himself would likely have objected to the distinction between masculinity and Barrett Browning's list of virtues. He followed Maurice in his message of Christ's masculinity, which Thomas Hughes expressed in *Manliness of Christ* (1879) as "tenderness and thoughtfulness for others" (Jones 168). Much more could be and has been said on the subject of Kingsley and masculinity, but the relevant point here is that his sense of the masculine can be understood as broad and relational.<sup>9</sup>

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9. See *Muscular Christianity*, edited by Donald E. Hall, J. A. Mangan and James Walvin's *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*; Norman Vance's *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought*; and John Maynard's *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion* for thorough discussions on muscular Christianity and Kingsley's embodiment of this ideal.

Kingsley's reviews of the Brownings, for example, communicate little of that manliness Mitford saw in him, according to Barrett Browning's definition. Even in criticism, his reviews are—as the poet observed he was in person—genial and kind. In the first article, Kingsley discusses how the poetics of the two Brownings might have been influenced by their marriage. He suggests that the poetic virtues of husband and wife act to justify the other's weaknesses. Speaking of Browning's poetry, he writes:

Thus, step by step, we have passed on from dislike to palliation, from palliation to something very like justification, and now remain, as we expect many of our readers will, in doubt what verdict to give, and somewhat glad that our verdict matters so very little that it is not worth while giving, on it; unable to prophesy whether Mr. Browning's poems will occupy a high and permanent place in our literature, but sure that if they do not, it will be from defects of manner rather than of matter, from the mere outward ruggedness of the utterance, and not from any intrinsic want of richness, nobleness, or health, in the nature. On this latter point there can be no doubt. A higher verdict than ours has been pronounced on it, by the best poetess, in our humble opinion, whom England has yet produced. Her sponsorship shall be sufficient for us; all that remains now for us is to prove the value of her verdict, and the honour of her approbation—much more, of her love. (*"Sordello"* 177)

Though Kingsley does not say so explicitly, the weaknesses he observes in Robert's poetry arise largely from their novelties—those very innovations that later lead readers to admiration. He refers to Browning's "private extravagancies," verses that are "never commonplace" and that evince a "certain 'arrythmia'" (174). He sees Elizabeth's weaknesses, on the other hand, lying in her poor reflection of greater poets like Milton and Goethe.

Kingsley primarily critiques Barrett Browning's depictions of spiritual, unearthly scenes. He considers the weaknesses in *Seraphim* and *The Drama of Exile* arising from such portrayals of abstract heavenly glories. The divine is out of reach. The strength of her work, "Confessions," on the other hand, lies in the

way “the thoroughly human plot...enables her to go down into the depths and rise to the heights of the truly Divine” (178). As long as the divine remains grounded in the “thoroughly human,” Kingsley believes her poetry can reach it. This could be a gendered critique, dismissing the woman’s attempt to achieve something extra-earthly. Except that he claims Milton and Goethe succeed precisely in this way—reaching the divine through the thoroughly human. Limiting her poetry to earthly subjects is not a gendered restriction, then, but a poetic one. In fact, Kingsley does not hesitate to declare Barrett Browning “a scholar of no common attainments, and a poetess of high merit.” Though, his criticism is gendered in other ways. He suggests, for example, that the formal defects in “Confessions” reflect her husband’s voice rather than her own, seeming to have been “struck off at once, and never polished afterwards” (179). Oddly enough, this describes the spasmodic mode in her poetry, generally critiqued elsewhere as being feminine—in contrast to Robert’s notably masculine verse.

Reading the two poets in the context of one another, Kingsley suggests that their marital union might ultimately improve their poetry and the depth of its truths. He refers to them as “a gifted pair,” as though they married primarily *as* poets rather than as persons. Together, he suggests, the two have access to different truths than they would otherwise have alone. Kingsley writes, “May they, for their own sakes, year by year, mine deeper among the golden truths, which can never be learnt alone, and mutually teaching, correcting, inspiring each other, add year by year fresh treasures to the Christian poetry of their mother-land!” (182). They are *mutual teachers*, though what they have to learn and to teach has changed with their union. This focus on their marriage reflects

what Tod E. Jones identified as Kingsley's "preoccupation with relations between the sexes" (155). Kingsley's impulse to compare the two poets seems to arise out of this preoccupation far more than it does out of a natural comparability between their poetic voices. John Maynard suggests that, for Kingsley, sexual relations are "the center of a new vision of life, an emotionally charged conviction, about which religion, as well as morality and social issues, must be reoriented" (86). Indeed, for Kingsley, husband and wife work to "teach" one another in marriage much the same way he suggests Elizabeth and Robert ought to develop one another's poetry. They do this as much through their differences as through their shared gifts. In typical Victorian fashion, Kingsley considered it the unique purview of women "to be more spiritual than cerebral," and in so being to encourage man "to develop his nobler capacities" (Maynard 121). Such a conviction would understandably look for correspondence between the poets' marriage and their work. And in so doing, would see correspondence between husband and wife's gendered persons and their gendered poetry. The real wonder is just how much masculine agency and individual merit Kingsley attributes to Barrett Browning and her work.

The freedom of Kingsley's criticism reflects his admiration. His review of *Casa Guidi Windows* in the December publication of *Fraser's* is a complicated critique. On the one hand, he rigorously lambasts errors that "every schoolboy" ought to know how to correct (622). For example, in response to her lines, "you concluded the upspringing / Of such a nimble bird to sky from perch / Must leave the whole bush in a tremble green" (*Casa* 2, 492), Kingsley writes:

We do not deny that it is logically correct, but do not our instincts tell us that it is aesthetically shocking? One does not conclude, but see and feel, concerning such images; intricate ones, too, as that of the bird and the



bush. And why is the “that” which grammar would require in all but colloquial style after “concluded,” omitted? There are but too many of these colloquialisms, to give them no harder name, in this poem; no one hates the meteorology of Pope and Co. more than we do; but the most playful simplicity is perfectly consistent with the severest grammar. And why talk of a tremble green, instead of a green tremble? It is not English. (620)

Kingsley’s criticism does not read condescendingly here but with the forthrightness of a peer. He is critical because he expects better of her. Moreover, he is critical of grammatical particularities rather than with the whole. And he prefaces his critique with a generous qualification that almost undermines his own argument, suggesting that the errors in her verse might be artful rather than careless. “The very incoherent and fragmentary form,” he writes, must be “a true and natural expression of her own just bewilderment, uncertainty, alternate hope and disappointment” (619). The grammatical errors that interrupt his reading do so to a purpose.

To illustrate Barrett Browning’s poetic genius, Kingsley follows his critique with a lengthy selection from *Casa Guidi Windows* that illustrates her intelligence motivated by virtue. He prefaces the poem simply: “We will make no more complaints, and with full admiration ask what can well be loftier than this” (621):

I love no peace which is not fellowship,  
And which includes not mercy. I would have  
Rather, the raking of the guns across  
The world, and shrieks against Heaven’s architrave.  
Rather, the struggle in the slippery fosse,  
Of dying men and horses, and the wave  
Blood-bubbling.... Enough said!—By Christ’s own cross,  
And by the faint heart of my womanhood,  
Such things are better than a Peace which sits  
Beside the hearth in self-commended mood,  
And takes no thought how wind and rain by fits  
Are howling out of doors against the good  
Of the poor wanderer. What! Your peace admits

Of outside anguish while it sits at home?  
 I loathe to take its name upon my tongue—  
 It is no peace. 'Tis treason, stiff with doom—  
 'Tis gagged despair, and inarticulate wrong,  
 Annihilated Poland, stifled Rome,  
 Dazed Naples, Hungary fainting 'neath the thong,  
 And Austria wearing a smooth olive-leaf  
 On her brute forehead, while her hoofs outpress  
 The life from these Italian souls, in brief.  
 O Lord of Peace, who art Lord of Righteousness,  
 Constrain the anguished worlds from sin and grief,  
 Pierce them with conscience, purge them with redress,  
 And give us peace which is no counterfeit! (*Casa* 536-537)

Barrett Browning's errors may have needed Kingsley's explication for the reader to share his critique, but her poetic virtues need no advocate besides her own verse. Thus, he justifies his lengthy excerpt with the claim that "by quoting which single passage, we consider ourselves to have made full *amende honorable* to Mrs. Browning" for the "critical fanaticism" of the review (622). As a minister, Kingsley could well have explicated the passage as a meditation on Jeremiah 6:14: "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace." Instead, he lets the passage stand. Barrett Browning is her own best advocate for her genius.

Furthermore, such a passage showcases the spiritual grounding of her intellect. Kingsley sees in it a "rich and intense imagination...strength, and health, and abundance of thought, altogether manlike," that place her above her peers—"poets or poetesses" (Kingsley 622). This description of Barrett Browning's poetic masculinity parallels her own description of Kingsley in response to the charge of his "manliness." Both appear to see one another as "humanly bold, brave, true, direct," uniting "a moral cordiality and an original intellect" (Barrett Browning, Letter to Mitford, 1853, 238). For Kingsley, the "intellect" is a masculine quality and the "moral cordiality" a feminine quality—

both which can be embodied by men and women alike, and which are especially embodied by Barrett Browning, as evidenced by her verse (622). When she writes in preference of “the raking of the guns across / The world,” rather than a peace that “takes no thought...of the poor wanderer,” she unifies moral and spiritual sensitivity with the “health, and abundance of thought” that Kingsley identifies as “manlike.” Thus, her poetic masculinity in no way minimizes her femininity. Her verses still retain “occasional touches of the very sweetest womanly tenderness.”<sup>10</sup> The masculine and feminine function as poetic modes, then, which Barrett Browning can use as she will.

Kingsley’s reviews are perhaps surprisingly unclerical in nature. Compared to the sermons and lectures on Tennyson considered in the previous chapters, these poetic readings carry few, if any, instructions for Christian formation or meditations on the relation between poetry and the spiritual life. On the contrary, they are almost strictly literary. Kingsley seems to have separated his own literary identity from his clerical identity here, in a manner his own fiction fails to do. This may be a function of his more liberal faith, or it may simply be the privilege of writing anonymously. After all, what reader would know that the reviewer has a vocational obligation to clerical pedagogy if the reviewer has not told them so? Kingsley thus avoids the need to clarify Barrett Browning’s own clerical capacity in relation to his Anglican priesthood—and so also avoids addressing the spiritual efficacy of her verse. His reading of Barrett Browning as capable of “mutually *teaching*” her husband, however, might well serve as a subtle embrace of the poet’s specific work of preaching, insofar as her

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10. As they must, Gilbert and Gubar would argue, if readers are not to find her monstrous.

poetry offers homiletic instruction—perhaps not for her readers, but within her marriage.

*Archer Thompson Gurney (1820-1887) – Anglican*

Archer Thompson Gurney—Anglican hymn-writer, pamphleteer, and polemicist—was ordained and began his curacy at Holy Trinity, Exeter, in 1850. In that same year, he penned an article for *The English Review* on “Poetesses” that praised the work of Barrett Browning along with the poet Helen Lowe. It would be another eight years before Gurney held the post that most distinctly defined his career—that of Resident Chaplain at the Embassy in Paris (“Obituary,” *Times* 8). An obituary in *The Academy* identifies him as being inclined toward Tractarianism, though “his sympathies were not confined to a single channel” (236). In fact, Gurney avidly participated in the Oxford Movement, writing several Tractarian pamphlets, letters, and sermons influenced by Newman, Pusey, and others. At the time of his article in *The English Review*, though only newly invested in ecclesiastical concerns, he had already developed a clear commitment to Tractarian theology. In the same year, he published two sermons movingly indicting the church against those who are “void of reverence as of love,” and who “make a practice of inveighing against all that are ‘set in authority’” (“The Danger” 7). These sermons were briefly advertised in the same periodical where his 1850 review of Barrett Browning’s poetry—along with another review he wrote on her husband—were published.

Like Kingsley, Gurney had a personal relationship with the Brownings as well as a professional one. Gurney and Robert had been friends, according to Alexandra Orr’s biography of the poet, as early as the 1830s (78). Though the

cleric's and poet's religious views were at odds, they shared similar political sensibilities at the time, and a mutual interest in each other's literary work. Gurney not only reviewed Robert's poetry on a few occasions—in fact, the poet referred to him as his “very kindest of critics”—but he gifted Robert copies of his books, including a collection of his own poetry, *Spring* (Letter to Gurney 144). According to her letters, Elizabeth held another copy of Gurney's poetry in 1845, so she was likewise familiar with his work early on.

It is unclear when Barrett Browning first met Gurney, but she wrote to Henrietta Cook from Paris about visiting with him in 1858. Though she found him “steeple-high in doctrine” and “ten archbishops in himself,” he was also a “gentle” conversationalist, honest and generous (158). Her letter to Arabella Moulton-Barrett the following day is more extensive on the meeting and worth quoting at length:

Mr Gurney has been with us yesterday & today—I understand that aunt Jane confided to him her anxiety about my state with regard to the spirits!—He believes in them but considers the intercourse unlawful. But we have not today talked of spirits, he & we—Our discussion has been on points of dogmatic theology—& though we disagree most widely on churches, the power of the priesthood the Athanasian creed & the like, he has pleased me much by certain very wide views of his .. which would'nt please you, dear .. not a bit—& which I was astounded to hear from a man in his position—such a high churchman! They are views which he dares not preach of course—universal—ultimate salvation, & the lawfulness of praying for the dead. In the first I myself hope, rather than believe—in the second I perfectly believe: in fact it follows from my views of the after-state. He did not quite like it when I greeted him as a fellow-heretic—(heretic being a dreadful word with him),—& maintained that the “eternity of punishment” &c were open questions, & not insisted on by the “Articles.” The fact is that some opinions are becoming slowly modified everywhere, though people are not aware whence the modifying light comes. His idea[s] of “hell” & “punishment” are absolutely at variance with the old ideas. Tell nobody “whom it may concern,” of these confessions of Mr Gurney, .. lest it should produce a feeling against him. He thought Robert & me horrible heretics, very unsound .. but we parted excellent friends, & he was of opinion that my heart was more advanced

than my head, which is just as I would have it— Better it is to love than to know— I wish I loved more, indeed.

This exchange—especially Gurney’s comment about her heart and head—was significant enough that Barrett Browning mentioned it in several other letters over the weeks that followed. Whether Gurney was familiar in 1850 with Barrett Browning’s interest in spiritualism or the other beliefs that would inspire him to consider the poets heretics is unclear. But he certainly respected Barrett Browning enough through her work to be open about his own dogmatic concerns and to maintain a friendship with them both.

Gurney’s own literary career—spanning, as it did, pamphlets, sermons, and poetry—was reflected by the interests of *The English Review* (1844-53) where his articles on the Brownings were published. The *Review* was a quarterly of both “ecclesiastical and general literature,” though it leaned heavily into the ecclesiastical. Other articles published alongside the Barrett Browning review in December 1850, for example, included a review of a book on the history of Anglican reform, an analysis of multiple texts on the “spiritual delusion” of Mormonism, and an article on papal aggression (307-319, 265-306, 410-430). Few non-ecclesiastical reviews are included in the December quarterly besides Gurney’s review of Barrett Browning and Lowe. Though readers would not have known to read the review in the context of his clerical vocation, as it was unsigned, the context of the periodical as a whole would incline a reader toward an ecclesiastical—indeed, a High Church—reading.

The *Review* was established in April of 1844 as an old High Church (not Tractarian) periodical. Its publisher, Rivington, had previously run *The British Critic* (1793-1843), but suspended it in 1843 after its editor, John Henry Newman,

showed inclinations toward the Roman Catholic Church (Altholz 25). Josef Altholz describes the old High Church as “the party of the well-endowed, Tory in politics, more concerned to defend Church establishment and property than to recognize religious duties” (23). *The British Critic* had been the old High Church’s primary journal until the Tractarians took over in the 1830s. Rivington launched *The English Review*, ostensibly to “counteract the Romanizing tendencies” of his previous publication (Altholz 26). Gurney’s sympathy with the Tractarians did not restrict him from seeking publication in *The English Review*, and it is worth observing that the periodical’s 1850 notice of publication for his own sermons firmly emphasizes his antipathy toward the Roman Catholic church.

Gurney’s review of Barrett Browning’s poetry clearly distinguishes her from other popular female poets of the day. The cleric has little good to say about “poetesses” generally, referring to their work as “endless twaddle,” “mawkishness” rather than real poetry, “lackadaisical, and tedious,” with “an almost total absence of thought, a superabundance of morbid feeling” (320-321). He lambasts the popular poet Letitia Landon (L. E. L.), for instance, calling her “one of the most utter nuisances the literature of the nineteenth century has been afflicted with” and accusing her of inflicting “almost irreparable injury on English literature, on English poetry at least” (320). Felicia Hemans receives less censure, for she is “less sickening,” though still burdened by “a tiresome, mellifluous sweetness” and “a superabundance of morbid feeling” (321). Gurney’s criticism of female poetry is not expressly grounded in any real limitations of their gender, but in the “absence of concentration in female thought” evident in their poetry (322). Apart from their poetry, Gurney considers

women to be “usually more sensible than men.”<sup>11</sup> Female poetry tends to be bad poetry, then, because it fulfils the low standards of its genre.

Women are not morbid and lacking in sense, Gurney suggests, but their poetic forms oblige them to feign such morbidity and senselessness. Gurney could be more generous to these poets who ostensibly composed their “mellifluous” verses in response to public expectation. Elizabeth Helsinger explains that the poetry expected of women from the period consisted largely of short lyrics, ballad stanzas, and simple, musical verse. Yet, even as these forms were expected of women, they were also treated as a woman’s preference. She writes that this supposed preference “suggested to many readers lack of range, ambition, and intellectual scope” (127). Gurney critiques “poetesses” for using forms that suggest to him precisely this lack of range. “Such assumptions,” Helsinger argues, “were the more easily made for women poets who, like Brontë, Rossetti, and Dickinson, composed no long poems and lacked formal education in the classical or modern-language literary traditions.” Barrett Browning, of course, belied such assumptions by composing lengthy poems and giving manifold evidence of her classical education.

She also resisted association with her female peers by producing more formally imperfect verse. Michael Hurley recognizes the critical preference for female poets who produce “mellifluous” verse in his explication of Christina Rossetti’s “practically perfect” poetry. He considers how her reviewers praised her verses “insofar as they are seemly,” composed “sweetly, by graceful

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11. Gurney adds that they are, indeed, “the queens of creation,” but the comparative idealism does little service to his argument.



discipline, and against the indecorous example set by Barrett Browning" (78).<sup>12</sup> Gurney offers a counter to the critics Hurley's cites, who "seemed unwilling to imagine that an unworldly woman could have the intellect and temperament or education and experience to produce much more than personalized emoting or prettified devotion." While Gurney fails to acknowledge other critics as being complicit in the inanity of the poetesses' verses, he exerts a robust willingness "to imagine" a more capable female poet. Indeed, he does not need to imagine, for Barrett Browning is right there, giving evidence that a woman can have intellect and temperament, education and experience, to produce more. Her unwillingness to produce "seemly" poetry can thus be seen as a revolt against this critical association between "practically perfect" form and "personalized emoting or prettified devotion." Just as Barrett Browning complicates this critical judgment, so do admiring critics—like Gurney. He includes Lowe in his admiration, considering the two of them to be "true poets; not *poetesses only*; each taking a high rank amongst her bardic peers" (323).

Like so many critics, though, the "bardic peer" Gurney most immediately compares Barrett Browning to is her husband. The cleric's early friendship with Robert makes some sense of the comparison. It is likely that he knew Elizabeth personally through Robert, rather than the reverse—though he gives no indication of this familiarity in the review itself, and it is unclear whether the two

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12. Hurley argues that Christina Rossetti's turn toward "perfect" composition, on the other hand, notable for its seeming effortlessness and spontaneity, grew out of an attempt "to de-emphasize the pains of literary composition, and literary achievement, to emphasize instead her commitment to poetry as a piously selfless endeavor" (83-84). In which case, Rossetti's "perfection" was not necessarily intended to shape her poetry as particularly feminine composition, but rather to shape it as definitively Tractarian. The Tractarian posture took form seriously as a means to an end—specifically, the end of guiding the reader to religious devotion. Barrett Browning's commitment to uniting her poetry and her faith parallels Rossetti's efforts but to clearly different results.

had met yet. Gurney's friendship with Robert does not preclude him from expressing a discerning criticism. Robert, he argues, lacks the lyrical skill of his wife. Robert has drama, though, and "the highest beauty, the highest grace" in pursuit of the highest truth (324). Both poets feel deeply and imaginatively, but ultimately, Gurney claims, Robert has "the higher and the master spirit; her's [sic] the more tender, and the more musical also" (325). In context, it is unclear whether Gurney means Robert's spirit masters his readers, his verses, or his wife. This conflation seems to be a common rhetorical slip of critics who bring the two Brownings together—reading each poet through the other so that they become stand-ins for the readers themselves, who then likewise participate in the poets' marriage by proxy.

Coming from a cleric, Gurney's simultaneously admiring and critical assessment of Barrett Browning's *A Drama of Exile* that follows is confusing. For while he praises the poem's "sacred strain," he is concerned about some of its theological treatments (325). He writes:

It is a grand and a solemn composition; somewhat too diffuse perhaps, and shadowy, and mixing up ideal conceptions, abstract ideas personified, such as the Spirits of the Earth and of the Creatures, with real actual sentient beings, in a manner we can scarcely approve. This, unintentionally, gives an unreal effect to much that would otherwise be very beautiful, and even holy.

This disapproval seems to be uttered as both religious instructor and as a critic of poetry. The distinction matters here, as the "mixing up" of concepts with "real actual sentient beings" sounds like a different failure for the theologian than for the poet. One is a failure of ontology, the other of believability—or rather a failure of the suspension of disbelief. Yet Gurney suggests that Barrett Browning's theological failure contributes to her poetic failure. A better attention

to theological reality would, apparently, lead to more “beautiful” and believable verse.

Gurney supports his criticism by analyzing the illogical tone of a dialogue between Gabriel and Lucifer. In it, “the chief of fallen angels is represented as troubling those with his presence who incessantly request him ‘to go’” (325). Even a brief glance at a few of Barrett Browning’s objectionable lines makes his point evident:

Gabriel: Go from us straightaway.  
Lucifer: Wherefore?  
Gabriel: Lucifer,  
Thy last step in this place, trod sorrow up.  
Recoil before that sorrow, if not this sword.  
Lucifer: Angels are in the world—wherefore not I?...  
Gabriel: Depart.  
Lucifer: And where’s the logic of depart? (*Drama* 11)

The argument continues on the next page, with Lucifer increasingly pleading his case before Gabriel. Gurney finds this nagging an unfeasible characterization of the prince of hell, arguing that, “Gabriel should not be made to speak so forcibly at first, if he has no power to enforce his commands; and his entering into long reasonings afterwards, on the same theme, is a token of weakness we should not have expected from an angel” (325). Barrett Browning’s failure to attend to such angelic distinctions results in an unbelievable poetic narrative. Gurney is cautious about his conflation of the theological and poetic, though, qualifying his critique with: “We almost fear we are waxing irreverent, which it is certainly far from our intention to be, firmly as we believe in angelic agency, and strongly as we desire to do honour to those blessed spirits which stand in the presence of our God around the throne.” Such a qualification may be necessary in *The English*

*Review's* "high and dry" pages, but it also suits Gurney's own "steeple-high in doctrine" character (Altholz 23, Barrett Browning, Letter to Cook 158).

The verse's beauty, like its failures, serves a theological purpose for Gurney. The beauty of the Spirits' songs about earth reflect praise for the Creator himself. The depiction of Adam and Eve's fallen state tells us something about ourselves. Of their conversation in the poem, he writes, "Both characters are nobly conceived. We find no trace of selfishness in what falls from either of them; only the love of God seems no longer to tenant their hearts; intense love of each other has taken its place" (326). This line itself contains a subtle sermon on disordered love. Though he has not explicitly stated that the poem instructs, Gurney nevertheless finds biblical instruction in its verses. He quotes the following excerpt as an example of Barrett Browning's powerful writing, despite these being the words of Earth-spirits—whom he has already suggested come across as unbelievable. Here, the spirits condemn Adam and Eve for bringing the curse upon them through the Fall:

And we scorn you! There's no pardon  
Which can lean to you aright.  
When your bodies take the guerdon  
Of the death-curse in our sight,  
Then the bee that hummeth lowest shall transcend you:  
Then ye shall not move an eyelid,  
Though the stars look down your eyes;  
And the earth, which ye defiled,  
She shall show you to the skies,—  
"Lo! these kings of ours—who sought to comprehend you!" (*Drama* 48-49)

Gurney follows the excerpt with the exclamation, "What a magnificent rhythm for scorn and irony!" (327). The rhythm itself communicates something of the poem's purpose, powerfully overcoming what Gurney had considered a theological and poetic weakness.

This elision of the poetic and theological critique continues in Gurney's assessment of *The Seraphim*, which he considers a failure. The poem narrates the perspective of the angels looking down upon the crucifixion, a theme "too awful and too blessed not to have forbidden such a desecration as this, however unintentional" (327). His free condemnation of the poem as a desecration resonates with his later proclamation, in their conversation of 1858, that Barrett Browning herself is a heretic. Again, he conflates poetic weakness with theological treatment, writing:

The whole poem labours under a painful sense of unreality, and that in treating of the greatest of all realities.... Does not Mrs. Browning feel that the glories of heaven are too great for her earthly grasp? that it far rather becomes her on such a subject to tremble and adore? ...As critics, and as Christians, *we entreat* that "The Seraphim" may be removed from the next edition!

For Gurney, the impossibility of conceiving of "the glories of heaven" make the poem not only a desecration of its subject but a failure in its poetry. His petition to remove the poem from her collection could be read as clerically condescending. Or, like Kingsley, it could be motivated by a recognition of Barrett Browning's equality; he, too, is critical because he expects more from one of her intelligence and ability.

In fact, Gurney's critique of Barrett Browning's theology highlights the egalitarianism in his review. If she is not a mere poetess but a true poet, he believes, she ought to do better. And true poetry is not out of reach for a woman of education and experience, which Barrett Browning clearly is. Gurney's praise of the poet and distaste for popular poetesses ultimately offers a subtle censure for those patriarchal structures that would prop up women's mediocrity and withdraw support from strong female voices. Even in his criticism, he credits her

with that very poetic capacity that the “poetess” designation alone would withhold. That is, he holds her to the same standard as her male peers.

*George Gilfillan (1813-1878) – Presbyterian*

The Scotch Presbyterian minister George Gilfillan was a popular preacher and admired writer. Ordained in 1835, he was established the following year in a lifelong post with the School Wynd congregation at Dundee (MacKenzie). As a writer, Gilfillan moved fluidly between theological and literary subjects throughout his career, beginning with a book of sermons and a series of literary essays both published in 1840. Five years later, he republished those essays in book form (*A Gallery of Literary Portraits*, followed by two sequels over the next decade), which established him firmly in the public eye as a literary critic. In 1850, his *The Bards of the Bible* treated the biblical authors with the same critical attention he gave to poets from the nineteenth century. As noted in the earlier chapters of this study, Charles LaPorte discusses Gilfillan’s claims for this volume, observing that:

For Gilfillan, as for many of his contemporaries, the poetic nature of the Bible may be deduced like a syllogism from the two axioms that the Bible is God’s eternal word, and that “the language of poetry...is the only speech which has in it the power of permanent impression.” “Poetry” is not merely associated with religious truth here; they are effectively synonymous. (*Victorian* 10)

LaPorte quotes from Gilfillan’s introduction here, where the critic also states unequivocally that “the language of poetry has, therefore, become the language of the inspired volume” (that is, the Bible), and “the Bible is a poem” (Gilfillan x, xx). In his preface, Gilfillan even acknowledges his aspiration that the text *about* the Bible as poetry might also be its own “Prose Poem” (iii). Gilfillan diverges

from many of his contemporaries who were reading the poetic books of the Bible as works of poetry. By including prose, especially biblical prose, in his definition of poetry, Gilfillan situates the poetic sensibility further away from form. And in so doing, he also allows both formal poetry and scripture to be discerned as spiritual text. This explicit interest in applying literary and spiritual discernment equally to poetry and scripture makes his assessment of Barrett Browning's work especially compelling.

In 1847, Gilfillan contributed a lengthy review of Barrett Browning for *Tait's Magazine* as the second installment of a series on "Female Authors." This series is notable for his progressive treatment of women, but it was of a piece with *Tait's* political character. *Tait's* originated in 1832, the same year as the first Reform Bill, and was committed to promoting national unity and inter-class dialogue. Alexis Easley writes that the journal directed a "reformist philosophy to a broad base of middle-class and artisan class readers with diverse regional affiliations" (263). Easley's study of *Tait's* in the 1830s suggests that the journal's literary criticism in particular was designed to help "[formulate] aesthetic principles that would reflect its commitment to reform" (267). Some of that criticism was even written by women, including Barrett Browning's friend Mary Russell Mitford, the novelist Eliza Meteyard, and the social theorist and writer Harriet Martineau, who contributed an article in 1833 on Sir Walter Scott's efforts to establish a Scottish identity in harmony rather than opposition with the British (Shattock, Easley 267). Easley argues that such politically shaped literary reviews, alongside the journal's working-class and middle-class writers, attempted "to reconcile differences of region and class by joining readers together in dialogue

over social reform" (269). The reviewers offered the reader examples of how to read literature politically, with an eye for national and class unification.

It was only natural that women like Martineau would be a part of such dialogue. *Tait's* was even edited by a woman from 1834 to 1846. Christian Isobel Johnstone encouraged contributions from female writers and set a standard for the journal as a locus for dialogue from both male and female points of view. Johnstone was committed to journalism as a tool of individual, even spiritual, development, and concerned about the possibility that it might do harm if not written well. In her article "On Periodical Literature," written the year before she began editing the journal, she writes:

The responsibility attaching to our profession is most important. We consider its duties as no light or perfunctory undertaking: we insist upon the necessity of performing them in an earnest, nay, almost religious, spirit of truthfulness; and we consider any deviation from singleness and dignity of purpose, any indication of a venal or temporizing spirit, as mischievous and criminal. (496)

Gilfillan wrote his series on female poets the year after Johnstone ended her tenure as *Tait's* editor, but his attention to the moral implications of his own writing as well as its subject are evident throughout. Moreover, his reasoned egalitarianism reflects the periodical's substantial evidence of women's equal intellectual powers.

Gilfillan began his series on female poets looking first at Felicia Hemans and then at Barrett Browning. Hemans he chose for the femininity of her verse, and Barrett Browning for her poetry's masculinity—gendered categories he uses to distinguish poetic tone rather than the poets' character ("Female Authors" 620). Gilfillan is critical of those who would dismiss women's intellectual powers—and easily critical, given the magazine's history and readership. Just



because a woman *has* not written an epic, he argues, does not mean that she therefore *cannot*. Such an argument responds directly to claims like W. A. Jones's that fallaciously argue women are evidently incapable of writing epics because history has shown that they have never done so. Women's creative capacities must be equal to men's, Gilfillan says, for "has not woman understood and appreciated the greatest works of genius as fully as man?" And if women can understand works of genius, they can certainly create them. Barrett Browning, as well as Johnstone and Martineau, offer proof to *Tait's* readers of such understanding. Gilfillan openly discusses how woman's intellectual progress had been stilted by a historical lack of education and poor formation. He writes:

Almost all that is valuable in Female Authorship has been produced within the last half-century, that is, since the female was generally recognised to be an intellectual creature; and if she has, in such a short period, so progressed, what demi-Mahometan shall venture to set bounds to her future advancement? (620)

He puts the blame for this squarely on man who has treated woman as "an article of furniture" and "the toy of pleasure." For Gilfillan, man's limitations on the advancement of women's intellectual and cultural development are both regressive and unchristian.

This introduces Gilfillan's biblical argument for the equality of the sexes. He reads the Genesis narrative of Eve's creation out of the ribs of Adam as evidence not of women's subjectivity to man but of her potential for equality—making her "his gentle *alias*," and therefore equal in intellectual and creative capacity ("Female Authors" 620). While this sounds a bit like Gilbert and Gubar's description of women as a *cypher* for men, Gilfillan's implications are quite the reverse. Rather than forming a shadow self to men, an empty vessel to

be filled with masculine creative energies, the “alias” formed from Adam’s rib is a copy, a doppelgänger. Woman is literally just as human as man.

Thus, despite poor education and poor formation, Gilfillan holds out hope for women’s expansion. After all, if women have been “written” into subjection, they can certainly be written out of it. In part, Gilfillan finds this hope coming from the work of female poets themselves, especially those from his own century. The speed with which such female authors have risen in skill and prominence in response to their intellectual freedom is further cause for his hope. Gilfillan not only suggests that women are equal to men but goes so far as to argue that women are supreme in some important aspects of poetic genius, particularly as civilization progresses (he thinks) toward a more peaceful and less wild state of nature. He writes:

We stay not to prove that the *sex* of genius is *feminine*, and that those poets who are most profoundly impressing our young British minds, are those who, in tenderness and sensibility—in peculiar power, and in peculiar weakness, are all but females. And whatever may be said of the effects of culture, in deadening the genius of man, we are mistaken if it has not always had the contrary effect upon that of woman...so that, on entering the far more highly civilized periods which are manifestly approaching, she will but be breathing the atmosphere calculated to nourish and invigorate, instead of weakening and chilling her mental life. (“Female Authors” 620-621)

Feminine verse is not strictly the province of female poets, then, but arises out of the century’s cultural development. Feminine poetics is a poetics of progress. And that progress nurtures the intellectual development of women as well as their poetic capacities.

Barrett Browning’s masculine sensibility, on the other hand, embodies the poetic genius of the past. Gilfillan compares her work to Lucretius, Aeschylus, Milton, and Coleridge rather than to her female peers. Her *Drama of Exile* comes

out of the tradition of these writers, he suggests. Though, it does so without imitating them—a surprising feat of originality given the same material as Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. Gilfillan also offers criticism of this attempt at originality, writing, “We do not approve of the daring precedent of trying conclusions with Milton on his own high field of victory—and we are, we must say, jealous of all encroachments upon that fair Paradise which has so long painted itself upon our imaginations” (“Female Authors” 622). Whether Gilfillan is expressing his own view here or mimicking a view he finds in others is not entirely clear. He continues in this vein, arguing that Barrett Browning’s paradise is comparable to Milton’s to the degree the Apocrypha is comparable to the Bible. He is not speaking here simply of the landscape of the Paradises, but of the language the poets use to shape them. The “sadness, or at least seriousness” Gilfillan finds in Barrett Browning’s writing is poorly suited to depicting a land of perfect beauty and goodness (621).

Barrett Browning appeared not to care much for Gilfillan’s criticism. While there is no evidence to suggest she knew him personally in 1847, she was familiar with his review. Mitford mentioned it to her in a letter from October of that year, calling it “an article highly & justly praiseful of your poetry.” But Barrett Browning seemed to reference the review in another letter to Arabella Moulton-Barrett in 1850, saying:

We hear that the book is “much talked of” in London, and “accused of irreligion.” There’s the effect of writing a religious book! Its always so. People have reproached me for “irreverence;” and “boldness approximating to blasphemy,” because I used liberty in speaking of divine things: if I had never named them or thought of them, there wd be clear approbation, as far as the world went.

This might be an unfair reading of the cleric—or it might reference a similar review by someone else. Gilfillan did use similar language to Barrett Browning's letter when wrote of her "The Cry of the Human" that "some may think its tone *daring to the brink of blasphemy*, and piercing almost to anguish" ("Female Authors" 622, italics mine). But for Gilfillan, this daring is a necessary outpouring of the poet's heroic suffering.

This suffering of the poet is *masculine* to the same degree that the progress, civilization, and enlightenment of the nineteenth century are *feminine*. If feminine genius responds to a world progressed and civilized, masculine genius responds to the world in its fallenness and suffering. Gilfillan describes this masculinity as "heroic" as it gives voice to—even as it rises above—that suffering ("Female Authors" 621). Barrett Browning "has soared upwards...to those flights of idealism...to those distant and daring themes," urged in this direction by the need "to fill the vast vacuity of a sick and craving spirit." Her masculine voice develops out of this tendency to turn away from herself toward these "dizzying heights," offering a "transcendental retreat" from the *mêlée* of the world. This almost magnetic draw between the suffering spirit and "gloomy themes" is a distinct characteristic of Barrett Browning's writing (621).

But the poet's heroism, even while enunciating a masculine sensibility, is also the special province of suffering *women* throughout history. While, as a Presbyterian, it is unlikely Gilfillan intended the connection, he treats Barrett Browning's physical sufferings in the same manner as the virgin martyrs of old, heroes who in a Catholic or Anglican tradition would have been considered saints. Like such religious figures whose sufferings turn them toward God, Barrett Browning acts as an advocate through her verse. Gilfillan asks:

Whom would the human race prefer as their earthly advocate, to a high-souled and gifted woman? What voice but the female voice could so softly and strongly, so eloquently and meltingly, interpret to the ear of him who's [*sic*] name is Love, the deep woes, and deeper wants of 'poor humanity's afflicted will, struggling in vain with ruthless destiny?" ("Female Authors" 622)

This female poet serves as a prayerful mediator, speaking not to the reader from the divine, but speaking to the divine on behalf of the reader. Gilfillan grows more explicit with this intercessory language, stating that Barrett Browning's poetry is "a prayer for the times, and no collect in the English liturgy surpasses it." In this prayer, she stands as "the conscious and commissioned representative of the human race," which is in Catholic terms both a saintly and Marian image (622-623). Gilfillan the Presbyterian may not recognize a mediator between humanity's suffering and God's listening ear in the figure of Mary, but he recognizes one in the female poet of genius and sympathy.<sup>13</sup>

Mediation Gilfillan *would* recognize, on the other hand, is the mediation of Christ himself, the original "earthly advocate." Indeed, he invokes biblical language here—1 John 2:1, which describes Christ as "an advocate with the Father," and Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:25, which refer to him as a high priest interceding sympathetically with our infirmities through his own suffering. Though carefully distinguishing between *earthly* and *heavenly* mediation, Gilfillan nevertheless also depicts the poet's advocacy as Christ-like. Furthermore, in this comparison to Christ, masculine and feminine poetic virtues meet all the more.

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13. Though Gilfillan may not consciously have appropriated Catholic Marian associations here, Marian imagery was nevertheless widely used at the time to represent female sanctity. Barrett Browning did so herself in *Aurora Leigh* through the character Marian. Such imagery was also evident in more paternalistic texts, such as the novels of Charles Dickens and Coventry Patmore's pre-Catholic narrative poem *The Angel in the House*. Julie Melnyk discusses the uses and limits of such imagery in "'Mighty Victims': Women Writers and the Feminization of Christ."

Julie Melnyk argues that from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth, Christ was widely figured in feminine terms. This ideal of a feminized Christ, she suggests, responded to the development of evangelical values of “self-sacrifice and influence,” as well as a negotiation of essentialized gender roles, “in which men and women embodied fundamentally different, complementary virtues” (136). By identifying Christ with feminine virtues, his suffering and triumph become accessible paradigms for women and men alike. Melnyk traces the presence of a suffering female Christ-figure through Barrett Browning’s own poetry, noting that poet and Savior are closely identified in *Aurora Leigh*—though feminine suffering is given to the male character, Romney, and Christ-like power, authority, “teaching and preaching,” given to the female poet (Melnyk 150).<sup>14</sup>

Gilfillan does not divide the two but recognizes the poet’s unique gift for such teaching and preaching as it arises from her seriousness and suffering. The “spread of the Earnest Spirit” indicates that poetry will overcome its recent frivolous history and again become a platform for “the most serious of all serious things” (“Female Authors” 625). Though he is hesitant to call Barrett Browning a prophet, he includes her in his anticipation that poetry might once again claim

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14. Denae Dyck likewise observes a close correlation between Christ’s suffering and feminine experience in *The Drama of Exile*. She writes:

[Her] reclamation of humility puts Eve in the position of the self-sacrificing Christ who appears later in the drama. The first to respond to Christ’s proclamation of “the Love, which is [himself],” Eve immerses herself in this love by declaring that, regardless of any blessing given specifically to her, she is “blessed in harkening” to him. Moreover, the paradoxical concept of work articulated by Christ recalls Eve’s acceptance and reclamation of her postlapsarian position. Exhorting Adam and Eve to live, love, and work, “nobly, because lowly,” Christ echoes Eve’s previous statement that she will accept her own work as a “high part, which lowly shall be counted.” Both Eve and Christ, then, dismantle hierarchies of high and low as they advance a wider vision of greatness. (42)

Through this explication, Dyck finds Barrett Browning’s concept of suffering arises not from oppression—as Melnyk suggests—but from “an all-encompassing gesture of love” (43).

the prophetic power it once had. Her poetry, and the poetry of peers like Tennyson and Emerson, give him “high hope and expectation”:

It recalls to us a past period, when the names of prophet and of poet were the same; when bards were the real rulers; when the highest truth came forth in melody; when rhyme and reason had never been divorced. It points us forward, with sunbeaming finger.... And when men have become more enlightened, more welded into unity, more penetrated with high principle, more warmed with the emotions of love...there shall break forth from it a voice of song...comparable to that fabled melody, by which the spheres were said to attune their motions.

Barrett Browning’s seriousness, then, both reflects the voices of the ancient prophets and directs the reader forward to creation’s praise in the triumphant Kingdom of God yet to come. LaPorte suggests that she developed this reflection and direction intentionally in her work, as she responded to the “Romantic ambition to craft new religious texts” by drawing poetic inspiration directly from her religious faith (*Victorian* 23). He sees Barrett Browning writing poetry as “a self-justifying testament to God’s divine presence” (24). The poet herself asserts as much in a letter to Mitford, stating that “Christ’s religion is essentially poetry—poetry glorified” (Jan. 1842, 219). She asserts that the “experiment” of religious poetry, “has scarcely been tried,” but that the genius of Christianity (referring to Chateaubriand’s *Génie du Christianisme*) may yet be “developped [*sic*] in poetical glory & light.”<sup>15</sup> Gilfillan clearly shares this view, and if Barrett Browning has yet to achieve that poetical glory, she offers “high hope and expectation” of its fulfilment.

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15. LaPorte gives a helpful introduction to Chateaubriand’s *Le Génie du Christianisme* in the context of Barrett Browning’s reading as an argument against Enlightenment skepticism: “A work of remarkable literary panache, it combines a personal and emotional defense of Christian dogma with an aesthetic claim that Christianity lends itself to the creation of beauty in a uniquely powerful way” (37). Chateaubriand’s claim appealed to Barrett Browning’s “fundamentally Romantic desire to unite religion and poetry,” even as the two likely meant very different things “by poetry and poets” (38, 40).

One of the poets Gilfillan lists among Barrett Browning's peers who share with her the work of recollecting the prophets and signaling the Kingdom is, of course, her husband. Like Kingsley and Gurney, Gilfillan cannot seem to help but reference Robert Browning in his assessment of Elizabeth's work. Earlier in the review, Gilfillan writes that she:

seems to have seated herself, like a second witch of Endor, in a cave of mystery and vaticination—her “familiar,” her gifted husband, a spirit well worthy of holding his consultation with herself; and who, like the famili of ancient magicians, is equally adapted for humorous sport, and for serious thought and enterprise.<sup>16</sup> (“Female Authors” 624)

Robert Browning becomes a refining poetic spirit at her side rather than a masculine counterpoint drawing her maternal womanhood out into the public eye. Though, Gilfillan's description here is also something of a criticism. In the previous paragraph, he argues that Barrett Browning “owes it to herself and to her admirers to simplify her manner—to sift her diction of whatever is harsh and barbarous—to speak whatever truth is in her, in the clear articulate language of men.” Gilfillan sees the poet vacillating between abstraction and linguistic clarity. The simplification he suggests will not, apparently, make her poetry any less “unearthly in its effect upon the soul,” but it will make her poetry accessible to a wider readership.

Gilfillan avoids using the language of prophet to describe Barrett Browning, but suggests instead that her poetry confers a prophetic role on the reader. Continuing the witch metaphor, he writes, “We have in spirit been

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16. This is a curious comparison between Barrett Browning and the witch of Endor for a number of reasons. On the one hand, it was from Barrett Browning's description in *Aurora Leigh* of the poet's mother as witch that Gilbert and Gubar drew much their language for the monster on the other side of the angel in the house. Every woman is a witch of Endor, they suggest. Yet, for Gilfillan, this comparison seems to evoke Barrett Browning's strange, compelling genius, not her feminine monstrosity. According to Gilbert and Gubar, of course, nineteenth-century feminine genius *is* a monstrosity.



visiting her cavern, and have come back in the mood of prophesying. She has, if not taught, confirmed on us impressions, in reference to the future progress of Poetry" ("Female Authors" 624). This is prophecy about poetry itself, which she does not teach the reader but awakens or confirms in them. The language used here is important—"if not *taught*, *confirmed*"—for it illustrates a hesitation to attribute to Barrett Browning a pedagogical role. Moreover, the prophecies she awakens in her readers are related strictly to poetry. The reader Gilfillan has in mind appears to be the critic, like himself, who looks for evidence of the future of poetry in her verse. He includes her in the list of great contemporary poets along with Tennyson and Emerson, insofar as they all reaffirm the seriousness of poetry. This is a high honor, but not the same thing as preaching or teaching.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, framing the female poet as a kind of witch-like oracle through which the reader might prophesy serves to reestablish the gender distinctions that Gilfillan has otherwise complicated. The feminine poetic mode, after all, has already been figured as the mode of progress, of the world to come. But the poet's prophetic work may be less about foreseeing the future and more about seeing well in the present.<sup>18</sup> Barrett Browning is both, then—a masculine poet of the old order and a feminine muse who, through poetry, communicates the mysteries of the divine to the prophetic reader.

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17. Granted, Gilfillan does not seem interested in Tennyson or Emerson as preachers either. Elsewhere, he claims Tennyson is "less a prophet than an artist," and Emerson descends from the mountaintop less like Moses than Rip van Winkle (*Second Gallery* 158, 123).

18. This view of prophecy resembles Sutherland's in his review of Tennyson from the third chapter.

*Charles T. Brooks (1813-1883) – Unitarian*

Barrett Browning's work received notable attention not only among the clerics and critics of Great Britain, but across the Atlantic as well. The Unitarian cleric Charles Timothy Brooks included Barrett Browning in an article surveying notable poetry for *The Christian Examiner* in 1845 (Wendte 13). The *Examiner* was a Unitarian periodical, launched as *The Christian Disciple* in 1813. Originally a vehicle for Transcendentalist Christian thinkers, the journal aimed to offer a "witness," specifically of:

our love to God, his word, and his worship; our love to the Lord Jesus, and his institutions; our love to our fellow christians of different denominations; our concern for those of our fellow men who are in a state of alienation from God; our desires for the prosperity of Christ's kingdom, and for the peace and welfare of society. ("Christian Disciple" 4)

The journal's intent seems to have been the justification of Unitarianism as a Christian denomination among others and an apology for the denomination's supposedly "rebellious" or even "blasphemous" doctrines. The introduction to the journal's first edition emphasizes its pursuit of unity between all Christians and Christian denominations, the "healing of divisions," and the sharing of the ministry of the gospel (6).

This emphasis on unity defines not only the periodical and its denomination, but Charles Brooks's whole ministry as well. After graduating from Cambridge Divinity School in Massachusetts, Brooks served as minister at the Unitarian Society in Newport, Rhode Island, from 1837 to 1871 (Wendte 13). The minister was notable for the geniality of his temperament and his unselfish eagerness to serve others (Willson 5-6). His ministry in Newport extended through the Temperance Movement, the Dorr Rebellion, Abolition, and the Civil War—divisive moments not only for the state and nation, but also for his

congregation (Wendte 14). Brooks was unhesitatingly firm in his opposition to slavery despite objections from his parishioners, though his ill health and passive temperament limited more active involvement in the cause. In addition to his preaching and parish visits, Brooks offered a number of lectures on theology and church history to his congregation and added to his salary through translation work. One of his biographers, Charles Wendte, comments on Brooks's literary inclinations:

Mr. Brooks was essentially a literary man in his tastes and aspirations. Literature was his favorite occupation, his solace and delight. When suffering from his ofttime infirmities or oppressed with private or public cares, he would retire to the quiet of his study and there woo the gentle muse of song or plunge into the intricacies of a Jean Paul or Rückert and soon be entirely oblivious of the trials and woes of his earthly lot. (18)

Wendte's description suggests Brooks turned to literature as an escape from his clerical obligations more than as an extension of them. He was prolific in this escape, producing so much and so quickly, Wendte suggests, that he gave little time to revise his work to ensure it was as strong in quality as it was in quantity. In addition to more than thirteen hundred sermons written during his tenure at Newport, he also wrote essays, reviews, monographs, poems, hymns, and children's literature.

Brooks's review of the two-volume American edition of *A Drama of Exile: and Other Poems* for *The Christian Examiner* in March 1845 surveyed six other poets as well, following Barrett Browning with Frances Anne Butler, Christopher Pearse Cranch, Sarah Ellis, Charles Hood, John Owen, and James Russell Lowell. He begins with Barrett Browning, he states, because she is "in some important respects the most remarkable poetic genius of this day" (206). Brooks uses the word "genius" to describe Barrett Browning's work five times in two brief

paragraphs, comparing her to Keats, Tennyson, and Lowell. It is interesting to note the absence of Robert in this list of comparable male writers. In 1845, Robert and Elizabeth had yet to marry. Robert's poetry was both considerably less well known than hers and, insofar as it was known, widely criticized. After her marriage, one would be hard pressed to find a reviewer claim, as Brooks does here, that "Elizabeth Barrett is herself, and not another or others" (207). Her genius, he claims, lies in her independence from those other poets even as she shares with them "old and antique freshness" and the unification of "bold imagination, beautiful fancy, and tender humanity." In those qualities that make the other poets notable, she is preeminent.

Despite this effusive praise, some of Brooks's language is surprisingly diminutive in its references to Barrett Browning's poetry. He writes of her "child-like simplicity" of execution and "meek simplicity of Christian faith" (207) At the same time, he also admires her "bluntnesses and prosaisms of expression," and her "daring...undertakings." She is, then, a genius in both force and tenderness, sweetness and glaring light. While Brooks also does not hesitate to attribute to Barrett Browning a deep knowledge of humanity, this is expressed in distinctly feminine terms:

We do not presume to say that Miss Barrett has reached the ideal of poetry, but if, (as we begin to think) that is the greatest poetry which grasps and moves in the greatest degree the greatest proportion of the feelings and energies of the human soul, then must this sweet singer take a high place in our admiration—a deep place in our affections. It is inspiring to meet such lofty genius blended with such meek simplicity of Christian faith—such purity—such peace.

Certainly, no male poet would ever be referred to as a "sweet singer," and the reference to purity and peace are surely rare in reviews of her masculine contemporaries. But the cleric's admiration of both her feminine and masculine

qualities suggests that even if he admires her for the sweetness, purity, and peace of her verse, he nevertheless considers those feminine qualities an asset for the poet *as* a poet. Perhaps, like Gilfillan, he considers the feminine to be a necessary quality in the poetry of progress.

However, it seems more reasonable to interpret Brooks's praise as a recognition of the female poet's different yet equal mode of human understanding. This oddly praises her for writing in a feminine mode, unlike Gilfillan who recognizes the masculine mode in her verse. Barrett Browning's femininity, then, may serve as an aspect of her poetic particularity and originality rather than a category of identity. Not yet identifying her work with her marriage, this review stands apart from assessments like Kingsley's, Gurney's, and Gilfillan's. Her independence may also explain why Brooks feels no urgency to put Barrett Browning's feminine voice in conversation with a masculine mode. She has yet to be categorized as a romantic or motherly figure, so her work can be approached free from sexual or maternal implications, whatever those might be. Later in the article, Brooks considers poetry more broadly, treating it in distinctly universal terms. He writes:

Every man has many poets within him. Hope is a poet, painting bright and beautiful pictures on the flickering curtain of the future. Memory is a poetess, and creates a past world of her own by shedding upon departed scenes and objects a mild and glorifying moonlight.... Every child is a poet. Every child has the poetic feeling within him. (221)

Barrett Browning's genius, then, is doing well what everyone does to some degree. And if the poetic impulse is a fundamental part of being human, as Brooks suggests, excelling in poetry is a form of excelling in humanity. Barrett Browning's gift is, on some level, a matter of being more fully human. This resonates with many of the observations of Tennyson's Nonconformist clerical

critics. Like them, Brooks finds alignment between the poet of excellence and a flourishing human life.

Whether because of space limitations from the periodical or restrictions from Barrett Browning's American publisher, Brooks is unable to quote from the poetry collection. The review—perhaps as a consequence—ultimately says little about the poems themselves. The only excerpt he affords his readers is from the description Barrett Browning gives of poets at the altar of God in "A Vision of Poets," from the second volume—the single line and a half: "pale and crowned, / With sovran eyes of depth profound" (207).<sup>19</sup> This description of the poets celebrated in her verse could just as easily refer to Barrett Browning herself. For while it is almost immediately after this line that Brooks qualifies her genius with "We do not presume to say that Miss Barrett has reached the ideal of poetry," he readily crowns her with praise as one who has attained "deep religious peace" even in the midst of her "sternest, stormiest utterances." Charles Brooks's review is signed only by his initials, so his readers likely would not have known that the reviewer was a cleric, let alone a Unitarian. But his admiration for Barrett Browning is explicitly religious, associating her not with priest, preacher, or prophet, but with those saints who have attained to glory.

*Gilbert Haven (1821-1880) – Methodist*

Twenty-five years after Brooks's work on Barrett Browning, the American Methodist minister, Gilbert Haven, penned a brief article on the poet's gravesite for *The Independent*. The article considers the poet's legacy rather than specific

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19. Barrett Browning later revised these lines to read: "Pale and bound / With bay above the eyes profound" ("Vision" 193).

poems, and thus functions as a eulogy rather than a review or even a biographical account. Barrett Browning had passed away ten years prior, but her work continued to be important for abolitionists like Haven in the United States. Haven was not only a fierce advocate for emancipation prior to the Civil War; he argued forcibly for racial equality throughout his career (Gravely). This advocacy made him a favorite among African American Methodists, but provoked significant conflict as other white leaders in his denomination increasingly accepted compromises with segregation after the war's end. Haven, on the other hand, boldly preached abolition and racial inclusivity from the pulpit, and promoted temperance, justice toward Native Americans, women's suffrage, and an end to capital punishment and social systems that encouraged immigrant poverty. He believed that the work of the church was the work of justice, and he took this labor seriously.

One way Haven worked for justice was by uncovering the stories of the past. It was this impulse to grasp for justice in the future through the narratives of the past that led him to the cemetery outside of Florence where Barrett Browning and the Unitarian Theodore Parker were buried. His article for the *Independent* describes both gravesites, but hers most fully. His description is full of rich particulars about the landscape, initially reflecting little of the radicalism he is most known for. The description gradually takes on more significance, though, as he turns to elegy. The glaring light of the sun upon Barrett Browning's tombstone, for example, becomes a symbol for the light of truth that the poet never shirked to see by. Haven uses the landscape of her burial much the same way he addresses history in his other sermons, lectures, and essays. His *National Sermons* (1869) collected many of these historical narratives told across the

Northeast over the course of his career. The outline of the book's purpose in the introduction sheds some light on his conviction about the witness of history:

[This book] looks before as well as after; before more than after. Its object is not to gather up memorials of the past, but to enforce the duties of the future. History, that simply describes vanishing events, is as purposeless and profitless as a moralless tale. All history, like the Bible, should describe the past only to sanctify the present and perfect the future. (xi)

Looking to history, he believed, could help people live more justly in the future. In the same way, the memorial of Barrett Browning's life and death serves as a reminder of what lives on through her verse—the witness it continues to give to divine justice, and the warning it offers for those who would thwart God's work in the world.

Haven's emphasis on Barrett Browning's political prophetic power clearly reflects the Methodist's own prioritization of social justice as a religious concern. In this context, Haven's admiration for Barrett Browning's poetry appears to grow out of his alignment with her political and religious values rather than her poetic genius. Barrett Browning was a fellow advocate in a climate of deep contention, and Haven addresses her work largely as abolitionist literature. He writes:

No writer of this age saw [truth] more clearly or pronounced its decrees with more authority. As a prophetess of God, she announces his curses on America for her sin against her children—prophecies which have been terribly fulfilled. With like courage, she uttered like warnings against England for her treatment of the poor.... Thus we muse over the narrow house of this scholarly, gifted, consecrated woman. (12)

The two declarations worth reflecting on here are his naming of Barrett Browning as "a prophetess of God" and his reference to her as a "consecrated woman." Other clerics have referenced something like her prophetic power before, but none have been so specific as to why. She is not simply prophetic



about human nature, but about human behavior. The prophecies of the poet have spoken against American slavery, British poverty, and Italian political corruption with moral accuracy and integrity. She is not simply a poetic prophet in the Romantic mode. Haven addresses her as a cosmopolitan prophet of the particular age in which she lives.

Haven's reference to Barrett Browning as a "consecrated woman" also follows his religious convictions. Though not a universal Methodist practice, the denomination had a history of ordaining women. John Wesley permitted Mary Bosanquet to preach alongside her husband, John Fletcher, in the mid-eighteenth century, for instance (Barbeau 40). But by the nineteenth century, as Jeffrey Barbeau observes, the movement for women's ordination was less a distinctively Methodist issue and more a progressive concern complementary with women's suffrage and the temperance movement (88). For example, while Frances Willard served as president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the United States, she also reasoned in her book *Woman in the Pulpit* that women with gifts for preaching ought to ordain themselves. Among her many arguments for this, she asserts that "women have at least as much sympathy, reverence, and spirituality as men, and they have at least equal felicity of manner and of utterance. Why, then, should the pulpit be shorn of half its power?" (49). Though herself a Methodist, her book includes testimony on women's suitability for ordination from several prominent progressive ministers hailing from a variety of denominations.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, despite Methodism's progressive legacy,

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20. Presbyterian Thomas DeWitt Talmage opens with the statement: "About the subject of woman's preaching, let me say that I do not think the story of the Gospel will be fully told until Christian women all round the world tell it" (Willard 9). Likewise, Congregationalist Joseph Parker wrote, "I cannot but feel that women have a greater Christian work to do than many of us

resistance to female ordination within the denomination developed in tension with women's widespread involvement in every aspect of church practice. Barbeau notes that Methodist women "regularly exhorted their fellow Methodists at class meetings, camp meetings, love feasts and Sunday services alike" (88-89). But the denomination was also striving for a "respectability" threatened by this growing authoritative involvement of its female members.

Haven rejected such compromised respectability, aligning himself with women like Willard who integrated their religious convictions with social concerns. Haven's "consecration" of Barrett Browning in this eulogy is thus fitting within the specific religious context of his concern for social justice and women's ordination. Of course, a consecration for Methodist ministry is different from consecration in an Anglican or even Presbyterian sense. As a consecrated poet, Barrett Browning's "problem" poems like "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" or "The Cry of the Children" offer a different homiletic experience than *A Drama of Exile* or "Confessions." The poet is consecrated for a socio-political ministry and for political prophecy through her poetry. Her more explicitly theological poetry somehow lies outside of the conversation.

Haven follows his meditation on Barrett Browning's grave by turning to the grave of Theodore Parker in the same cemetery. Parker was a Transcendentalist and abolitionist who knew the Brownings and spent some time with them in Florence before he died in 1860. Barrett Browning reflects on his visits in a letter to Isa Blagden on the day of his death, May 10. She notes his "high noble intellect," but does not hesitate to identify the ways they disagreed

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have yet realized or admitted, and that they have it to do for the simple reason that they are divinely qualified to do it" (Willard 15).

with one another on spiritual matters. "He himself misses while here, much spiritual truth, I think, & fails rather in that larger tolerance which ought peculiarly to belong to men of so negative a creed.... Clergymen & schoolmasters are nearly always narrow men." Barrett Browning is largely concerned with his resistance to spiritualism rather than his work and reputation for those causes that are also close to her heart. Haven, on the other hand, mentions neither. While he feels that Barrett Browning's grave in Florence suits her, considering that Italy was her second home, Haven grieves Parker's burial in a foreign land. His personal grief over Parker preempts his usual method of reading the past homiletically, with radical hope for the future. In this brief article, only Barrett Browning preaches. And her sermons are strictly social or political in nature.

Part of Haven's selectivity about Barrett Browning's "consecration" for a ministry of socio-political change may simply be related to the character of the *Independent* where the article is published. The journal was an American weekly out of New York City, religious in its origins but often more political in its output. The editor's note in the periodical's first edition identifies it as inspired by but not representative of Congregationalism. The periodical responds, they claim, to the "multitudes of intelligent christian men," who are sympathetic to Congregationalism, and who "are looking for some popular exposition of current ecclesiastical and religious questions, and of all the progress of our times, as seen from the position of that great principle" (Bacon 2). In the same way they deny denominational affiliation, they also refuse alliance with a particular political party. Most importantly, the editors boldly claim that the political issues of the day are fundamentally moral:

The question of war or peace, so often as it arises, is a moral question. The question of cheap postage, and of an entire reformation of the post-office system...is a question involving great moral interests. The question of laws to restrain and control, or altogether to suppress, the traffic in intoxicating drinks; the question of laws to punish crimes against chastity; and generally all questions about crimes and punishments, are moral questions, and are to be discussed accordingly.

Thus, though the journal's subtitle explicitly names its topics of interest including "Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts," these are all ultimately moral concerns. Haven's interest in Barrett Browning as a prophet of political or social morality is thus well suited to its pages.

*The Independent* had featured articles on Barrett Browning previously. In 1869, one general article on "Women's Influence on Literature" argued that women were bound to be great poets because one of the deepest loves in human nature—the love of children—is felt by them more profoundly than men. The journalist names Barrett Browning as a prime example of such a poet. Her expression of "motherly affections, yearnings, and prayers" illustrate her brilliance despite her "faults in artistic structure, and in clarity of meaning" (4). The writer includes a full transcript of Barrett Browning's poem "Little Mattie" as an example, but makes no mention of the moral seriousness of her concern over infant mortality and the poverty that so often attended it, or the religious anxieties that lace the poem's expression of grief (5-8). *The Independent* also published a notice of her death by the editor Theodore Tilton, who praises her genius far more generously than the author of "Women's Influence." In it, Tilton argues that Barrett Browning's work serves as proof of "the possible equality of woman's mind with man's" (1). And while he, like so many others, inevitably compares her to her husband, he does so initially to praise them both above the other poets of their generation: "The finest English poetry written since

Shakespeare and Milton, is that which is bound into books under the gilt labels of the Brownings." Despite her noted genius, Tilton closes the article by claiming that Barrett Browning's "greatest greatness was in being the Christian wife and Christian mother." In this, Haven's brief description of his excursion to the poet's grave does her greater justice, recognizing the prophetic power of her verse and the lasting influence not of her maternal virtue but of her moral vision.

*Edwin Paxton Hood (1820-1885) – Congregationalist*

Over the course of thirty years, Edwin Paxton Hood served as a Congregational minister for five different congregations, from Gloucestershire to London (Rigg). He was an activist who worked tirelessly before and during his clerisy for the temperance movement and preached boldly on political concerns, even when it caused conflict among his parishioners. Much of Hood's political and social activism found its way into his writing. While he was better known after his death as a hymn writer, his most significant contribution to literary studies might well be his help in establishing Robert Browning's fame. For eight years, he acted as editor for *The Eclectic Review*—in some cases penning whole issues entirely on his own. In one of his articles, Hood refers to Robert as "the second of our great living poets," placing him behind only Tennyson in genius ("Poetry" 436). In the same article, Hood acknowledges that Robert's reputation was, at the time, overshadowed by his wife's. This imbalance would shortly reverse, in part as a result of Hood's advocacy. But the cleric was as much an advocate of Elizabeth as he was of Robert, as his reviews illustrate.

*The Eclectic Review* began in 1805 as an attempt to bring together Nonconformist and Establishment perspectives in a single journal. Eclectic in

nature as well as name, the founders' aim was, "neither excluding nor admitting indiscriminately the sentiments of any party, religious or political, nor aiming at innovation, [to] select from all whatever appears to them to be sanctioned by reason, experience, and revelation" ("Preface" iii). To ensure this bipartisanship, the periodical intended to dismiss "national and personal reflections" as well as "indiscriminate censure of any religious or political party" (iv). Instead, they attended primarily to articles and reviews that would "rouse the Christian world to a perception of the important influence which literature possesses in obstructing or in accelerating the progress of religious truth and human happiness" (Conder 3). By its second year of circulation, however, the *Eclectic* had become exclusively the product of and for the Nonconformists, as its Establishment supporters all pulled out. Altholz notes that the monthly periodical was not specifically religious, despite its stated pursuit of religious truth (58). It was, however, the first of its kind, soon emulated by quarterlies like *The Edinburgh Review* and the Nonconformist *British Quarterly Review*.

Hood's eight years editing the journal were also its last. When he took over in 1861, the periodical had long suffered financial woes. Hood attempted a revival through practical as well as ideological means—by lowering the periodical's cost and increasing its size, while emphasizing its identity as the only predominantly Congregationalist review in circulation. He introduces the first edition in the new format with the following intention:

I desire to make it something of a *Bibliotheca Sacra* for the students and ministers of our country, and yet something of the "*North American Review*" for Family readers.... It shall contain what may render it a fitting companion for the Instructive Sabbath afternoon—interesting for the wife and daughter; while, in the same number, discussing questions which the Christian citizen or the Christian scholar would wish to see discussed, in

such a manner as to be useful and attractive to a large variety of readers.  
("New Series" 660)

Hood's desire to be all things to all men could not save the *Eclectic*, but it distinctively shaped his own contributions to its pages. His interest in the Brownings may well have stemmed from his commitment to literature—and reviews of such literature—that would help define Congregationalism. While he admits the generalization is true that "Nonconformists do not support a literature," he argues that, "even Nonconformists themselves will frequently be found in ignorance of their principles, and by Journalism, rather than by Treatises, they will be enabled to comprehend them" (661-662). The *Eclectic* serves a clear educative function for him in religious, or at least denominational, formation. Most of Hood's articles are unsigned, but he appends his name to these claims, making it clear to readers that the Congregational cleric at the periodical's helm is pursuing his religious vocation both in the pulpit and in its pages.<sup>21</sup>

Out of this context, Hood reviewed Barrett Browning in March 1862, less than a year after her death. He begins his article with caution, expressing the fear that critics tend to be less reverential than they ought after a poet is no longer living. For his part, he considers her worthy of the reverence due the early prophets. He writes:

We think this woman also demands our reverence.... But what can we reverence—suffering?—if we would speak reverently to Aaron in his bells, about to minister within the veil, or to the minister touching sacred things at the altar.... Shall we not reverence those who are able to climb the highest altar-stairs—who can hold and handle the true sublime? Is not that a great power still given to man, to call down fire from heaven, and not to consume the unbeliever, but to kindle the sacrifice? Elizabeth

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21. I am indebted to Mary Ruth Hiller's 1994 article on *The Eclectic Review* for directing me to many useful issues from the periodical and confirming much of its history.

Barrett Browning had, in a very eminent degree, all these powers.  
("Elizabeth" 189-190)

Hood rejects the impulse—indulged to a different degree by Gilfillan—to reverence the poet because of her suffering. Instead, he compares her to Aaron, first among the Levitical priesthood, and Elijah, who called down fire to consume the altar sacrifice. She is worthy of reverence because of the sanctity of her ministry and the boldness of her divine commission. This attributes to Barrett Browning the powers of both priest and prophet. For Hood, these powers put her in the same (male) company as those other poets whom critics have been careless toward: Wordsworth, Coleridge, Carlyle, and Tennyson. And this leads him to inquire about the purpose and definition of poetry itself.

According to Hood, poetry acts as both prophecy and pedagogy. Drawing on a Native American narrative to illustrate the point, Hood suggests that poetry speaks a prophetic message from "the land of souls," or the world beyond this world. "[It] fits the spirit of man able to read and to understand, to visit himself the land of souls" ("Elizabeth" 193). According to this definition, then, the poetic extends beyond verse to encompass "the witchery of the blue sky, and the green and flower-enameled world." The language Hood uses here is interesting, from describing the poetic element of nature as "witchery" to claiming that poetry "hallows all things, consecrates the mountain chain, and the lowly farm." This is both pagan and Christian language, suggesting that poetry acts as a spiritual force encompassing but not restricted to religious expression. He is less interested in poetry's relationship with the created world, however, and more interested in its "dealings with souls"—that is, the way poetry reveals human nature while also giving the reader tools to understand that revelation. In this,



poetry serves the same function and has as much utilitarian purpose or value as a minister like himself.

More than that, poetry ministers *to* the minister. Ignoring any arguments against a woman's clerical authority, Hood declares Barrett Browning to be "the minister's minister" ("Elizabeth" 194). After all, if not her, then whom? He writes:

Who then is to be the minister's minister? For man cannot live by bread alone, and of all men the minister. But who then is to be the minister? not our brethren, for they have most likely got no farther than we have, and see no more; they are in the shock of battle as we are. Who then? Why some old middle-age monk in his old black letter cowl, or some still and tranquil heart, shut up to its sick chamber from a life of strife; or some such being as Mrs. Browning, in whom may be united the lofty intuition to the widest possible culture, and the reach of hopes and aspirations most sublime. She is the minister's minister.

Barrett Browning, through her intuition and the sublimity of her verse, ranks just below the "sacred four"—Homer, Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare—and even excels all but Dante in her embrace of "the mystery, the majesty, the sorrow and glory of the higher life" (195). Hood illustrates this embrace by quoting from *Casa Guidi Windows* on "Priests," where Barrett Browning expresses outrage against those religious traditions that claim a priesthood other than Christ's alone (538-539). Here, she communicates Hood's own Congregationalist beliefs, and perhaps in so doing confirms her suitability to minister to Hood himself.

Hood does not completely ignore gendered differences in his assessment of Barrett Browning's poetry, but he tends to interpret these differences as assets. For example, while Hood considers Barrett Browning as an "Una among poetesses," he is more interested in her as a "Britomart among poets" ("Elizabeth" 197). Gilbert and Gubar discuss the association between Spenser's Una as representative of the "angel in the house" and Duessa as the feminine

monster at length. But they make no account, as Hood does, for the female knight, Britomart, as an alternative ideal “other side” to the virtuous Una. Hood certainly idealizes Barrett Browning in designating her the pure and perfect Una, and not without patriarchal condescension. But he also offers another interpretive experience of the poet as peer.

Hood also considers the physical limitations of Barrett Browning’s chronic illness and the emotional vulnerability of her maternity not as disadvantages related to her gender but advantageous qualities of her poetic faculties. Gilbert and Gubar likewise have much to say about the nineteenth-century invalid woman, of which Barrett Browning is an obvious representative. They write:

Surrounded as she is by images of disease, traditions of disease, and invitations both to disease and to dis-ease, it is no wonder that the woman writer has held many mirrors up to the discomforts of her own nature.... Barrett Browning [is] often both literally and figuratively concerned with disease, as if to emphasize the effort with which health and wholeness were won from the infectious “vapors” of despair and fragmentation. (57)

Gilbert and Gubar are not alone in their interpretation of women’s illnesses in the nineteenth century, and there are considerable reasons to agree with them. But Hood identifies both Barrett Browning’s physical ailments and the prostrating grief she suffered at the loss of her brother as catalysts for her poetic genius rather than “debilitating patriarchal prescriptions” (Gilbert and Gubar 59). In an article published two months after his review and following the poet’s death, Hood shares lengthy excerpts from Barrett Browning’s *Last Poems*, arguing that “she was born and trained in the school of suffering” to “sing and say” such verse in her “especial key” (“Mrs. Browning” 424).<sup>22</sup> It was only “through her

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22. The article almost exclusively consists of lengthy transcriptions of verse, thus its minimal treatment in this chapter. Hood himself acknowledged at its close, “we have quoted till we are ashamed to quote more” (425).

own tears” that the poet was able to see “the golden headlands of eternal truth.” Eulogistic hyperbole aside, if her physical limitations are distinctively feminine, then the strong masculine poet is at a decided disadvantage—especially as the imitation of poetic femininity offers an inadequate substitute for the real thing.

Despite his emphasis on Barrett Browning’s ministering role, it is unclear from Hood’s review to what degree his interest in her religious expression stems from his clericalism. Apart from his praise of the poet as a “minister’s minister,” it would be easy to forget his clerical position altogether until the close of the article when he praises the “fulness” of Barrett Browning’s Christianity (“Elizabeth” 206). He is obliged to step into a pedagogical, homiletic mode here. After all, he says, “Christianity has, unhappily, become so vague a word that it is necessary to define.” And define it he does, as “that Christianity which is secured by atonement, and sealed by holiness—a Christianity in which Christ is on the cross, to overcome, and the Spirit is in the Church to purify and to console.” Hood considers this the Christianity of Cowper and Milton as well as Barrett Browning, and attributes the poet’s genius precisely to her expression of a theologically robust faith. Thus, although his original definition of the purpose of poetry suggested a Romantic universality—embracing the prophetic impulse of river and mountain as well as Wordsworthian verse—Hood ultimately finds the richness of Barrett Browning’s genius in its theological specificity. The message that river, mountain, and poet prophesy must be theologically *true* in order to satisfy. Barrett Browning does this, Hood argues, in *A Drama of Exile*. There, she displays “high and great” theology (207), and “the highest and most sacred lessons” since Job (209). This emphasis on her poetry’s theological instruction nuances his expression of Barrett Browning as “the holiest soul” (211). She is not

simply a saintly poetess, virtuous in her feminine suffering and tranquil devotion to husband and child. Her holiness is that of a good minister of the gospel, or even a biblical prophet.

It should perhaps not be surprising that the cleric most effusive in praise and most bold in attributing pastoral authority to Elizabeth Barrett Browning shares her denominational commitments. Barrett Browning's poetics were influenced not merely by her Christian faith, but by its particular denominational shape. Karen Dieleman argues that the Congregationalist "grassroots concept of the preacher" directly contributed to Barrett Browning's modification of "the prevailing Romantic paradigm of the poet as an authoritative, prophetic figure" (24).<sup>23</sup> The Congregationalist's centralizing of the word over the forms of worship likewise reflects Barrett Browning's conviction that "[no] sacramental act could embody truth as well as language could" (36). Furthermore, the Congregationalism Barrett Browning and Hood shared was notable for its emphasis on the "communal power" of the laity, who approve and elect their ministers in order to avoid a concentration of authority in a ruling body other than the congregation itself (Knight and Mason 21).

In this context, Barrett Browning acts as poetic minister, though only by congregational—or perhaps reader—commission. This is not the same kind of ministerial authority in the manner of the Anglican Gurney or the Scotch Presbyterian Gilfillan. But this lack of authority is shared between her and her

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23. Dieleman also helpfully outlines Barrett Browning's affiliation to the denomination, from her early worship in the Hope End schoolhouse chapel to the Free Church of Scotland—which had close ties to Congregationalism at the time—while in Italy. Dieleman identifies ecumenical commitments that many have used as evidence to show the poet's disaffiliation from Congregationalism—such as her universalism, memorial interpretation of the sacraments, and rejection of the doctrine of election—as resonant of the denomination's "gradually widening" parameters in mid-century (28).

male contemporaries, for in the Congregationalist context, there is no singular priesthood from which Barrett Browning must be barred or admitted. There is only the living, discerning gathering of fellow believers, of whom the poet is but one member—albeit with a uniquely powerful voice.

### *Conclusion*

Many reviews and articles on Barrett Browning were far less egalitarian in their praise. After her death, for example, *The Methodist Review* printed a brief eulogy to her life and work in which every element of her biography—from her early illness to her romance, marriage, and short motherhood—suggests the life of a suffering saint. The article praises the description she writes of her son, Pen, from *Casa Guidi Windows*, as an illustration of how the tenderness of her verse arises out of her maternal instincts (“Elizabeth” 417).<sup>24</sup> The poet’s stylistic weaknesses, however, are attributed to her imitations of a masculine style, resulting in “the swagger of a woman in man’s apparel” (420).

By contrast, Barrett Browning’s clerical critics largely consider her ability to write in either the feminine or masculine mode as an asset rather than a liability. Whether she rejects the feminine mode (as Gurney sees her doing), revises it (as Gilfillan observes), or appropriates it naturally (as Brooks suggests), she employs her genius in a manner wholly her own. Reviews like Kingsley’s—

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24. The passage in question:  
...Now, look straight before,  
And fix thy brave blue English eyes on mine,  
And from thy soul which fronts the future so,  
With unabashed and unabated gaze,  
Teach me to hope for, what the angels know,  
When they smile clear as thou dost. (*Casa* 545)

where he finds that her “*defects* of metre and of rhyme...remind us curiously of Mr. Browning”—attribute the imperfections of her verse to an appropriated masculinity (“Mr. and Mrs. Browning”). But elsewhere that masculine mode is embraced and complicated.

Often, the tension between Barrett Browning’s gender as poetic asset and poetic liability is addressed simply by putting her work in conversation with that of her husband. One could read these conversations as dismissive complementarian readings—attributing the best of Barrett Browning’s writing to masculine agency and feminine responsiveness. Alternatively, if the best writing by either sex comes out of the highest human feeling—if the poet’s worst lines were her most “masculine”—then perhaps the best poetry comes out of what is most “feminine” in any poet. Kirstie Blair observes something similar, arguing that femininity becomes something male poets “actively wish to possess” (110). She cites Diane Hoeveler and Anne Mellor’s work that suggests that poets like Keats, Shelley, and Byron began the nineteenth-century process of “appropriating feminine qualities for poetic ends,” incorporating “‘the essence or idea of the feminine’ into their work and implicitly into their bodies.” This appropriation reflects what Gilbert and Gubar saw as the masculine writer’s “ownership” of women through their writing. As men write women, they define what womanhood means. And when they write in what they consider to be a feminine mode, they appropriate the very identity they’ve limited women to—leaving women nowhere else to go. When a woman appropriates a masculine mode, on the other hand, she receives censure.

Barrett Browning’s clerical critics, however, exhibit a ready willingness to allow the female poet to speak authoritatively to the human experience. While

none of these clerics manage to consider her poetry without reference to gender, they all communicate a willingness to learn from Barrett Browning's poetry—to let her preach to them, as it were. While these clerics exhibit a far from uniform appreciation of women's intellectual and spiritual agency, to varying degrees, they find in Barrett Browning's work evidence of ministerial authority and prophetic power.

Though the anonymity of periodical publication relieves these clerics of pedagogical urgency, they nevertheless bring their clerical commitments to bear on their interpretations of the poet. Even when Barrett Browning's verse is at odds with the religious convictions of the clerics—like the Tractarian Gurney—her poetry necessitates their engagement with its spiritual meaning. She sought to embody the poetic nature of faith in her verse, after all, trying the “experiment” of religious poetry in a way other poets, Tennyson included, had yet to venture. She sought for her poetry to confer a religious experience through language. This emphasis on the poetic word as a medium of religious experience reflected the priority Congregationalists gave to the word as a medium of religious truth.

While most of these clerics are hesitant to confer prophetic, priestly, pastoral, or preaching authority on the female poet without qualification, they nevertheless find in her work some degree of each of these roles. Kingsley considers her a teacher; Gurney a preacher; Gilfillan, a prayerful, Christ-like mediator between the reader and the divine; Brooks, “the most remarkable poetic genius” and a saint of “deep religious peace.” Haven considers her a prophet of her age, while Hood recognizes in her the authority of the Levitical priesthood and the Old Testament prophets. His assertion that she is the “minister's

minister” comes out of such recognition, for she speaks to the clerical critic as the patriarchs spoke to the apostles. Like Gilfillan who attributes to Barrett Browning a prayerful mediation, Hood looks to the poet to minister to him. She does this through poetic intuition born of wrestling with the world as it is, in hopeful suffering and divine expectation. In short, these clerics attribute authority to Barrett Browning because she speaks authoritatively—with clarity, perception, and insight—about the things that matter most to them.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Every Reader a Minister: Interpreting Robert Browning in the Browning Societies

Like Alfred Tennyson and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Robert Browning (1812-1889) was widely treated by his clerical readers as a poetic minister and prophet. Numerous sermons, lectures, reviews, and essays by clerics interpret his poetry as scriptural text for the individual and the nation. Priests and preachers like Hugh Haweis, William Anderson O'Connor, Richard Roberts, Archer Thompson Gurney, Charles Kingsley, and others wrote just as movingly about the ministerial work of Browning's poetry as they did Tennyson's and Barrett Browning's. Yet, in many ways, the reception of Browning's work was even more clerically shaped than theirs. By the late nineteenth century, his readers were following his work with the avidity of disciples. Reading groups were formed to study his work like sacred texts, and scholars who typically focused their attentions on long-dead classical authors were compiling scholarly editions of Browning's work for posterity during the poet's lifetime. Nearly one thousand Browning literary societies emerged in the United Kingdom and the United States from the end of the nineteenth century well into the twentieth, becoming so popular that local participation in them became a mark of social status.

Browning's followers were not only religious in their commitment to his work; they were ecclesiastic in their practice. While many of these societies looked like social gatherings, meeting in homes or hotels, many others gathered in churches. All were almost without exception frequented by ministers and conducted with liturgical order. Over the years, they commemorated the birth,

marriage, and death of the poet with religious ceremonies in religious spaces. They recited and studied the poet's work with spiritual attention and interpretive efforts usually afforded to scripture. And their participants—clerics, scholars, and lay people, mostly women—often took on clerical roles within these orders, spaces, and interpretive practices. Thus, the Browning Societies offer a similarly clerical hermeneutic through which to encounter both poetry and the poet as the clerical readings of Tennyson and Barrett Browning in sermon, lecture, and article. Browning's religiously inspired poetry religiously inspired his readers, and they were drawn to him as a spiritual "master," a "sage," and a "preacher." Indeed, Society members explicitly treated Browning as a religious teacher and studied him for spiritual edification. In their capacities as readers and critics, they likewise mediated Browning's work like prophetic texts to an increasingly secular world. While some of these gatherings were denominationally distinct, many were interdenominational spaces that, in a sense, formed a unique denomination of their own, marked by literary Christian practice. In their gatherings, Christian truth was mediated through the poet and his interpreting followers.

This chapter considers three clerical aspects of the Browning Societies—the poet's religious role within the Societies, the influence of the clerics who participated in the Societies, and the laypeople whose participation in the Societies took on clerical signification. While Browning was clearly understood as a poetic minister for the Society members, their interpretation of his poetry as a scriptural text and the ecclesiastical undertones (or overtones) of the Society gatherings also treated his role as prophet with surprising literalness,

consequentially elevating those who mediated that verse in the ecclesiastical form of the Society gathering to clerical roles.

This study involved significant research into the Browning Society archives at the Armstrong Browning Library (ABL). While the majority of Society papers delivered in America are lost to history, the early London Browning Society papers, a collection of papers from the Boston Browning Society, a few collections from individual speakers, and occasional papers published in local periodicals offer an enlightening glimpse into Society scholarship.<sup>1</sup> The ABL's Browning Society archives largely consist of Society programs that provide surprising insight into their practices and priorities. With only two major works of scholarship devoted to their history and influence—William S. Peterson's *Interrogating the Oracle: A History of the London Browning Society* (1969) and Hédi Abdel-Jaouad's *Browningmania: America's Love for Robert Browning* (2014)—there is, of course, much more to discover in the long, curious history of the Browning Societies.<sup>2</sup> My hope is that this chapter serves as a starting point for further research into the Societies, the lay critics within them, and the relationship between religious readings of Browning's poetry and the search for spiritual authority in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Browning's followers were notable in their devotion, their ubiquity, and the strange cultural

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1. More isolated resources would surely be available from other archives—the Hiram Corson papers at Cornell, for instance, or the Jenkin Lloyd Jones papers at the University of Chicago. Limiting my research to the ABL's archives and digital databases was both a necessary limitation due to Covid restrictions and a useful restraint for the bounds of a single chapter.

2. Countless other works on Browning address the formation and influence of the Browning Societies—notably Elizabeth Porter Gould's *The Brownings and America* (1904) and Louise Greer's *Browning and America* (1952), both of which are concerned more predominantly with Browning's reception in America over the course of his life.

significance their gatherings took over time. The Browning Societies were a distinct literary, cultural, and religious phenomenon, and they welcome interpretation as such.

*Browning as Preacher, Prophet, and Paragon*

For decades, Browning Societies from London to Los Angeles looked to Browning as a religious teacher, a modern prophet, and a mediator of spiritual truth. The London Society in particular—whether despite or because of its scholarly aims—illustrated the primacy of Browning’s theological instruction and prophetic voice. While the first official literary society concerned with Robert Browning’s poetry was arguably Hiram Corson’s reading club at Cornell University, begun in 1877, it was the London Browning Society, launched by Frederick Furnivall and Emily Hickey in 1881, that came to define the movement.<sup>3</sup> Other than a few Ruskin societies in mid-century that found little to no success, the Browning Societies were the first of their kind to study a poet who was still living.<sup>4</sup> Peterson speculates that this alone was reason enough for members of the London Browning Society, at least, often to find themselves the

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3. Every account of the origin of the Browning Societies—Gould, Greer, Peterson, Abdel-Jaouad, Nancy Glazener—offers an account of Hiram Corson’s reading group as the first in their history.

4. The first society of this kind to study posthumous work, on the other hand, according to Harrison Steeves, was the Roxburghe Club, begun in 1812 in response to one of the most significant rare book auctions in English literary history. The club was notably exclusive, attracting bibliophiles rather than scholars or general readers, and originally publishing only enough to satisfy its members—not to extend its studies beyond its own circle (101-103). The society’s roots in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century antiquarianism give some context for the Browning Society’s uniqueness in studying a poet still living. Others, such as the Wordsworth Society and several Shakespeare Societies, gave more proximal precedent for the London Browning Society.

source of ridicule (*Interrogating* 5). Though, the extremity of many members' devotion certainly gave more reason.

Multiple accounts confirm that the London Browning Society came into being on July 3, 1881, as Furnivall and Hickey walked together to visit the poet, eight years before his death.<sup>5</sup> Furnivall was already well-known as an establisher of societies, having launched the Early English Text Society, the Philological Society, the Ballad Society, the Chaucer Society, the New Shakspeare Society (with Browning as Honorary President for a time), the Wicliff Society, and the Shelley Society (Peterson, "Furnivall"). His motivation in establishing these societies was rooted in a devoted antiquarianism. Their purpose was to ensure that adequately edited texts and affordable editions were available to scholars and readers alike, that extant manuscripts were preserved, and that materials were well catalogued.<sup>6</sup> But few of these motivations serve as adequate justification for the formation of a Browning society while the poet was still living, his works not yet complete, and some editions still in their first run.

Nevertheless, the London Browning Society immediately drew avid attention from a respectable coalition of readers. From 1881 to 1891, the Society

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5. Several cite Peterson's account in the first chapter of *Interrogating the Oracle*, which he draws from the *Browning Society Papers*, Furnivall's article "Recollections of Robert Browning" (1889), and Enid Maud Dinnis's biography, *Emily Hickey: Poet, Essayist—Pilgrim* (1927). Abdel-Jaouad actually credits Corson with conceiving of the London Society prior to catalyzing the others in America (16). Oddly, he cites as evidence the very account from Corson that confirms the contrary:

Dr. Frederick James Furnivall dined with us, and after dinner we went over to the Inns of Court Gardens, just back of the hotel. There we walked about during the long evening twilight, and talked over the founding of a Society *which Dr. Furnivall and Miss Emily Henriette Hickey, the poetess, had been contemplating*, for the study of Browning's poetry. (Whiting 241, italics mine)

6. Peterson credits Furnivall's efforts in these societies with helping to establish the work of English literature as central to scholastic curriculum throughout the English-speaking world (*Interrogating* 7).

brought together what Peterson terms “a microcosm of the London literary world,” from scholars and clerics to novice poets and devoted society women (*Interrogating* 4). Despite frequently being dismissed as comical fanatics, there was considerable variety of opinion and admiration amongst these readers. Nancy Glazener suggests that the London Browning Society was “one of the last public venues in which serious readers inside and outside the academy collaborated as equals” (173). It is clear from the Society papers that this equal collaboration was a purposeful aim. The first collection names this purpose as follows:

This Society is founded to gather together some, at least, of the many admirers of Robert Browning, for the study and discussion of his works, and the publication of Papers on them, and extracts from works illustrating them. The Society will also encourage the formation of Browning Reading-Clubs, the acting of Browning’s dramas by amateur companies, the writing of a Browning Primer, the compilation of a Browning Concordance or Lexicon, and generally the extension of the study and influence of the poet. (Furnivall 19)

The antiquarian impulse in Furnivall clearly found some scholarly work to do with Browning’s publications, though these aims grew strained over time.<sup>7</sup> There simply was not enough archival work to do with a poet currently—or so recently—alive. Instead, the Society meetings immediately became dominated by interpretive papers and argumentative discussion.

London Browning Society papers took a scholarly approach to study of the poet, but in nearly every gathering, the conversation that followed

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7. Peterson is not particularly generous in his assessment of the consequences of the Society’s aimlessness. He writes:

The Browningites had no manuscripts to edit, no historical problems that could be solved in the Public Records Office; so they turned instead to all that was really left for them to do—writing critical papers on Browning’s poetry, most of them rather impressionistic and fuzzy. But the pretense of exact scholarship was kept up until the end in the society’s published transactions, which included a Notes and Queries column, bibliographic “Scraps,” and careful records of discussions. (*Interrogating* 7)

specifically turned toward theology. In fact, the early Society papers show that the tendency of their meetings to turn into theological debates was one of the most frequent objections to and within those meetings. Though most members were Anglican, a good number of agnostics were among the ranks—including Furnivall, Bernard Shaw, and William F. Revell. This diversity of perspective made theological debates all the more inevitable, even as the members objected to their recurrence. In a meeting on April 29, 1887, for instance, after Arthur Symonds delivered a paper reviewing a new edition of Browning's poetry, the Theosophist William G. Kingsland questioned Browning's theory of evil. According to the minutes, Kingsland suggested Browning's poetry argued "that evil already existed in the world, was to be used by man as a sort of stepping stone to good" ("Sixth Session" 211). Edward C. Gonner, a notable economist, disagreed, as Kingsland's theory "implied that only the virtuous man was the wicked man, in that it was through him that men became good." The record cites an unnamed clergyman interjecting at this point, asserting "that neither Mr. Browning nor any other man could explain the origin of evil. We could only believe that God brings good out of evil; not that evil was a necessity." All of these conversationalists also mention Browning's verse itself: Kingsland states that the poems' defect in rhyme "did not in the least interfere with his enjoyment," Gonner that he would need to know more about the relationship between meter and poetry to cast judgment, and the clergyman that he was generally disappointed in the collection. But the question of evil overshadows their collective interest in the poetry's formal qualities. The interpretation of Browning's theological teaching is not only an essential part of their scholarly

engagement with the poet but a personal concern for them as disparately exploring the spiritual nature of the individual.

Thus, the theological inquiry was not limited to readers of faith. In this same conversation on the problem of evil, Shaw, the agnostic, responded to Kingsland, Gonner, and the clergyman. He initially seemed to sidestep the question of evil and returned to the argument in Symons's paper that "thinking was an exercise of the mind, and poetry of the soul" ("Sixth Session" 211). "If the poet was not a thinker," Shaw countered, "he was nothing; and he considered the 'inspiration' idea concerning poetry as altogether obsolete and exploded." This "'inspiration' idea" refers to the argument for poetic faith made familiar by Tennyson's poetry, as discussed in the third chapter of this study. Many clerical critics in the nineteenth century found in this poetry a confirmation of faith beyond the limits of scientific knowledge and reason. They saw his faith and his poetry arising from the same divine inspiration, confirming the reality and presence of God and the eternal, spiritual nature of the individual. The "inspiration idea" offered consolation in the face of scientific rationalism that threatened to undermine traditional Christian doctrine on scriptural authority and ecclesiastical practice. But if the "inspiration idea" was "altogether obsolete and exploded" by 1887, that consolation was short-lived. For the religious skeptic at the *fin de siècle*, Browning must *think* and not merely *intuit*.<sup>8</sup>

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8. To be fair, many other readers of Browning's poetry interpret him in much the same way the clerical critics interpreted Tennyson. Dorothea Beale's enunciation of the London Society's ideology is representative of this. She writes of Browning:

I think what draws most of us to him is this: we are struggling with the waves of doubt—storm-tost [*sic*] and ready to sink—and as we look at him, we see him with a smile on his face, calmly floating, his head above the waves, his body supported therein. He quietly tells us our safety is to do the same. (323)

Browning's easy faith in Beale's account resonates with Richard Acland Armstrong's envisioning of Tennyson as a believing, prophetic child from the third chapter. John P. Farrell finds this



By addressing this need, Shaw brought the conversation right back to theological concerns precisely in his disagreement with them. Revell points this out in the meeting, in fact, noting that, “as usual the discussion had turned on theology” (“Sixth Session” 212). But the only person to blame for the persistence of the theological in their discourse, he suggests, is Browning himself—“for the new book was a theological talk throughout.” Browning’s poetry offers itself to these scholars as a theological treatise—one of intellect rather than intuition—with the poet acting as theologian.

The persistence of Browning’s theological ideas, according to these Society readers, stems from his continual fascination with the individual’s spiritual nature. And despite the London Society’s objection to the subjects’ frequency, it is largely the theological concerns of Browning’s poetry that make that verse appealing to Society gatherings generally. In a visit with Browning in January 1884, Charles William Bardeen of the Syracuse Browning Society assured the poet that, “It was not merely as a literary luxury, but as a practical help in the difficult problems of life that we had seized upon his books with such eagerness. We felt personally grateful to him quite as much as a philosopher as a poet” (242-243). Bardeen goes on to address the poet’s theological appeal, conflating his poetry’s philosophy and theology as a single concern for the spiritual nature of the individual. Revell himself wrote extensively of those theological concerns in

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expression particularly interesting for Beale’s suggestion of Browning “all but walking on water,” and the consequent implication that “Browning is only fully grasped once he is connected to the figure of Christ among his perplexed disciples” (235). This reading certainly resonates with the elevated view many Society readers held of Browning, as we shall see. But Shaw is not wrong in identifying the ways Browning offers something different for the skeptic.

his papers for the London Society.<sup>9</sup> There, in answer to those who criticized the poet's "metaphysical and theological subtleties," Revell writes of Browning's difficult poetry:

Work of this sort was unavoidable in the case of one who undertook to treat of some of the profoundest problems of human life and thought. He whose theme is men and women, must, unless he deals with human life in a shallow or superficial fashion, come across such subjects as Browning has dealt with so fully and profoundly. (65)

Revell's study and the debate above illustrate why theological conversations seemed inevitable in any discussion of Browning's work. In the view of his followers, Browning considered the spiritual nature of the individual to be his primary business. Theology was more than a scholarly concern for him, but a "practical help"—a ministry. For them, he offered new ways to explore that spiritual nature in a world in which the "inspiration idea" had become "obsolete and exploded."

Thus, though the London Society was determined to shape itself around traditional scholarship, similar to that which occupied the antiquarians, Browning's theology was both a necessary and appealing consideration for the pious and the agnostic, the conservative and the radical alike. Peterson argues that this appeal is due to Browning's own broad theological views. He writes: "Browning's theological position was sufficiently broad—vague, if you please—so that his religious poetry could appeal to the entire spectrum of believers and unbelievers" (*Interrogating* 6). The Society papers affirm this reading throughout. For example, at the January 27, 1882, meeting, the well-known atheist James Thomson presented an essay, "Notes on the Genius of Robert Browning," which

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9. Revell's papers were published together as the collection *Browning's Criticism of Life* in 1892.

boldly attests to the poet's Christian "orthodoxy," asserting Browning's "profound, passionate, living, triumphant faith in Christ, and in the immortality and ultimate redemption of every human soul in and through Christ" (248). Yet Thomson also acknowledges those religious readers who would be disturbed by the "reverence and audacity co-equal and co-efficient" in Browning's poetry (especially "Christmas-Eve" and "Easter-Day") and those unreligious readers—like Thomson himself—who find in Browning a faith they cannot share (249). Browning nevertheless appeals to all of them, Thomson suggests, because of his conscientious engagement with his own life:

[Browning was] one of the very few men...who, with most cordial energy and invincible resolution, have lived thoroughly throughout the whole of their being, to the uttermost verge of all their capacities, in his case truly colossal; lived and wrought thoroughly in sense and soul and intellect; lived at home in all realms of nature and human nature, art and literature. (Thomson 250)

Whether the reader agrees with the poet's faith is less important to Thomson than that such faith arises from his deep wrestling with the contentions of the age. Browning's religious teaching comes out of a life lived fully.

Society readers felt that Browning was able to offer his readers an account of faith beyond intuitive consolation because his life engaged both intellectually and prophetically with the problems of modernity. Thus, for both "pious spinsters" and "militant agnostics," as Peterson observes, the poet was considered "a teacher, a prophet, a seer, one who could remind men of spiritual realities in a world of doubt and anxiety" (*Interrogating* 6). While this reminder sounds similar to Tennyson's intuitive appeal—which also, incidentally, related to his personal life—Browning's work appears to do something different. His poetry's "broad—vague" intellectualized spirituality addresses the religious

skepticism of a world that has become alert to the challenges of the Darwinian model but also begun to consider human behavior in newly psychological terms. Writing specifically of the reception of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, Charles LaPorte suggests that "the fin de siècle Browningites did not receive Browning's 'transcendent spiritual teaching' as a bequest," but that his poetry "provided the material from which they crafted that teaching" (155). In other words, Browning's interpreters found spiritual guidance in his poetry because they were looking for it. Browning's poetry begged for intellectual interpretation rather than intuition.

As with Tennyson's and Barrett Browning's work, however, the obscurity of Browning's intellectual verse encouraged his readers to associate his work with prophecy. An abstract from the February 28, 1890, session records an exchange between Furnivall and Miss Stoddart that asserts as much:

Dr. Furnivall read the poems [*Bad Dreams* and *Asolando*] and considered them very difficult; he continued his previous remarks as to the difficulties of some of Browning's poems and thought many of them would never be popular; and in fact that much of Browning's later work...would not live.

Miss Stoddart said it was possible that these very works would be those best understood by a later generation. Browning was in her opinion pre-eminently the seer for the future as contrasted with other poets, who saw more clearly for the present, and wrote for the present. Browning's work was too near to us for us to judge of its true beauty, like a mountain which appeared beautiful as we receded from it, when we approached it too closely its scars and rugged surfaces forced themselves on the attention to the exclusion of its sublimity as a whole. ("Monthly" 56)

The prophetic identity Stoddart attributes to Browning is something more practical than the spiritual attunement of Tennyson's poetry. Browning is not an Aeolian harp receiving intuitions from the divine; he is an intellectual staring into the future with refined perception. This prophetic perception develops out

of a life well lived. It depends on the person of the poet—both his historical particularity and his biographical relation to subject and reader.

Browning himself intuits the relation between a poet's life and his work. Though, rather than seeing poetry as the outflow of the poet's life, he sees the poet living more fully in response to that prophetic poetic perception. That is, the *subjective* poet lives so. In his "Essay on Shelley," he explains that the *objective* poet "reproduces things external," that is, reproduces "the phenomenon of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain" (5).<sup>10</sup> This reproduction is executed, Browning suggests, "with an immediate reference...to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction." In other words, the objective poet is a "fashioner," reiterating the known world in recognizable forms. Such poetry "will of necessity be substantive, projected from himself and distinct." The subjective poet, on the other hand, is oriented toward his work very differently. He first embodies what he perceives, "not so much with reference to the many below, as to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth,—an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul" (6). Browning describes the subjective poet—Shelley in particular—as a prophet, one who communicates his own vision from the divine. Only a few lines later, he calls such a poet "a seer" rather than "a fashioner," whose poetry is "less a work than

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10. Browning wrote the "Essay on Shelley" in 1851 as an introduction to a collection of Shelley's letters published by Edward Moxon in 1852. When the letters were discovered to be forgeries, the book was pulled from publication. Nevertheless, Browning's introduction has served as an important text on both poets ever since.

an effluence" (7). The objective poet's primary work may be fashioning—taking the concrete elements of human experience and spinning them into verse.<sup>11</sup> But the subjective, prophetic poet pursues the "absolute truth" in all things and looks to the "One above him" rather than to the things of earth.

Browning might have considered his own work more fashioned than Shelley's verse, but his readers disagreed. John Drury, for example, addresses this disagreement in his paper presented to the London Browning Society on April 28, 1892. There, he argues that Browning embodies both the subjective and the objective poet fully. Referring directly to Browning's essay on Shelley, he writes:

Considering that the poet's function is to find and show us Truth, the objective poet tries to fulfil this function by presenting to us in poetical dress nature and life as they immediately seem to be; the subjective poet by transcendent acts of insight apprehends transcendent Truth.... We want a poet who will use understanding as well as insight.... This is what Browning does; he supplies mediating links between experience and absolute Truth. (260)

Of course, this act of mediation between lived experience and the perception of Truth constitutes the work of a religious cleric as well as a poet. The Society members, like Drury, who approached the essay on Shelley as a kind of treatise on Browning himself not only refer to him in both clerical and prophetic terms, but value his poetry as "effluence" as well as craft.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, compared to his message, the poet's formal qualities were almost incidental to the Society. His pursuit of Truth was always given more attention

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11. Of course, the primacy of the poet's experience here means that the reader will "covet his biography" in the work of interpretation (Browning, "Essay" 6).

12. The London Browning Society was not alone in treating Browning's essay on Shelley as his *ars poetica*. Even the recent Routledge anthology of Browning's poetry, edited by Woolford, Karlin, and Phelan, includes the essay as an appendix, ostensibly for this reason.

than his verse as verse. A quick survey of paper titles from the London, Boston, and New York Browning Societies supports this preference for meaning over form. The papers include classifications of Browning's poetry by genre, subject, and theme;<sup>13</sup> historical, architectural, archaeological, and landscape studies of his poems' settings; studies of their characters and humor; and studies of the poet's philosophy, religion, theology, aesthetics, science, teaching, and love. There are also studies, summaries, and analyses of individual poems, but surprisingly few on their formal constitution. In a paper read at the May 30, 1890, meeting of the London Browning Society, Revell argues that there are two points of view from which to consider poetry: "its literary form...and its subject matter" (64). While these two may be considered separately, he suggests, "when a critical judgment has to be passed upon the artistic quality and merit of a poet's work both must be taken into account." Thus, according to Revell, the difficulty of Browning's formal poetic qualities should only be judged with its message in mind. This preference for meaning over form may well have been encouraged by the

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13. The interplay between an antiquarian impulse to catalog and the theological interpretive impulse is evident in such categorizations. For example, Alexandra Orr's "Classification of Browning's Poems" in the first *Browning Society Papers* volume organizes his works in two broad categories of "Lyrical" and "Non-Lyrical," and within "Non-Lyrical," under subcategories of "Psychological," "Critical," "Philosophical," etc. (236-238). Her argument for so doing is that these divisions "are natural, or answering to received general forms of mental activity" and because "such a system of division excludes all arbitrary judgment or undue emphasis of the *motive* or *leading thought* of the poems" (235). She may well have been reacting to John Nettleship's "Classification of Browning's Works" in the same volume. Nettleship categorizes the poetry according to its exploration of "the soul of man," in response to Browning's claim in his "Essay on Shelley" that the poet's highest aim is the study of man's "true essence which is to live or die, develop or dwindle, according as opportunities are used or wasted" (Nettleship 231). In practice, this meant subject headings such as "Poems not strictly dramatic in form, but which deal with the history, or some incident in the history, of the souls of two or more individuals, mutually acting on each other towards (1) progress, or (2) arrest, in development," and "Poems dealing with some play of human emotion, caused by,—1. Love; 2. Hate; 3. Love and Hate; 4. Love of Animals; 5. Humour" (232, 233). These rather arcane categories well reflect Nettleship's unfortunate critical reputation. As Edward Dowden once wrote, Nettleship's work was "very beautiful, but hopeless" (Peterson, *Interrogating* 66).

difficulty of Browning's verse. His poetry's obscurity contributed to its application for "broad—vague" religious expression.

Though, the Society members' poetic principles also drew them to Browning's verse despite its difficulty. The London Society readers illustrated a preference for what LaPorte referred to as "art for wisdom's sake"—pursuing edification and instruction in poetry far more than entertainment (185). Their collected works bear this preference out. Following the dedication in the first collection of the *Browning Society's Papers*, the editor (likely Furnivall) includes a passage from John Ruskin's *Elements of English Prosody*, which "the reader of Browning should always bear in mind":

The strength of poetry is in its thought, not its form; and with great lyrists, their music is always secondary, and their substance of saying, primary,—so much so, that they will even daringly and wilfully leave a syllable or two rough, or even mean, and avoid a perfect rhythm, or sweetness, rather than let the reader's mind be drawn away to lean too definitely on sound.... While, however, the entire family of poets may thus be divided into higher and lower orders,—the higher always subordinating their song to their saying, and the lower their saying to their song,—it is throughout to be kept in mind that the primal essence of a poet is in his being a singer, and not merely a man of feeling, judgment, or imagination. ("Ruskin" 24)

Ruskin's formulation of the "singer's" primary concern being meaning or substance formed a useful rubric for Society members to read and study the poet—one echoed in Revell's paper above. Though, readers often seem more interested in exploring the first part of Ruskin's statement rather than the last—the strength of the poet's thought rather than possible weakness in its "song."<sup>14</sup>

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14. Ruskin himself did not hesitate to praise Browning's thought and criticize his form. In 1855, after reading Browning seriously for the first time, he wrote to Elizabeth to say, "I never heard anything to approach your husband[']s brilliancy of illustration and swiftness of fancy. But he wants more scolding about his poetry even than you do.... I had glanced at the flight of the duchess and though I liked certain lines & rhymes in it, I fancied it was erratic & careless." His letters to Browning further communicate his frustration with the poet's difficult syntax and rough rhythms. On December 2, 1855, he wrote: "I cannot at all make up my mind about these



For many Society members, like Stoddard, the obscurity of Browning's verse signified buried truth. It made room for creative interpretation while serving as evidence of the poet's divine mediation.<sup>15</sup>

A curious consequence of associating Browning's prophetic vision with the virtue of his life is that, for those readers who treated him as prophet and preacher, he also became a kind of saint figure. Browning Societies took on unique practices in response to these various religious roles—from holding meetings with the liturgical ceremony of a church service to celebrating the poet's life, marriage, and death as literary holy days. The London Society, in fact, came to be so closely related to the Brownings' own London church that the poets were eventually venerated in the building itself. Though the London Browning Society as it was originally constituted came to a close in 1891, it reemerged in the twentieth century, even more ecclesiastic in form and practice. The Society had always had a relationship with St. Marylebone Parish Church, where Robert and Elizabeth were married. After the London bombings of World War II damaged the building, reconstruction included the addition of a "Browning Chapel" in 1949. The chapel was later moved to the side of the church and renamed the Holy Family Chapel, while the original space became the "Browning Room" and served as a meeting space for parish gatherings—including, after its re-formation in 1969, the meetings of the London Browning

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poems of yours.... Of their power there can of course be no question.... But as to the Presentation of the Power, I am in great doubt. I try at them for—say twenty minutes—in which time I make out about twenty lines" (12). After a lengthy explication of lines that trouble him, he closes his critique with the censure, "You are worse than the worst Alpine Glacier I ever crossed" (17).

15. Similar terms were also used to justify the prophetic poetry of Isaiah in early responses to and adaptations of Robert Lowth by figures such as Hugh Blair in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), specifically Lecture XLI, "The Poetry of the Hebrews."

Society. The previously undefined relationship between the Society and the Church was thus solidified in the brick and mortar of an erstwhile chapel.

The “marriage” of the London Browning Society with the church was all the more solidified in liturgical practice. The two central annual events of the Society calendar over the past half century have been the commemoration of the Brownings’ marriage on September 12 at St. Marylebone, and the commemoration of Robert Browning’s death on December 12 at his gravesite in Westminster Abbey. At the Abbey, the commemorations generally follow evensong and include a laying of wreaths on the poet’s grave.<sup>16</sup> The Rector is usually in attendance for the ceremony, and ecclesiastic music follows when the Abbey’s schedule allows.<sup>17</sup> At St. Marylebone, the marriage anniversaries are also commemorated with evensong, sometimes including Browning’s poetry in the service. For the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 2020, St. Marylebone held a choral eucharist with a presentation of both Brownings’ works given by voice actors. The bicentenary of Browning’s birth in 2012 was also celebrated with evensong at St. Marylebone, including the guest speaker, Professor Margaret Reynolds. As this event suggests, the inclination toward scholarly engagement still persists in the Society. And while few of the participants now are dedicated members of the

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16. It is not unusual for commemorative events like this to take liturgical shape. In Westminster Abbey, where so many literary figures are buried, it may well be commonplace. The Armstrong Browning Library’s Browning Society archives even include two flyers for similar commemorations honoring T. S. Eliot at Westminster and at Christ Church, Oxford. But the prevalence of such literary commemorations for Browning in particular is more surprising, as is their regularity and explicit religiosity.

17. I identified these patterns of commemoration and those that follow by reviewing invitations, orders of service, and letters between the London Browning Society and participants such as representatives from the ABL.

parish—or any parish, for that matter—such scholarly engagement is nevertheless all the more explicitly wed with the liturgical practices of parish life.

Perhaps the most remarkable ecclesiastical celebration of Browning was the 150-year anniversary celebration of the poet's marriage. In 1996, the London Society, in partnership with Browning Societies across the United States, celebrated with a ceremony at Marylebone on the very hour of their wedding a century and a half before (London, "Press"). The event brought society members from the United Kingdom and the United States together, along with the Brownings' descendants, Browning scholars, and international dignitaries. The London Society went to great lengths to secure a member of the clergy for the event, ultimately assigning the ceremony's central address to Reverend Leslie Griffiths—a Methodist minister and politician. An excerpt from a draft of the opening prayer for the celebration illuminates the event's tone:

We are gathered here today to remember and give thanks for the courage and faith of Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.... We rejoice in the personal fulfilment of their marriage and the consequent enrichment of their poetry; in the inspiration their words have brought to many generations and especially today to all those across the world who are unable to be here but are part of this fellowship of mind and heart.  
(London, "Bidding")

Both celebrating and eulogizing, this prayer treats the faith, marriage, and work of the poets as inseparable qualities. And the fellowship of the Browning Societies in this gathering and beyond functions as a communion of saints, sharing its devotion across time and space through the veneration of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Taken together, the commemorations of Browning's life, death, and marriage form a series of literary holy days for his followers, recognized in social, political, and ecclesiastical celebration.

Browning's poetic sainthood is nowhere more evident, though, than in one non-ecclesiastic religious practice of Browning Societies from the early twentieth century. In 1926 and 1930, Browning scholar A. J. Armstrong organized and led literary pilgrimages to European Browning "shrines" for Society members throughout the country (Armstrong Educational 1). His hope was that a representative from every Browning Society would be able to attend at least one pilgrimage, bringing back a record of their experience to enlighten their fellow Society members. The pilgrimage would thus serve as an evangelical tool for Browning followers, as well as an educational opportunity. Furthermore, the pilgrimage would unify Browning Societies across the country in a shared interpretive experience of the poet mediated by Armstrong, the scholars they would meet along the way, and the European landscape.

Armstrong referred to the trip as a "pilgrimage" quite conscientiously. Most notable for curating the world's largest collection of Browning materials and establishing the ABL at Baylor University, Armstrong also led a number of other trips to Europe (Armstrong Educational 7).<sup>18</sup> While these ventures were designed as "educational tours," the Browning trip was specifically advertised as a "Pilgrimage." The nine countries on the pilgrimage itinerary were selected to correspond with works from Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Brownings' oeuvre—Naples for *The Ring and the Book*, for instance, and the Baths of Lucca for *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. A small advertising booklet for the pilgrimage featured a photograph of the Vallombrosa Abbey on the front, referenced in Barrett

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18. "The Circle Tour," the "General European Tour," the "Mediterranean Tour," and a "Follow-Up Tour" took American travelers through as many as twelve different European and Middle Eastern countries in order to "See Europe Right!" Though A. J. Armstrong did, in fact, lead tours through the Holy Lands, he called these "Journeys" rather than "Pilgrimages."

Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* and signifying the religious theme of the tour.<sup>19</sup> But this theme is made all the more explicit in the pamphlet's foreword, which describes the tour in clearly religious language: "This pilgrimage to the shrines of the most virile poet of the Nineteenth Century is a spontaneous growth, out of the minds and hearts of Browning Lovers in America" (1). Referring to Browning sites as "shrines" elevates the poet to a saintly or even apostolic status. As sites of prayer, the term also signifies Browning as a spiritual mediator. Even the pilgrimage's origins are here described as an outflowing of religious fervor, "out of the minds and hearts" of Browning Society members across the country.

If the booklet had not also named the other tours, one could assume this language was simply intended to shape a particular tone in advertising. And it certainly does that, for the trip is also very much a sightseeing journey. For the four days in Venice and Asolo, for example, tourists are promised an experience of the cities' "charm" and "beautiful situation" (Armstrong Educational 5). But they are also invited to experience Asolo as "The Holy of Holies for Browning Lovers." The biblical temple language here offers a surprising reminder of many Browning followers' religious devotion, as it aligns the poet more fully with the Christian God than with his disciples, saints, or clerical ministers. Browning's work of poetic mediation of the divine makes this alignment possible. But the extremity of the metaphor of the "Holy of Holies" also signifies an awareness of

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19. The uncatalogued archives for the Browning Pilgrimages, as well as Armstrong's other European tours, are extensive untapped resources for scholars interested in the convergence between literature and tourism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They include drafts of Armstrong's detailed tour narratives, not to mention a curious account of the pilgrims meeting Benito Mussolini.

the tension between the trip's tourism and its pilgrimage—a playful acknowledgment of the extremity of that devotion.

This devotion was evident not only in Armstrong's advertising for the excursion, but in the Society members' own experiences. Lydia Hubbell, from the Missouri Browning Society in Kansas City, provided an account of the 1930 pilgrimage for her Society chapter back home. Though the majority of her recollections read like any other account of a European tour, she interprets each significant stop along the way through the life and work of the poet. For example, when her party approaches Gibraltar, she recalls Browning doing the same:

[We] were reminded that our own Robert Browning rounded Cape Vincent when just twenty-two years old, sailed through Trafalgar and Cadiz Bays and, filled with patriotic sentiment, wrote, when in sight of the citadel, 'Home Thoughts from the Sea,' never so appreciated as now with the citadel in sight, Africa plainly visible and the Pillars of Hercules looming grand in the distance. (1)

Viewing the landmark through Browning's poetic account in "Home Thoughts," Hubbell experiences it as both a national and spiritual encounter.<sup>20</sup> Her

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20. Walker Percy's well-known meditation on the tourist's derivative experience offers interesting framing here. Speaking of the impossibility of encountering the Grand Canyon authentically, Percy writes:

The Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind. . . . The thing is no longer the thing as it confronted the Spaniard [who first discovered it]; it is rather that which has already been formulated—by picture, postcard, geography book, tourist folders, and the words *Grand Canyon*. As a result of this preformulation, the source of the sightseer's pleasure undergoes a shift. Where the wonder and delight of the Spaniard arose from his penetration of the thing itself, from a progressive discovery of depths, patterns, colors, shadows, etc., now the sightseer measures his satisfaction *by the degree to which the canyon conforms to the preformed complex*. (47)

Percy, of course, is critiquing the displaced pleasure of the tourist who views the landmark through the "preformulations" of those who have gone before. In Hubbell's case, however, the preformulation of the poet is a necessary aspect of appreciating the landscape. Browning's "wonder and delight" is as much an object of interest for her as Gibraltar itself, that wonder's source.

recollection reiterates Browning's observations, literally renaming each landmark cited in the poem, which she quotes in part on the same page:

And nobly, nobly *Cape Vincent*  
To the northwest died away:  
Sunset ran one glorious blood red  
Reeking into *Cadiz Bay*.  
Bluish mid the burning water,  
Full in the face *Trafalgar* lay.  
In the dimmest northeast distance,  
Dawned *Gibraltar* grand and gray.  
Here and here did England help me,  
How can I help England? Say,  
Who so turns as I this evening,  
Turns to God to praise and pray.  
While love's planet rises yonder,  
Silent over *Africa*. (italics mine)

In the poem, the sight of Gibraltar and its relation to his own home inspires Browning to prayer. The verse then serves as a model for Hubbell and her fellow pilgrims to approach Gibraltar similarly—not only with patriotic reverence, but with prayerful gratitude for where they have come from and where they are going.

Hubbell's recollection reflects on Browning as an original witness of the journey's landscapes while also attempting to share that vision through her own written word. Though she provides accounts of humorous and curious experiences as well—an excruciating hike, for instance, and a daring, unchaperoned night drive—Hubbell is primarily interested in experiencing Italy as Browning would have. Her account of Vesuvius, one of the sites she refers to as a "Browning shrine," illustrates this interest:

At night the long rows of lights bordering the cog railroad that takes you to the top of Vesuvius, gave off a lurid and brilliant illumination. A more appropriate place than this could not have been chosen by Robert Browning in which to write, "The Englishman in Italy," descriptive of what they saw, their joy in these surroundings, and his tender love for her. Listen to the extract or excerpt:

“...and God’s own profound  
Was above me, and round me the mountains,  
and under, the sea,  
And within me my heart to bear witness  
what was and shall be.” (6)

Hubbell’s descriptions of place read like poetic exercises, attempts to see and describe the landscape as a poet would. All the more remarkable, though, is the manner in which Hubbell associates poem with place, referring to Browning’s work much the way a pilgrim to the Holy Lands would refer to the text of scripture. And her account makes it clear that she has not interpreted the landscape through his poetry only in the retrospective work of the memoir. The pilgrims read Browning’s poetry aloud in these places, so that their experience of Gibraltar, Vesuvius, the Cathedral of San Genarro, and the Villa d’Este is witnessed through his verse (11). Browning thus guides the pilgrims in perceiving the landscape, even as he himself is perceived through the landscape anew.

The Societies’ pilgrimages, commemorations, liturgical services, and religious scholarship all respond to Browning as a multifaceted religious figure. As Society readers approached Browning’s poetry for spiritual wisdom and guidance, the poet functioned for them as preacher, prophet, mediator, and guide. His life was commemorated like the lives of the saints, even as the landmarks of that life were venerated as shrines. Society critics interpreted his poetry even more explicitly as spiritual instruction than past critics had interpreted those poets, such as Tennyson and Barrett Browning, who went before him. In a few cases, that religious interpretation sprang from some of Browning’s readers having rejected the traditional Christian authority of church, cleric, and scripture. Browning became for them a substitutionary religious



authority—and a parallel authority for those who retained their Christian faith. Thus, critics could not help but treat him and his work religiously—whether in their mediation or their devotion.

*The Ecclesiastical Influence of the Cleric in the Society*

Criticism from clerical readers of Browning's poetry takes on a different aspect in the Browning Societies than it does in the lectures and sermons on Tennyson or the articles on Barrett Browning considered in previous chapters. Clerical critics were not necessarily any more or less likely to focus on Browning's religious content than lay critics. But clerics contributed to the life of the Society itself, shaping its gatherings in ecclesiastical ways. From the beginning, clerics constituted a consistent portion of the London Society's regular membership. In this, they were a pattern for Browning Societies that followed across the Atlantic. No Browning Society could be inaugurated, it seemed, without inviting the sanctifying presence of a cleric. Nor, as attested by the 1996 anniversary celebration mentioned above, were Society events complete without clerical involvement. Indeed, many Societies were instituted by clerics themselves. Clerics explicitly contributed to the ecclesiastical character of Society gatherings, often leading prayer, scripture readings, and religious music in the order of service, whether the meeting occurred in a church hall or home parlor. They brought ecclesiastical character into the Society gathering, and they did so in a way that embraced the religious traditions—and religious radicalism—of disparate Society members.

For example, in its early days, the Syracuse Browning Society was notably interdenominational. This quality developed, in part, because it was launched by

local university scholars as much as by clergy. It was also a social institution, defined by class as well as ecumenical appeal. According to Abdel-Jaouad, Syracuse was the most socially active of the early Societies, meeting in large secular spaces like the Vanderbilt Hotel and the Woman's Union Hall. But this social character did not diminish the Society's ecclesiastical nature. Bardeen described their meetings as having "quite as much an ethical as a literary character," influenced not only by lectures from clerical figures like Canon Farrar, but by religiously nuanced programs (Abdel-Jaouad 20). A celebration of Browning's birthday at the Women's Union Hall, for instance, though it predominantly featured toasts and musical entertainment like any other high profile social gathering, was significantly marked by clerical involvement (Syracuse). The event opened with an invocation by Rev. J. B. Kenyon and was interspersed with homiletic reflections—one from Unitarian Samuel Calthrop on "Browning as Philosopher" and another from Rev. Charles DeBerard Mills on "Browning as Religionist."<sup>21</sup> The event closed with a song based on lines from Browning's *Paracelsus*, with an excerpt included in the program highlighting the religious nature of the Society's pursuits:

I go to prove my soul!  
I see my way as birds their trackless way....  
In some time, His good time,—I shall arrive:  
He guides me and the bird. In His good time!

The selection emphasizes Browning's spiritual teaching, his significance for the individual soul, and the Christian God who guides it. Social the Society may be,

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21. That is, Mills is listed as a cleric in the program: "Rev. C. DeB. Mills." According to one source, although Mills had ministered at the Abolitionist Free Church of Canastota at some point in the mid-nineteenth century, he had rejected his Christian faith by the late 1870s ("Mills"). It is highly unlikely that "C. DeB. Mills" could refer to a different Syracuse cleric but likewise curious that Mills would be known as such in his final years given his religious history.

but its aim is clearly directed toward the soul's progress. Each of the event's elements—the invocation, clerical homilies, and music—openly mirror ecclesiastic practices to form a social, literary, and religious liturgy accessible across denominational lines.

The ubiquity of clerical figures from across denominations within the American Browning Societies could be attributed simply to the relationship between church and society in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The ecclesiastical shape of even the most social of Browning Society gatherings—such as the St. Petersburg, Florida, Browning Club that met in the rooms of the Congregational Church and which was organized, led, and attended almost exclusively by women—gestured to a conflation of the religious and social experience. Yet, clerics were specifically, regularly, and actively sought as interpreters of the poet—not just as participants in the meetings. They brought their capacities as interpreters of scripture to bear on the poet's texts. Abdel-Jaouad suggests that Browning clubs mirrored the network of churches and study halls that had grown out of early nineteenth-century reform movements, now taking on new reform causes such as the enfranchisement of women and the cultivation of middle and lower classes. Considering the Rochester movements in particular, he argues: "The analytical reading skills that Rochesterians acquired in parsing the scriptures in evangelical study groups were applied to the elucidation of Browning's famously obscure poetry" (40-41). While Abdel-Jaouad does not explicitly state that Browning offered an alternative to the Bible—or to Christianity itself—for a religiously-inclined society at a loss for authoritative scripture, his history of the poet's fame implies such a reading. Of course, these communities did not all wholly reject biblical authority, as the

participation of such a variety of clerical figures attests. On the contrary, the more Browning's poetry offered a source of spiritual authority parallel to—and in some cases interchangeable with—Christian scripture, the more ecumenically grew his appeal.

The Rochester Browning Club offers a robust example of such denominational ecumenism. Though, its welcoming posture may well have arisen from the club's more social character than its lack of denominational specificity. Charles E. Fitch described it as such, at least, in his "History of the Browning Club, 1884-1910." He writes:

[The Club was] a composite of both sexes, social as well as literary in its features, with the suggestion of the salon of a Récamier, with tea and cakes, typical rites of hospitality, and the flow of conversation preceding the papers and discussions, in which the men have had the prominent parts, with the women as sympathetic listeners. (10)

In many ways, this polite social form made denominational unity possible. Though, John Slater's account of Rochester's cultural history describes the gatherings in much more ecclesiastical terms, figuring them as sanctified domestic spaces in which the rooms were darkened and hushed. Attendees—predominantly women who kept silent because "they knew their place"—sat in rows, waiting for the dignified gentlemen speakers to deliver recitations and lectures (Abdel-Jaouad 84-85).<sup>22</sup> While the severe formality of these gatherings was elsewhere contested, the description suggests the Society understood itself to be a sacred space, even if imitatively so.

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<sup>22</sup> The silence of Rochester's women, accounted here by both Fitch and Slater, would not define the Society for long. As explored later in this chapter, according to extant records, women soon spoke as much—if not more—than their male counterparts in nearly every Society gathering in the United States.

It is less surprising that Browning appealed to a variety of denominationally affiliated clerics than that his poetry was able to bring them together in unity. During Bardeen's meeting with Browning in 1884, he gave the poet an account of the Syracuse Society's diversity. Browning was especially impressed by its interdenominational character. Bardeen recounts:

[Browning] seemed interested in what I told him of our club, particularly of the effect it had had in bringing into religious and moral sympathy those whose creeds had been named so differently that they had supposed themselves chasms apart. He even encouraged me to describe at some length a meeting held the winter before at Bishop Huntington's, where Methodist and Unitarian, Presbyterian and Catholic, Episcopal and Agnostic vied in seeking for points of agreement instead of dissension. (243)

The capacity for Browning's poetry to bring such disparate theological perspectives together was a significant reason for his appeal to so many clerics. In both Syracuse and Rochester, the result was a social space deeply marked by religious practice. The liturgical shape of their gatherings continued into the twentieth century, with lectures buttressed by musical interludes, recitations, and formal addresses. In nearly every case, this liturgical rhythm was marked by the defining presence of a beneficent clerical figure.

One of the most ecumenical of the Browning Societies was the Boston Browning Society, launched in December of 1885 by the Reverend S. W. Bush. In its first year, Society membership was significantly interdenominational, with Unitarian George Willis Cooke, Congregationalist Henry Spaulding, and Episcopalian Percy S. Grant among the original members. Though the meetings were held in members' homes to begin with and then at the Brunswick Hotel, the preponderance of clerics among the Society's leadership made the religious tenor of the meetings inevitable. A sample program from the 1891-1892 Society season

shows the majority of speakers that year were clerics. Their papers, such as “The Christ of Browning’s Poetry,” by Cooke, or “Browning’s Argument for Immortality,” by Francis Tiffany (also a Unitarian minister), indicate the familiar inclination to read Browning predominantly for religious instruction, much like the readers in the London Browning Society before them. Such theological interpretations of Browning’s work from the voices of clerics brought homiletic discourse from the church into the domestic and secular spaces of the home parlor and hotel meeting room.

If any trend might be found in the denominational affiliations of the Browning Societies, it would almost certainly be the frequency of Unitarian involvement. Browning’s work especially appealed to the skeptic and the radical—and the Unitarian Church included many of both in its numbers.<sup>23</sup> Unitarian principles served them well in interpreting Browning’s obscure verse. Such principles were explicitly included in the largely Unitarian Chicago Browning Society’s guide for its Browning clubs, *Outline Studies*,<sup>24</sup> published in 1886, where they encouraged their members to read Browning with an open-minded pursuit of truth:

Whatever order is pursued, the student of Browning, like that of any other poet, had better pursue his work in his own way. The best results are attained in the open mind, equally devoid of prejudice and conceit, which

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23. Unitarian aims were certainly not uniform at this point, nor was the wide variety of Unitarian experience—much of which was far from radical in the late nineteenth century. But as the radical posture increasingly became Unitarian norm, and some of the most dominant Browning Society figures took such a posture, I emphasize it here.

24. *Outline Studies* was published in the Chicago Society’s first year for the purpose of helping its disparate clubs organize their studies. It included a recommended code of conduct and lengthy lists of potential programs of study—from surveys of Browning’s poetry on love or art to selections of poetry about music, religion, or heroism. *Outline Studies* was largely drafted by the Society’s publisher, Charles Kerr, who worked closely with Jenkin Lloyd Jones on Browning Society texts.

acquires its own power of judging and makes its own application of the truths and lessons taught. (Kerr 4)

For the Unitarian, this guidance was important for both Browning scholarship and religious inquiry. The development of critical reading practices through Browning studies influenced and was influenced by Unitarian postures of open-mindedness.

The dominant Unitarian trait of the Browning Societies, though, was their pursuit of cultivation as a religious principle. Abdel-Jaouad speculates that Unitarians found in Browning “a shared view of nonsectarian Christianity and a strong conviction in the power of self-culture and cultivation of others” (37). Abdel-Jaouad draws here from Leslie Butler’s work on cultivation in *Critical Americans: Intellectuals and Transatlantic Liberal Reform*, where she writes that the goals of public critics—like the ones who flocked to the Browning Societies—in the mid to late nineteenth-century were “to achieve one’s potential—to become fully human” as well as to renew American democracy (7). The means to those ends involved “cultivating a broad reading public,” or “self-improvement as the development of those moral, religious, intellectual, social, and imaginative faculties that all humans possessed.” Glazener makes a similar observation, arguing that Browning, “as a poet who affirmed processes of human development and helped frame their significance...was well suited to the educational improvisations of the late nineteenth-century United States, among them many forms of self-education and mutual education” (178). In other words, Browning’s poetry provided an ideal “textbook”—or scripture—for the national and religious project of cultivation. Thus, Browning discussions, readings, and

lectures participated in their larger aim to bring cultivation to their communities, a kind of gospel of cultivation, as it were.

The significance of cultivation as a religious principle is especially evident in the surprisingly biblical language of *Outline Studies'* code of conduct. After an extensive categorization of Browning's poetry for study, Charles Kerr prefaces his "Rules for Literary Clubs," referring to them as "'ten commandments' for the guidance of literary studies" (42). These commandments are as follows:

- I. Aim to study, not to create, literature.
- II. Avoid red tape and parliamentary slang.
- III. Let but one talk at a time, and that one talk only of the matter in hand.
- IV. Start no side conferences: whispering is poor wisdom and bad manners.
- V. Come prepared. Let the work be laid out systematically in deliberate courses of reading and study.
- VI. Let papers be short. Beware of long quotations. "Brevity is the soul of wit."
- VII. Be as willing to expose ignorance as to parade knowledge.
- VIII. Aim not to exhaust, but to open the theme. Incite curiosity. Provoke home reading.
- IX. Begin and close to the minute.
- X. Meet all discouragements with grit and industry. Rise superior to numbers; for the kingdom of culture, like the kingdom of God, comes without observation.

The closing comparison between "the kingdom of culture" and "the kingdom of God" suggests that Kerr and the other Unitarian leaders of the Chicago Browning Society explicitly conflated the project of cultivation with the Christian's *telos*. Cultivation truly was another gospel for the church. Learning to engage with Browning thoughtfully and socially through these "ten commandments" was a path toward a certain kind of righteousness. Such cultivation became the central tenet of Unitarianism and a standard aim of Unitarians clerics in Browning Societies generally.



In many ways, the Chicago Browning Society came to define the relationship between the Unitarian Church and Browning studies. The Society as a whole was run by the radical Unitarian minister Jenkin Lloyd Jones out of his church's Unity Club, and its papers were published alongside his Unitarian pamphlets and periodicals. Though the denominational affiliation of the first known Chicago Browning reading group, formed in 1882, is unclear, their Unitarian character was well established by 1886, when *Outline Studies* was published and the city's Browning reading groups organized to form a coherent, joint gathering. This gathering met for the first time at the Church of the Messiah—not in its sanctuary but in the church's parlors, much like the London Browning Society's twentieth-century meetings in the Browning Room. After a paper from a local professor, two poetry readings, and a musical performance, the constitution of the Chicago Browning Society was ratified. Its stated purpose was to read and study the poet's works, to publish "helps" for studying that poetry, and to "awaken a wider interest in this poet" ("Origin and Constitution"). The Society aimed to meet at least four times each year, and the first, defining meeting was inaugurated by Reverend Jones.

Functionally, the Chicago Browning Society was inseparable from Chicago's Unitarian community.<sup>25</sup> Two years prior to its inauguration, Jones had planted the Unitarian church, All Souls, in Chicago, where in addition to his regular ministry he held annual classes on Browning (Ruff 7). These classes were

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25. And, arguably, inseparable from the Socialist movement as well. Kerr, who helped write and publish *Outline Studies*, later became the nation's primary publisher of Socialist texts. In *Outline Studies*, Kerr used particularly Socialist language to describe the Chicago Society's founding, claiming that it was organized in 1886 by "Chicago workers" and implying it served as much a Socialist cause as a literary and religious cause.

initially part of All Souls' Unity Club, a branch of the radical Unitarian offshoot, the Free Religious Association (FRA).<sup>26</sup> Before moving to Chicago, Jones had ministered to another Unitarian community in Janesville, Wisconsin. There, he launched the Mutual Improvement Club—a venture combining Sunday school-style adult education with social action and cultural engagement, and particularly encouraging the participation of women (Ruff 9-10). Jones also helped found *Unity*, a fortnightly journal of the Western Unitarian Conference (WUC). In 1880, he moved to Chicago to serve as the WUC's secretary. Within two years, Jones launched All Souls with the hope that the church "emphasize Universal Brotherhood" and "stand upon a grand emphasis of the great word of the century: Unity" (Ruff 10). The line between this ideal of unity and nineteenth-century socialism was thin, if it existed at all. For Jones, the ideal of "Unity" meant that "low and high, poor and rich, unbeliever and believer" were all equally welcome.

In this environment, the Browning Society functioned as an engine of cultivation for Jones's Unitarian parishioners. Officially, the Society constituted a formal section of the church's Unity Club (Ruff 18). Jones's son described the church as "a 'seven day church,' a church home, a school, a social club, and a shrine." The Browning Society in particular functioned as a continuation of Jones's Mutual Improvement Club—combining literary and cultural education with social engagement for men and women alike. Jones's theological convictions emphasized a "nondoctrinal 'ethical basis' of 'freedom, fellowship,

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26. The FRA had begun as an anti-slavery society, not a formal denomination, "open to all those who held that the improvement of spiritual and moral existence was the substance of pure religion" (Ruff 7). The FRA's "Unity Men" maintained their ties to the Unitarian community despite disavowing both orthodox Christianity and theism (8).

and character in religion," the optimistic remains of a faith on the other side of higher criticism and comparative religion (7-8). Jones looked to literature like Browning's dramatic monologues for spiritual sustenance. He read such texts with the same critical attention he gave to scripture and used them as the foundation of a religious education from Society gathering to printed pamphlet. Jones's influence encouraged the near-exclusive participation of Unitarian clergy and parishioners who found in Browning's work spiritual sustenance without credal specificity and a religious voice free from traditional religious practice. Browning offered a cultural inroad for their societal concerns, a spirituality that upheld the cause of Unity.

Jones was far from the only cleric to coningle his church community with the Browning Society. Fitch reports that Reverend Nelson Millard ministered to both the First Presbyterian Church of Rochester and the Rochester Browning Club "socially, intellectually, and spiritually" (Fitch 16). Baptist minister Augustus Hopkins Strong was the Club's most faithfully attending member, and the Rochester Club offered a social context for him to work through his religious study, "The Great Poets and Their Theology" (Fitch 18). The Club was also frequently visited by the Unitarian minister, William Gannett, who once claimed that he "had learned deeper religious truths from reading Browning than from any of the sermons he had ever read or heard" (Abdel-Jaouad 187). Gannett's presentations to the Rochester Browning Club communicated this "deeper religious truth" as he understood it, even amongst the Club's "tea and cakes."<sup>27</sup>

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27. Gannett also offered a series of classes on Browning through the local Unity Club at Rochester's First Unitarian Church from 1896 to 1907. A significant portion of Abdel-Jaouad's *Browningmania* explores these classes, so they will receive little attention here.

In such a clerical context, the concerts, readings, and other entertainment that Fitch depicts in purely social terms do not cast a secular pall over the religious poet. On the contrary, the religious poet—and the religious figures who interpret him—sanctify the otherwise secular social setting.

Furthermore, Browning's poetry as parallel scripture makes especial sense of his popularity among readers eager for social change. Abdel-Jaouad writes, "Unitarians in particular considered Browning to be a sort of a priest-prophet, the embodiment of true Christian values, and parsed his poetry like biblical text for moral and spiritual edification and answers to spiritual ills" (45). The poet provided Unitarian ministers and other religious readers with undogmatic spiritual texts to which they might apply their powers of interpretation. Browning served as a paragon as well as prophet and priest, offering a way forward in a world where the "inspiration idea" no longer satisfied the scriptural skeptic. Like Tennyson's interpretive inspiration, however, Browning encouraged a way of reading poetry that might serve as a model for reading scripture as well. If religious readers were bringing the exegetical tools of Bible reading to bear on Browning's verse, they were also learning in that verse how to approach the text as an encounter of "continual striving and seeking" rather than finding (Abdel-Jaouad 49).

### *The Lay Reader as Cleric*

Ubiquitous as clerics were in the Browning Societies, women were all the more so. Women made up a majority of the members of most Browning Societies, if not in the first few years of their founding, then certainly in their longevity. Indeed, despite Fitch and Slater's depictions of the Rochester Club's

women as passive listeners, it was actually a society woman, Mrs. George W. Fisher, who founded the Club in the first place (Fitch 11). Women's emancipation in America and Browning devotion were oddly intertwined. Notable Rochester Club clergymen like Gannett were vocal advocates for the expanding rights of women. Susan B. Anthony was even a member of Gannett's Unity Club and an avid reader of the Brownings (Abdel-Jaouad 39). Anthony also founded the Women's Union in Rochester, which hosted a lecture from Gannett on Browning's poem *Saul* in 1895 (51). According to Glazener, the mingling of Browning scholarship with the advocacy for women's emancipation was a fundamental feature of the Societies. She writes, "The Browning societies kindled hopes for social transformation and spiritual regeneration that hinted at revised gender roles" (182). This accord between Browning devotion and women's equality encouraged and was encouraged by the number of women who made up the Societies' numbers.

In the Boston Browning Society, for example, though the majority of speakers were originally clerical gentlemen, the presence of women grew significantly in a short span of time. In the 1895-1896 season, half of the Society's presenters were women and all were lay people. Women had, in fact, formed the majority of the Boston Society's members from the beginning—a gender imbalance mirroring that of church participation in the period.<sup>28</sup> And as the

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28. Though, of course, women's greater church attendance did not necessarily correlate to women's increase in authority, as it did in the Browning Societies. Geoffrey Blainey goes so far as to suggest that church attendance has been dominated by women throughout Christian history, though their greater presence in the nineteenth-century church carries interesting consequences. For example, Callum Brown correlates the widespread drop in church attendance and subsequent secularization of Great Britain in the 1960s with the drop in attendance of women. Just as "women were the bulwark to popular support for organized Christian religion between 1800 and 1963," he claims, it was likewise women "who broke their relationship to Christian piety in the 1960s and thereby caused secularization" (9). Patterns of gendered church attendance

Boston Society grew more Unitarian in its denominational complexion, its posture also grew more egalitarian. Though clerical figures continued to be a significant presence among Society presenters in most Society gatherings, assuring their association with ecclesiastical life and practice, they shared space with scholars and women—including some scholarly women—whose papers were often equally as religious in tenor and context.

Indeed, as the ecclesiastical shape of Browning Society gatherings gave all presenters' papers homiletic context, this put women who spoke on Browning in a uniquely clerical position—one they often did not find in their church experience, despite their significant numbers in both contexts. One such notable scholar, Agnes Knox Black, served as the Snow Professor of Elocution and Oratory at Boston University and gave several public lectures on Browning over the years—at Emerson College of Oratory, the Boston Public Library, and, of course, the Boston Browning Society. She delivered her Society paper, "Browning as Artist, in His Conception of Religious Faith, and Love Human and Divine, Illustrated by Readings," not during a typical Society meeting, but as the central speaker at a Sunday afternoon service held in honor of Browning's birthday at Old Cambridge Baptist Church. Her lecture followed a psalm, hymn, scripture reading by Rev. George D. Latimer, and prayer by Rev. George H. Whittemore. The service closed with another hymn and benediction. This was explicitly a religious service, and Dr. Black's lecture functioned therein

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in the United States were similar, even as secularization in the twentieth century appears more complex there. Ann Braude has traced those gendered patterns, revealing that 60-66% of church attendees in North America since the Puritans have been women. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these patterns continued to mirror Browning Society attendance, even as dropping numbers from the 1960s onward led to most Browning Societies ending well before the close of the twentieth century.

unequivocally as a homily. Though the text of the lecture itself is not included in the Boston Browning Society's paper collections, the context suggests that Browning's readers were willing to learn about theology through the interpretive work of a woman even as Browning's poetry was read with the same attention as passages of Christian scripture.

The ecclesiastical context of Black's lecture on the poet offers a compelling example of how Browning Societies elevated lay readers, including women, into clerical roles through the act of poetic interpretation. Black's contribution was homiletic, not merely elocutionary. Though, even the reading of a spiritual text was considered an act of interpretation to some. Society meetings regularly involved such readings by lay members and guests. In Fitch's history of the Rochester Browning Club, for instance, he gives an account of a reading from April 1892 in which Sarah Crowell LeMoyne read Browning's "Pippa Passes." He writes that, "in the timbre and thrill of her voice, she unfolded the meaning of the poem, over which critics have puzzled, far more cleverly than have many of the most acute and learned disquisitions upon it (13). This description is more than an excess of praise; Fitch here describes the goal of elocutionists throughout the period, Black included.<sup>29</sup> Elocution was itself a form of careful critical engagement, and Black's presentation brought both—readings as well as a homiletic lecture—into the halls of the church and the order of a religious liturgy.<sup>30</sup>

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29. Not only elocutionists, but poets as well. Hallam Tennyson records an account from Emily Ritchie on the effect of Tennyson's oral reading: "The roll of his great voice acted sometimes almost like an incantation, so that when it was a new poem he was reading, the power of realizing its actual nature was subordinated to the wonder at the sound of the tones" (87). We see this incantatory power in Corson's readings as well, mentioned below.

Such interpretive elocution was a part of the earliest Browning Society practices. Lilian Whiting describes Corson's reading of Browning as an essential aspect of his interpretation for the Cornell Browning Society. She writes:

His aim was to give his audience the spiritual meaning of the poem read. His rich voice had the choral intonation without which no poem can be vocally interpreted. His reading gave not only the articulated thought but the spiritual message of the poet. It is hardly too much to say that no one has ever fully realized the dramatic power of Browning who has not listened to the interpretation of Dr. Corson. (240-241)

Whiting here describes Corson himself as both actor and prophet or priest in his vocalization of poetry. Browning's texts require interpretation much like scripture itself, and good interpretation is a spiritual vocation. Corson—though a scholar, not a preacher—communicated the poem's "spiritual meaning" rather than its narrative, history, or intellectual contribution.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the Browning Societies, lay women and men interpreted the poet with religious authority. The collected papers from the Boston Browning Society, published in 1897, gives evidence of such interpretations. Following a biographical introduction by the Society's then president, the notable Thomas

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30. Glazener distinguishes between the practice of elocution, expression, and oral interpretation (185). As the accounts of oral readings in the Browning Society papers do not make such distinctions, I conflate them here. Also see Mark Morrisson's "Performing the Pure Voice" for an account of how such oral reading practices of poetry manifested with the development of modernist poetry.

31. I will address more of Corson's unique contributions shortly, but it should here be noted that the spiritual significance of his oral reading was not solely Whiting's impression. Gerald Graff discusses how Corson himself believed that the "spiritual essence" of a poem was simultaneous with the "'non-intellectual, the non-discursive' aspect of man," and that in reading the poem aloud, that spiritual essence might be captured (48). Though many students and fellow faculty mocked Corson for his zealous readings, they did occasionally strike some listeners precisely as he presumed they would. One account Graff cites describes a student experiencing "a kind of rapture, almost a mystical experience" in listening to Corson's reading (49). The listener "was no longer the sullen, undutiful scholar, he was the poet and the poem." This experience accords well with Corson's theory of personality explicated in his paper for the London Browning Society, "The Idea of Personality as Embodied in Robert Browning's Poetry" (discussed further on), as well as his broader theories in *The Aims of Literary Study* (1894) and *The Voice and Spiritual Education* (1896).



Wentworth Higginson, the collection includes a critical analysis of “Browning’s Theism” by philosopher and historian Josiah Royce, and a study of the artistic and ethical dramatism of Browning’s verse by Welsh philosopher Henry Jones. These are published alongside papers from religious leaders like the Episcopalian priest Percy Stickney Grant, Methodist Daniel Dorchester Jr., Congregationalist Philip Moxom, and Unitarians Charles Gordon Ames, George Willis Cooke, George Dimmick Latimer, John White Chadwick, and Jenkin Lloyd Jones. Though many of the lay studies in the collection focus on secular topics—such as the relation between Browning and classical studies, the nature of his rhymes, and the historical and cultural accuracy of his narratives—even in these, the critics address Browning’s poetry as a text of spiritual instruction and insight. Furthermore, they do so with the same critical authority as the clerics in the same collection.

Browning studies regularly gave women in particular an authoritative, even clerical voice. The Wednesday Club of Versailles, Kentucky, offers a general example of this inclination.<sup>32</sup> Though the organization was not itself a Browning Society, they committed considerable attention to the poet from 1909 to 1911. In

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32. The Wednesday Club in Versailles, KY, was one of many women’s clubs organized throughout the country in the late nineteenth century. One of the “home parlor clubs,” its business was the pursuit of “social culture, literary, and miscellaneous study” (Croly 497). This pursuit was shared among all of its members, not relegated to a set of leaders or speakers. And this egalitarian cultural investment was common among Wednesday Clubs generally. One group in Granbury, Texas, originating in 1897, would open its sessions with a roll call in which members answered “with some item of interest concerning current events, a country, the Bible, women, or quotations” (GWWC). As in Browning clubs, this was usually followed by a paper presentation on a subject related to women from one of its members, along with a musical performance or a reading. The Club is still in existence today. One of the most significant of the Wednesday Clubs was located in St. Louis (Croly 760). Its members worked to unify all of the women’s clubs in the state, arbitrating disagreements and even hosting a convention. In many ways, these clubs existed in a network of relation with one another like a church denomination. They responded to local and statewide concerns with the attention and action of a church body. And, like the Browning Societies, they pursued truth in the realm of culture with the same religious intentionality as a serious Christian community.

these years, they organized their biweekly meetings around discussions on the poetry of both Tennyson and Browning. Each club session considered a different work and theme from one of the poets, such as the "Ethical and Religious Ideals" in Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, or "Speculative Theology" in "St. Simeon Stylites." Not all sessions emphasized the poets' religious or theological concerns, but the ones that did were particularly interesting. The sessions appear to have been structured as discussions, with members expected to come familiar with the poem at hand and ready to discuss specific questions. A March 23, 1910, discussion on "Natural Religion" in Browning's *Caliban upon Setebos*, for example, encouraged members to consider questions like "What is the chief attribute of Caliban's duty? What his theories of prayer?" This was followed by a discussion at the next meeting concerning Browning's "A Death in the Desert" and the epilogue to *Dramatis Personæ*. Members debated how the two poems related to the doctrines: "That revelation was limited to a given place and time and that it will never be repeated. That with a decline of belief in the supernatural, all belief in God must suffer. That God is incarnate in faith and love now as fully as in any age of the past." These theological questions were treated by them as cultural concerns, discussed in the same way the women considered "Fra Lippo Lippi's" style and thought, or the "art temperament" of "Pictor Ignotis." As cultural women in the context of the cultural society, the Wednesday Club's members had authority to debate such theological concerns with the confidence that, through Browning's poetry, they might come to a real conclusion about matters of faith and doctrine.

Even where the Browning Society membership was not exclusively female, women took on authoritative interpretive roles. Bertha Lovewell

Dickinson (almost always named in the Society programs with her credentials, “PhD”) was perhaps the most notable of such women.<sup>33</sup> A student of Browning, Dickinson’s advanced scholarship on the poet gave her an academic and spiritual authority within the Browning Societies she led. In 1899, Dickinson launched the Hartford Browning Club, also called the Bard and the Sage Study Club, in Hartford, Connecticut. After moving to Pasadena in 1914, she continued her program in Browning studies with the Society there. In the Browning Society of Pasadena, Dickinson was given a special designation among the Society’s officers and members as “Editor of Course Study and Club Leader.” In Hartford, however, this same role was titled “Interpreter.” The absence of any other presenters listed in the annual programs for the Club implies Dickinson was almost the only member in Hartford to contribute interpretations of Browning’s work. Dickinson not only took on a clerical role within the Society in her interpretations of the poet, she acted as the poet’s exclusive minister within the Society for several years. Her interpretations included studies on Browning’s “Mysticism,” his “Motive Truth” and “Motive Faith,” his “Catholicity of Spirit,” views on “The Problem of Existence,” “The Supernatural in Life,” “The Infinity of the Soul,” and “The Immediacy of God.” The program for the 1911 to 1912 years does conclude with a guest lecture, offered by Congregationalist minister Charles Francis Carter. But rather than take away from Dickinson’s role as a religious teacher in the Society, this anomaly strengthens the association. That

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33 Outside of the Browning Society programs, information on Dickinson is scarce. A blog devoted to the Lovewell family ([lovewellhistory.com](http://lovewellhistory.com)) makes a few slight references to her, including an entry on her dissertation, *The Life of St. Cecelia*. The dissertation itself is also available online but tells us nothing of its author other than that she was a thorough and thoughtful scholar.

the only other authoritative voice on record offering an interpretation of Browning to the Hartford Society was a clerical figure suggests that the role of “Interpreter” was understood clerically regardless of the credentials of the person holding it.

Dickinson was well established as the primary interpreter of Browning in Southern California. The Los Angeles and Long Beach Browning Societies took advantage of her proximity and invited her to lead lecture series for multiple years in a row. At the close of her lectures on *The Ring and the Book* for the Los Angeles Society, they thanked her as “the distinguished lecturer and interpreter of Robert Browning” for lectures “comprehensive and particular, historical and philosophical, profound yet simple, and all-round in treatment, leaving no point untouched.” Special mention was given to the readings she gave of Browning’s poetry before beginning her lectures—yet another example of poetic elocution doing interpretive work alongside scholarship. Her lectures to the Pasadena Society included reflections on the nature of evil, the role of the church in society, the power of love, institutional versus personal religion, and absolute versus relative truth. “Historical and philosophical” these concerns may be, but they are also clearly theological. Her interpretations of Browning, like so many other critics, necessitate work as theologian—and her teaching serves, in like manner, as a homiletic message.

The prevalence of women in interpretive roles within the Societies was not necessarily a function of the context but grew out of the nature of Browning’s work itself. Numerous papers were given in Society gatherings on Browning’s treatment of women. Christina Whitehead, for example, praises Browning for being unlike Tennyson in his elevation of women. In her paper on “Browning as

a Teacher of the Nineteenth Century,” delivered at the London Society meeting in April, 1888, she states:

Browning does not waste words over defining woman’s position, he simply gives it her. I do not think one line can be found implying that she is to gain “mental breadth” by contact with a man’s mind, and that her work must fail unless she has

“A helper *me* that know

The woman’s cause is man’s.”<sup>34</sup>

He treats men and women on a broad level of equality, judging each individual according to merit, not sex.... There is no shade of patronage in Mr. Browning’s tone about women, but a frank acknowledgment of mutual help and assistance between them and men, a recognition of the friendship which is one of the most helpful features of our time. (246)

Indeed, this “equality” and “friendship” Whitehead finds in Browning’s poetry likewise came to define the relationship between men and women in Browning Societies—not only in their social context, but in the roles they took in their interpretation of the poet. Whitehead’s very perception of Browning’s lack of patronage participates in the interpretive authority women wielded within the context of the Society gatherings. In the same way that clerics and laypeople were given equivalent authority to interpret the poet theologically and spiritually, men and women shared that authority as well.

Whitehead took full advantage of this shared authority throughout her paper. There, she treats the poet almost as a new Solomon, attributing to him deep wisdom for their age while referencing lines of his poetry like proverbs. Though she also quotes lengthy passages throughout the paper, she repeatedly lists his teachings in her own words, following these paraphrases with aphoristic lines from Browning’s poetry to substantiate them. One series of claims and quotations, for example, could be read either as her own definition supported by

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34. Quoting Tennyson’s “The Princess.”

Browning or as her interpretation of Browning's definition found within the maxims of verse:

[Love's] foundation must be truth—  
    "Truth is the strong thing.  
    Let man's life be true!  
    And love's the truth of mine."  
It includes friendship, which is the heart of true love.  
    "Friends—lovers that might have been."  
It only fails when honour and trust are dead—  
    "Love you lose  
    Slain by what slays in you the honour."  
And yet it can be very patient...  
    "Bear with a moment's spite.  
    What of a hasty word!"  
because it lies deeper than outside difference.  
It is undying, for eternity—  
    "In the worst of a storm's uproar  
    I shall pull her through the door;  
    I shall have her for evermore." (248)

In the public presentation of this paper to the London Browning Society, this passage would audibly interweave Whitehead's and Browning's teachings on love in one voice. Even on the page, the lines of poetry serve as proof text of claims she makes herself about love's truth, patience, and selflessness. Though on the following page she explicitly states, "Mr. Browning presents us, then, with an ideal picture of love," it is her own explication of this verse that arrives at such a picture and clarifies how it is particularly "fitted for this age" (249). Whitehead's interpretation of Browning's poetry is overwhelmed by her own instructive arguments, justified by both his verse as well as the equality he himself recognizes between women and men.

The equal authority of men and women, clerics and laypeople, in the Society "pulpit" directly paralleled the equal authority of clerical homily and lay lecture. George Wharton James, the founder of the Pasadena Society—where Dickinson spent the greater part of her service—offers a compelling example

of this. Like so many Society founders, James had, at one time, been a Methodist minister. But after a scandalous divorce, he lost his position in the Church. According to Lawrence Clark Powell, though James never returned to Methodism, he “practiced a sturdy Christian idealism, unrestricted by any particular dogma” in the years that followed (56). While today he is known for his prolific writing on the American Southwest, at the time of the founding of the Browning Society of Pasadena in 1909, he was best known as a lecturer.<sup>35</sup> The Societies that he founded vocationally replaced his church body, offering him space to teach, minister, and develop community. Early programs for the Pasadena Society indicate that they encouraged ministry outside of the typical literary discussion, with committees on prison reform and philanthropy operating alongside entertainment and hospitality—similar to church and parachurch charity and reform movements of the time.<sup>36</sup> Lectures that James gave there and elsewhere likewise functionally replaced his weekly sermons. Thus, his lecture on October 12, 1916, “Browning as a Spiritual Power in Life,” can be understood, along with the papers by laywomen and men that followed in the program, as a homily on Browning’s mediation of spiritual truth.

Perhaps the most notable layman to use clerical authority in his interpretation of Browning’s prophetic poetry would be Hiram Corson. Indeed,

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35. The most curious consequence of his frequent lectureships was his launch of the Anti-Whispering Society, an organization “devoted to the suppression of (1) talking audiences, (2) peanut fiends, and (3) crying babies” (57). Though his standards for an audience were stringent, Powell notes that he was surprisingly hospitable with those that met his expectations, occasionally inviting them for dinner afterwards: “He did the cooking; all they had to provide was their own knife, fork, and plate” (59).

36. For a survey of such movements, see “A Brief History of the Parachurch” in Christopher Scheitle’s dissertation, *Beyond the Congregation* (Penn State U, 2008), as well as Leslie Howsam’s *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge UP, 1991), which discusses the prominent roles women took in organizing Bible distribution networks and Sunday schools.

as many Browning scholars have noted, the American Browning Societies owe their existence to Corson's religious fanaticism for the poet. In 1877, Corson established a reading group for fellow professors and their wives to read, discuss, and study the poet's work together (Greer 167). This reading group had precedent for Corson in the college literary societies of his youth, which often immersed students in as much as a full survey's worth of literature outside of the classroom while also encouraging them to develop oratorical skills in reading, debate, and discussion (Graff 44-45). Corson carried these practices into his Browning reading group. Its success, as well as the immediate popularity of the London Browning Society four years later, motivated Corson to encourage the development of other Browning Societies, beginning in Syracuse and Rochester and expanding from there. Martha Caskey Hunt dubbed Corson "a true evangelist" of the poet, as his efforts were met with resounding success on both sides of the Atlantic (Abdel-Jaouad 6). By the 1900s, there were more than nine hundred similar societies across the United States (7).

Corson's paper given to the London Browning Society on June 23, 1882, provides enlightening context for his commitment to the poet. In "The Idea of Personality as Embodied in Robert Browning's Poetry," the professor argues that art serves an intermediary function between the individual and the Divine. The greater the "personality" of the artist, the more efficacious the work may be in leading the soul upward. Corson brings scripture together with Browning's poetry to show that Christ's call to "abide in My word" in order to "know the truth," is a call to find that truth "*within* ourselves" as "it takes no rise from outward things" (Corson 295). It is personality, rather than intellect, which gives us access to the truth within and unites us with God. Just as many clerics read



Tennyson as the premiere poet of spiritual intuition above reason, Corson reads Browning as the poet of personality above intellect. "A cardinal idea in Browning's poetry," he argues, "is the regeneration of men through a personality who brings fresh stuff for them to mould, interpret, and prove right,—new feeling fresh from God" (302). This is the work of the poet, who "reteaches" the reader "what life should be, what faith is." Browning himself, then, brings this "fresh stuff" in verse, "fresh from God" in such a way that, as religious tradition ought to do, he "quickens and regenerates the race." Quoting from *The Ring and the Book*, Corson illustrates Browning's own expression of this poetic identity: Through the poet's mediation of "new feeling" from God, "God stooping shows sufficient of His light for those i' the dark to rise by" (Browning, *Ring* 278).

But the reader has a role in this as well. Corson seems to be describing the faithful Browningite when he explains the reader's right response to a poet's divine mediation. He writes, "It is only through the spontaneous and unconscious fealty which an inferior does to a superior soul (a fealty resulting from the responsiveness of spirit to spirit), that the former is slowly and silently transformed into a more or less approximate image of the latter" (304). The "fealty" of the Browning disciple, then, transforms or perhaps sanctifies him into the image of the poet. The poet's mediation, by the reader's meditation, becomes his own. And the poet's inspiration and spiritual elevation likewise come to characterize the reader. Corson's devotion to Browning would, in theory, make Corson "into a more or less approximate image" of Browning. Thus, Corson's study of Browning would serve not only to enlighten and encourage him as a scholar, but ostensibly introduce transference of personality, if not identity.

Insofar as the poet is prophet, priest, or preacher, Corson's argument implies the lay critic of Browning becomes all of these things as well.

Corson further argues in the same paper that Christianity's perpetuation through the centuries has depended not only on the communication of biblical texts or church tradition, but on "embodiments of [Christ's] spirit in art and literature," such as "the statesman's great word" and "the poet's sweet comment" (quoting Browning's *Sordello*). The poet's "intermediate personality" makes the personality of Christ accessible to people across time and space.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, the work of the poet cannot be separated from the person of the poet. "The life and efficacy of Art depends on the personality of the artist" (309). It is "apocalyptic of the artist's own personality" and "*cannot* be impersonal." But if the artist and his art cannot be separated, and the work of art communicates Christ beyond the pages of scripture into the spiritual nature of the reader, then that reader also becomes a kind of intermediary. The reader who becomes "a more or less approximate image" of the poet, carries on the poet's act of mediation of the divine personality of Christ—with poetry becoming an agent akin to the Holy Spirit. While the Browning Societies in London and America made a variety of different claims as to their purpose and aims, Corson suggests that the individuals who participate in these societies may also experience a kind of sanctification into the life of Christ *through* the life of the poet *through* the

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37. It is worth noting that this re-membering and re-presenting of the person of Christ is, in Catholic and Anglican tradition, literally the work of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Graff identifies echoes of "Quaker and Protestant evangelical appeals to the authority of faith over encumbering externals of formal churches, rituals, and doctrinal disputes" in Corson's obsession with oral readings (47). But insofar as those readings are incantatory and mystical, and the poetry being read is thus sacramental, they also suggest almost the reverse. Corson simply relocates the "rituals" of formal church practice to the poetic encounter. And, as we shall see, when such rituals are conducted outside of the formal church setting, they risk reconstitution as the occult.

poet's works. Browning, the prophet and preacher, bestows on his readers by influence of personality the roles of prophet and preacher in the new context of a Society gathering.

Coming from the man who propagated almost a thousand Browning reading groups across two continents, this interpretation of the dynamic between poet and reader carries significant weight. Though, Corson's drift into the occult may lighten that weight somewhat. In his later years, Corson frequently engaged in seances to speak with dead writers—predominantly Browning, but Tennyson and Longfellow as well. His journey from a spiritualistic Christian faith into spiritualism has been described as a tragic and surprising consequence of his fanaticism by the few Browning scholars who address him—if they mention it at all. Peterson refers to the professor's spiritualism as a “grotesque closing note for Corson's remarkable career,” a “pathetic and slightly ludicrous” image, and “the *reductio ad absurdum*” consequence of Browning fanaticism (*Interrogating* 95-96). Abdel-Jaouad attributes Corson's spiritualism to his “damagingly obsessive” interest in the poet, suggesting that it arose from Corson's belief in Browning as a literal “medium, a link with the unseen world” (17). It is certainly somewhat surprising given Browning's own stated disaffection for spiritualism. But it is not such a strange outcome of spiritual fanaticism generally as it was a considerably more widespread practice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries than either of these accounts suggest. Kingsland, for example, another original London Browning Society member, was also a spiritualist who dipped in and out

of the Theosophical Society between 1888 and his death in 1936.<sup>38</sup> According to the minutes of a June 2, 1883, London Society meeting, Kingsland considered Browning to be the “the *teacher of teachers*; he inspired those who were engaged in various ways—by music, painting, or literature—in instructing the people” (“Seventeenth” 79). This account certainly resonates with Corson’s own reading of Browning as a mediator for mediators, but there is of course no indication that such an opinion of the poet *necessarily* correlates with belief that such teaching might persist after death, mediating between the spiritual and the physical world.

Even so, Corson’s spiritualism and Kingsland’s Theosophy inevitably color their interpretations of the role of the poet and the nature of poetry. After all, a “mediator” in the spiritualist tradition is considerably different from a biblical prophet or a nineteenth-century preacher. In such a tradition, Corson’s inclination in “The Idea of Personality” to nearly equate the poet and the poem through the intermediary function of art—as though reading Browning’s work acts to summon his person—takes on occultic significance. Corson was not only familiar with the spiritualist tradition of mediation; he actually hosted Madame Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy, in his home. There, Blavatsky worked on her first book, *Isis Unveiled*—an account of her visions, or “transcriptions” of spiritual insight from the unseen world (Hanegraaff 6). The legitimacy Corson attributed to Blavatsky’s “transcriptions” nuance his own sense of the poet as

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38. Kingsland’s vacillation in and out of the Theosophical Society was apparently due to widespread disagreements among the Theosophists, not due to any changing religious conviction.

mediator of spiritual truth—as well as the work of the critic who interprets that mediation.

Even those who were unsympathetic to spiritualism often spoke of Browning in similar terms, though. The poet, essayist, and scientist, Edmund Clarence Stedman, attributed to Browning the “mission” of “exploring those secret religions which generate the forces whose outward phenomena it is for the playwrights to illustrate” (Fitch 11). Stedman refers to Browning’s interest in human psychology here, but his account of Browning sounds remarkably similar to those of playwrights, like W. B. Yeats, who literally used drama as a vehicle for the occult. There may be any number of explanations for the blurring line between Browning as a religious figure within Christian tradition and Browning as a mediator in the occult sense. But the tendency to speak of him in these ways suggests a more aggressively religious treatment of the poet than readers encountered in Tennyson and Barrett Browning.

### *Conclusion*

It is evident throughout these myriad accounts of Society gatherings, readings, and arguments that the critic’s work of interpretation took on greater significance in the later part of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Browning’s role for the critic—clerical and lay—was unequivocally religious in nature. But the critic participated in that role through the act of interpretation. Corson’s theory of spiritual mediation may be the most extreme interpretation of the critic’s role, but it was also a deeply influential one. Not only did many of the Browning Societies in America come into being in response to Corson’s traveling lectures on the poet, but London’s *Browning Society Papers*, where Corson’s

“Personality” lecture was published, became standard reading for Society members for decades. If, as Corson suggests, the work and the life of the poet cannot be separated, the reader of the poet participates in that work and that life through the act of interpretation. When William Lyon Phelps writes, “Browning’s philosophy is my own; his ways are my ways and his thoughts are my thoughts,” he speaks as both a co-creator and a disciple (207). In a sense, the interpreter of Browning becomes what Browning himself is—a cleric of divine truth.

This elevation of the role of Browning’s clerical and lay critics followed aesthetic theory from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It was, after all, in 1891—a year of robust growth for the early Browning Societies—that Oscar Wilde penned his essay “The Critic as Artist.” There, Wilde enunciates a view of the critic as an active, creative participant in the work of art. In 1909, Benedetto Croce published his widely influential work, *Aesthetics*, where he argues that the beholder of a work of art can only receive an aesthetic experience in the act of expression—that is, giving form to the aesthetic sensation through language. The work of art is not an object, then, but literal *work* exerted between sensation and perception. In other words, it is the critic who encounters the image, composition, or poem who makes that work *art* in the act of expressing it in language. Browning himself was interested in the reader’s work with a poem. He closes his dramatic narrative *The Ring and the Book*, for example, with a reflection on the necessity of poetry’s “obliqueness”: “Art may tell a truth / Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought... So write a book shall mean

beyond the facts, / Suffice the eye and save the soul beside" (477).<sup>39</sup> For Browning, the reader's work in perceiving truth through the artful poem may "save the soul." This purpose differs from Wilde's, of course. Browning does not elevate the reader's work over the work of art itself. Wilde and Croce's views, on the other hand, give the critic considerably more agency. The spectator *becomes* the artist. The practice of interpretation then becomes an act of making, more crucial than the work of art itself that lies inert until the critic's engagement.

As the lines between work and criticism, artist and critic, were being called into question in aesthetic theory, they were likewise being confounded in practice in many of the Browning Societies' readings. Criticism of the poet participated in the work of the poet; the poem's interpretation contributed to the experience of the poem itself. Thus, whether the poet is understood as prophet or cleric, priest or saint, the poet's interpreter can be understood similarly—mediating the work of the mediator through homiletic discourse on scripturally signifying poetry. Furthermore, as the critical space becomes a religious space—when Society gathering takes on the form and function of a church gathering—those critics who bring Browning's poetry to life do so as ecclesiastic figures. The Societies act as their own progressive "denomination," unifying Browning's readers around common causes of spiritual elevation, intellectual faith, and cultivation. And the elevation of critic to cleric through the act of interpretation crosses over the social limitations of gender and the dogmatic particularities of denominations. Every interpretive reader of Browning becomes his minister.

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39. In fact, Browning's response to Ruskin's criticism of his formal licenses, mentioned earlier, was precisely this—that the poem must actively engage the work of the reader in interpretation, or it is not a poem.

## EPILOGUE

As these chapters have shown, clerical interpretations of the role of poets and their poetry largely center on questions of spiritual authority. Tennyson and the Brownings were recognized as authoritative in offering spiritual wisdom, insight, and guidance to their readers through the medium of poetry. While these critics assumed the spiritual authority of these poets, they differed in their understanding of the nature of that authority. The poet could function as prophet, but some considered their prophecy a response to national identity and some a response to personal faith and doubt. Others looked to the poet to address social ills or answer how to live well in response to a world of change. Their differences in interpretation of the poet generally follow differences in their denominations, as these clerics interpret the religious roles of poetry and the poet through the context of their beliefs.

In their interpretations of Alfred, Lord Tennyson, for example, Anglican priests found a spiritual authority much like their own. The poet's role conflated with their own priestly identities, so that his poetry offered homiletic instruction for the spiritual lives of their congregations. But the poet was also more than a priest, actively mediating divine wisdom like the biblical prophets of old. This prophetic and priestly poet responded to the religious and national needs of the current moment—instructing and inspiring the reader in work, virtue, and faith. These clerics focused less on Tennyson's argument for faith generally, and more on the social or spiritual significance of poetry in the lives of their congregants.



Tennyson's poetry thus serves as a parallel scripture for priestly homily encouraging readers toward a better life in communion with one another, with the church, and with the nation.

Nonconformist ministers, on the other hand, turned to Tennyson for a paradigm of belief in the face of doubt. They were less concerned with instructing their congregants in national or spiritual virtue than they were with providing a way forward in faith despite the implications of scientific rationalism. Tennyson's willingness to grapple with doubt, especially in *In Memoriam*, provided these clerics with a model for the triumph of intuitive faith in the face of their century's fundamental religious struggle. They considered the poet's intuitive faith as an extension of his poetic intuition. Even without priestly agency, the Nonconformists' poetic prophet passively receives divine truth and communicates it to the reader through his poetry as to a fellow congregant.

While clerical critics of Elizabeth Barrett Browning were surprisingly willing to attend to her spiritual instruction and attribute a prophetic power to her verse, they did so in conversation with her role as a female poet. This necessarily put them in tension with the age's characterization of the poetess, a role Barrett Browning herself wrestled with in her life and work. The inclination to treat Barrett Browning as a spiritual authority differs between clerics of varying denominations. The more closely they share her religious convictions, the more likely they are to recognize her as minister—not only for their own religious community, but for other ministers like themselves. Furthermore, the clerics' shared willingness to compare her work with male poets whom they also treat as prophet, priest, or preacher, expands the parameters of the religious role of the female poet in ways that implicate their own clerical identities as well.

The Browning Societies that treated Robert Browning with ardent religious devotion expand these parameters even further. In the context of the literary society, the poet's work acts all the more literally as a parallel scripture, functionally ordaining lay critics—including women—who offer homiletic interpretations of his work in its quasi-ecclesiastic space. But the expansion of the parameters of the prophetic identity of the poet invites a liberal application of the idea, opening the door for Browning to function as occult mediator or minister of a socio-political agenda. These expansions also respond to the increasing secularity of the age as Browning Societies extended from the late nineteenth century into the twentieth. In the midst of such changes, clerical and lay critics alike looked to the poet to provide spiritual wisdom, guidance, and revelation.

This project contributes to work on literature and religion in the Victorian period by newly interrogating intersections recognized as important within that field and beyond. I have explicated a few of those intersections in this study: clerics and literary criticism, poetic prophecy and scriptural prophecy, the poetess and the masculine-voiced female poet, reading society and church community, denomination and literary framework, lecture and liturgy, lay critic and clergy, poet and prophet, priest, or preacher. My aim here has not been to set out a single argument for how clerical critics understood poetry in the nineteenth century but to open up their own arguments and explore what they have to say for themselves. I have put those arguments in tension with one another and traced their progression from poet to poet, medium to medium.

In recent years, scholarship on nineteenth-century religion and literature has reconfigured earlier conceptions of the waning cultural significance of faith, the growth of secularity, and the role of literature in both. While clerics have

been well considered in these discussions, no single study has engaged multi-denominational clerical voices exclusively. The compilation of clerical texts considered here is itself a significant contribution to the scholarship as much more could be gleaned from their pages. Future work in this area would involve expanding the archive of clerical criticism with non-digitized material, putting these works in conversation with clerical criticism on other popular and lesser-known poets, and continuing to consider how these voices influenced and were influenced by those poets.

The chapter on Barrett Browning in particular introduces a number of questions about the female poet's influence in religious life. The near-egalitarianism shared among the clerics in this chapter suggests that the pedagogical imperative of the cleric, even when anonymously reviewing the writing of a woman, inclines them to look for spiritual instruction. There is more work to do in understanding the relationship between Barrett Browning's prophetic role and her religious readers. Comparing the articles and reviews with other published texts—such as essays by Congregationalist Robert Vaughan and Dutch Reformed George Bethune—or expanding the periodicals by exploring non-digitized sources, could reshape the narrative in compelling ways.

A wide scope of future possibilities for research also emerges from the study of Browning Societies. Papers from Hiram Corson, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, William Gannett, and George Wharton James at Cornell, Chicago, Rochester, and the Huntington Library respectively could introduce a number of distinct perspectives on the nature of the Societies, their relationship to denominational and national politics, and their malleable religious character. Papers from the many women who led and contributed to Society discourse have been less well

preserved, but correspondence and local Society collections could help locate more of their work. Furthermore, reading clubs are a growing source of interest for scholars concerned with literary reception and communal habits of reading. The research offered in this study contributes to the subject, but there is much more to explore in the Browning Society archives.

While many opportunities for research remain in clerical reception of the Brownings, my next step will be to focus attention on Tennyson and his clerics. I will initially address a few of these responses in an article, explicating more specifically the contrasting dynamics between Anglican and Nonconformist readings. While the chapters on Tennyson here establish a corpus of clerical responses, they also introduce a number of further questions on genre and audience that a concentrated study could more fully attend to. Thus, I will return to the lectures and homilies of F. W. Robertson, Hugh Haweis, and Richard Acland Armstrong as examples of Anglican and Nonconformist criticism. This will allow me to look more closely at the relationship between spoken and printed sermons—their shared features as well as their distinctions. Robertson's texts allow me to explore the homiletic character of clerical lectures in non-ecclesiastic settings. Haweis and Armstrong's Sunday evening cultural homilies provide opportunities to consider the reader's imaginative engagement as congregant. All three introduce questions about the reception of the text's setting through the printed transcript. I will attend more fully to the publishers of these sermons and lectures, and their distributive reach, to further indicate the degree of representation and influence these texts and their authors held.

This concentrated attention on the clerical reception of Tennyson not only expands the interventions my research here makes in scholarship on nineteenth-

century religion and literature, but also helps further define the genre distinctions of clerical criticism. Teasing out the characteristics of an interpretive homily will make help clarify when a clerical article or Society paper should be read homiletically. It should also shed more light on the ways Society readers' interpretations diverge or conform to homiletic principles. If the significance of publication on a homily's reception can be specified to some degree, the different influence of published versus presented Society papers might also be clarified. This necessarily extends the study of clerical reception to lay reception, considering how readers encounter poetry through the interpreting clerics. The influence of clerical interpretations of poets on nineteenth-century lay readers will be better understood as the genre, context, and characteristics of these interpretations of Tennyson are more deeply concentrated.

Ultimately, my concern lies with the clerics' own encounters with these poets, and the exchange of spiritual or religious identity between cleric and poet in the act of interpretation. But these clerics were aware of their own reception, of how their interpretations were being received by lay readers of poetry, homily, and criticism. They spoke for such audiences, wrote for such readers, and even read Tennyson and the Brownings with such audiences and readers in mind. Thus, a more thorough explication of the reception of these clerics' works will shed greater light on their interpretive efforts as well.

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