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# "A Magic Deeper Still": Sacramental Poetics in William Wordsworth, Christina Rossetti, and C.S. Lewis

Eric Michael Bontempo  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

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“A Magic Deeper Still”: Sacramental Poetics in William Wordsworth,  
Christina Rossetti, and C.S. Lewis

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English

by

Eric Bontempo  
Harding University  
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Dr. Sean Dempsey  
Thesis Director

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Dr. William Quinn  
Committee Member

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Dr. Mohja Kahf  
Committee Member

## Abstract

A sacramental poetics requires a particular mode of being-in-the-world. Religiously-minded poets, from Dante and Milton to Donne and Herbert, have long considered how the individual becomes attuned with creation and God's will. But what happens when modernity and secularization challenge long-held assumptions about the universe and how humankind fits into it? A reevaluation is then needed. My thesis begins with an examination of how William Wordsworth, who sort of falls into modernity, seeks to reoccupy the functions of religion in an increasingly secularized landscape. One consequence of the European Enlightenment is the disentangling and distancing that occurs in regards to what cannot be empirically proven or trusted, such as religion and spirituality. Thus, Wordsworth's poetic strategy for reoccupying religion's functions asks that individuals become entangled—with the environment, with other people, and with the Divine. I argue that Wordsworth employs a sacramental poetics that embraces the unknowable as a means of invoking a religious phenomenological experience. Further, at the heart of this phenomenological experience is this sense of connectedness that binds everything together. Beginning with the Romantics, a sacramental poetics objectifies the unknowable qualities within ourselves and the world in order to awake a sense of purpose and meaning. The subsequent chapters on Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" and C.S. Lewis's novel *Till We Have Faces* confirm that a sacramental poetics depends upon not only our ability to perceive the world as capable of producing a sense of fullness but also our ability to feel this sensation with our bodies and other affective aspects of our being, thereby maximizing our sense of purpose and connectedness. A sacramental poetics preserves certain characteristics of religion, such as liturgy and ritual, to emphasize that we are embodied creatures, feeling our way in the world. As will become clear, there is something efficacious in this pursuit.

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## Introduction

In C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Aslan is resurrected after his self-sacrificial death at the hands of the White Witch. He explains to Lucy "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation" (178). The Deep Magic, or the framework, by which the White Witch abides, is supposed to replace or dethrone Aslan's rule, or his framework. But she misunderstands Aslan's rule as only a pilgrim vocation, in which Aslan is only on "a quest of a kingdom still to come" (Kearney 85). She fails to recognize that while Aslan is, indeed, on a pilgrim vocation, bringing creatures into the fold, his is also a sacramental vocation, ushering the foreigner into the here and now, into the kingdom already come (Kearney 85).

Aslan abides by a primordial framework that is so interwoven with the material world that it cannot be replaced. Thus, Aslan adds that if the White Witch had known the deeper magic, "She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward" (179). The logic behind this proclamation may appear lacking, but that misses the more important point: the White Witch did not have access to deeper knowledge because she was too closed off to perceive just how limited her control was. Because of her hubris and her quest for self-sufficiency—her wish to be in control of herself and others—she was outdone by her inability to look "a little further back." She was not attuned to a specific way of being-in-the-world and, therefore, lacks a sacramental disposition. This lack of attunement is not the cause of

her treachery; rather, it is symptomatic of it. C.S. Lewis, it seems, begins to pay closer attention to his characters' orientation to the world in his later fiction. In his final novel, *Till We Have Faces*, we see Lewis's fullest and most mature treatment of this theme.

In this thesis, I focus on William Wordsworth, Christina Rossetti, and C.S. Lewis, who all write with a sacramental imagination, that is, with an innate belief that the whole world is charged with what Charles Taylor calls "a sense of fullness" (5). To that end, critical work on these writers must subsequently be open and receptive to the possibilities that the sacramental and religion present. By open, I mean more than being merely open-minded. In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski argues that English scholars also should adopt a more open approach to literary analysis, one that does not solely rely on critique, which she believes has come to dominate the profession to a detrimental extent. In her view, critique's "relentless grip" has created the prevailing attitude of "skepticism as dogma" (9). One particular problem with critique-as-hegemon is the implicit assumption "that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *uncritical*" (Felski 2). A healthier model for literary studies, according to Felski, is one where we "place ourselves in front of the text" so as to be receptive to what it might offer up, even if what the text offers does not require one to look behind or beneath. Like Felski, I seek to reframe and reconsider what we do as literary scholars by examining texts in a more receptive manner. According to Felski, "Reining in critique is not a matter of trying to impose a single mood upon the critic but of striving for a greater receptivity to the multifarious and many-shaded moods of texts" (12). Felski's "postcritical" mentality thus signifies a growing interest in matters that academia has long neglected. Just as these three writers look up *and* around at the world, seeking a sense of fullness from it that drives them to be active participants, so too should

I, the critic, look up and around, attempting to affect the environment through garnering some kind of attunement with it.

It is not bold to claim that Western European culture, largely rooted in a Christian tradition, has evolved over the past several centuries as a result of modernization, industrialization, and the Enlightenment. I am interested in early nineteenth-century Romanticism as a movement that seeks to preserve or reoccupy the functions of religion. M.H. Abrams observes that:

The process...has not been the deletion and replacement of religious ideas but rather the assimilation and reinterpretation of religious ideas, as constitutive elements in a world view founded on secular premises. Much of what distinguishes... 'Romantic' [writers] derives from the fact that they undertook, whatever religious creed or lack of creed, to save traditional concepts, schemes, and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation. (qtd. in Halimi 121)

After establishing how Romanticism attempts to reorient the individual after the loss of joy and sense of alienation caused by post-Enlightenment modernity, I offer three models for how sacramental poetics functions in a modern, secular context: the poetry of William Wordsworth and Christina Rossetti and the fiction of C.S. Lewis. Because new pathways to divine encounters were sought in the wake of Enlightenment thinking, several writers, starting with the Romantics, embraced the symbol because of its newfound ability to point to the unknowable—a key characteristic of religion's phenomenological root.

A notable feature of these three models is the affective side of things (i.e. how our ability to consciously and cognitively articulate and orient ourselves is codependent on our affective and precognitive orientation). Thus, I take up Donovan Schaeffer's "opposition to the divide between 'savage/emotional' and 'civilized/ rational'" (11). In addition, the three models I discuss below indicate that experiencing fullness or encountering the Divine is a social phenomenon: "Works of art, by default, are linked to other texts, objects, people, and institutions



in relations of dependency, involvement, and interaction. They are enlisted, entangled, engaged, embattled, embroiled, and embedded” (Felski 11). In what follows, I explore how a text enables meaningful engagement. My argument is that in order for a text to elicit any feeling of joy, any sense of efficaciousness, it must be understood as being rooted in the world. A poet who invokes the sacramental accomplishes this feat.

Entanglement is a key word in my exploration. There is the misconception that humanity should become *disentangled*, independent of all ties, and otherwise self-sufficient. A key trademark of modern secularity is the “coterminous...rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option” (Taylor 18). Thus, although Plato can be credited with defining the human as primarily a thinking thing, modernity becomes increasingly infatuated with this model, as it is revitalized by Descartes’ philosophy. Moreover, there is the general conception that humankind has moved on from primitive things like traditional religion and traditional ways of communing that had entangled humankind with its surroundings. Referred to as the traditional secularization hypothesis, this powerful and influential notion, developed by Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, asserted that, as time continues, the cultural significance of religion will dissipate because of the following three features of modernity: “social differentiation (specialized societal institutions subsuming functions once performed by religion), societalization (life becoming oriented more toward nation/society than locality), and rationalization (technological advance obviating the role of faith in everyday life)” (Branch, “Postsecular Studies” 138). From the mid-twentieth century on, sociologists and anthropologists analyzed religion with the frame of explaining the causality of the decline of religion in terms of modernity’s impact (Branch, “Postsecular Studies” 136). As

literary scholars coopted cultural studies with early twentieth century critical work like M.H. Abrams' *Natural Supernatural*, this framework also became prevalent in literary studies.

Recent scholarship on secularism, however, revises this hypothesis. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor evaluates secularity's rise over the course of the past 500 years by essentially inventing a comprehensive framework in which secularity is understood as part of a continuum that is "a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane" (300). With societal and technological advancements, humankind has become preoccupied with disentangling from the outside world, creating what Taylor refers to as a "buffered" identity (38). Wordsworth, who sort of falls into modernity, grapples with issues relating to being "buffered" as opposed to "porous," attempting to reconfigure religion's phenomenological sensations in an increasingly antagonistic and isolated environment. Wordsworth, then, would hesitate to accept such a bifurcated view of religion/secularity and porous/buffered that the traditional secularization hypothesis proposes.

In this view, a binary approach to understanding secularity relegates religion to outside Enlightened rationality, castigating antithetical concepts such as magic and enchantment "as the residual, subordinate 'other' to modernity's rational, secular, and progressive side" (Landy and Saler 3). In many ways, my thesis will continue the project of a number of scholars, like Taylor, who challenge this supposed binary. The higher order aspects of modernity associated with advancement, secular humanism, and modernity in general remain, in fact, deeply entangled with the past and, importantly, the human body. I ask questions that Donovan Schaeffer poses in the introduction to his book *Religious Affects*: what if religion is "about the way things feel, the things we want, the way our bodies are guided through thickly textured, magnetized worlds" (3). Though such a question may seem endemic of the twenty-first century's interest in spirituality, I

argue, in chapter two, that a question of this nature is also on Christina Rossetti's mind, whose religious imaginary was deeply influenced by the orthodox theology of the Tractarian Movement that sweeps through the Anglican Church in the nineteenth century. In "Goblin Market," a poem rich with religious imagery and Christian pathos, it is fair to ask how religion is "defined by the depth of our bodies" which "puts us in continuity with other animal bodies" (Schaeffer 3). The subjects of Rossetti's narrative poem, Lizzie and Laura, attest to an understanding of religion that is far less understood than our rational predisposition is comfortable with. In such an affective conception of religion, we can begin to explore how religion is "something that carries us on its back rather than something that we think, choose, or command" (Schaeffer 3). In considering these issues, it becomes evident that though one might suppose religion to diminish with human advancement, the traditional secularization hypothesis fails to account for how deeply ingrained our religious dispositions are in ourselves and in our exterior environments.

Some literary scholars have approached issues pertaining to religion with a postsecular attitude that coincides with the "religious turn" that occurred in the 1990s. Like the term *postmodern*, the prefix "post" in *postsecular* does not indicate that we have moved past secularism (in fact, we are very much in the midst of it); rather, postsecularism owns up to all of what this binary has produced, the good and the bad, and seeks to better understand it (Branch, "Postsecular Studies" 137-138). This movement is "characterized by a new openness to religion and recognition of the homologies between deconstruction and negative theology's orientation toward God as sacred and other" (Branch, "Postsecular Studies" 134). Thus, there is the "erosion of the secular/religious binary and the knowledge/faith distinction" (Branch, "Postsecular Studies" 135). A postsecular approach to literary analysis also means reassessing how we have organized our thinking on religion since the Enlightenment—that knowledge

supposedly falls under our critical apparatus while faith is castigated as a remnant of our primitive roots. “Rather than repressing the fears of our involvement in faith and uncertainty,” Lori Branch advocates for “a robustly postsecular study” that is “deeply invested in owning up to [the secular]” (“Postsecular Studies” 143).

In many ways, then, a postsecular approach parallels the early Romantic project, which strived to navigate through the problems that arise when an affective, feeling human confronts an unfeeling environment. Thusly, “as the twentieth century fades out / the nineteenth century begins again” (Rothenberg 1). After the watershed of the French Revolution—a historical moment that signified secularity’s strength and durability—the Romantic poets had to develop something like a new mythology of the cosmos:

When Wordsworth and Hölderlin describe the natural world around us, in *The Prelude*, *The Rhine*, or *Homecoming*, they no longer play on an established gamut of references, as Pope could still do in *Windsor Forest*. They make us aware of something in nature for which there are as yet no established words. The poems are finding words for us. In this ‘subtler’ language...something is defined and created as well as manifested. A watershed has been passed in the history of literature. (Taylor 353)

While the European Enlightenment freed the individual mind from oppression, it left a void. The struggle, therefore, of the Romantic poets “is to recover a kind of vision of something deeper, fuller...require[ing] insight and creative power” (Taylor 357) because “We are,” as James Smith writes, “primordially and essentially agents of love, which takes the structure of desire and longing” (50). Author of *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Smith advocates that Christian formative practices should rely more on affective practices rather than cognitive practices: “To be human is to be just such a lover—a creature whose orientation and form of life is most primordially shaped by what one loves as ultimate, which constitutes an affective, gut-like orientation to the world that is prior to reflection and even eludes conceptual articulation” (51). This perspective captures much of what I believe Wordsworth is doing in the

*Lyrical Ballads*. He is gesturing at something lost that needs to be found, believing that it can be recuperated through affect, the physical, the natural—as these media are formative. The problem of modernity, which produces a sense of emptiness, is that we think of this lost joy in terms of what we can only configure cognitively. Charles Taylor remarks that over the course of the past 500 years “we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it ‘within’ human life” (15).

As the Enlightenment pushes one to look inward, Romanticism reminds us to look exterior to one’s self. Encountering the Divine is now understood as being achieved “indirectly through a language of symbols” (Taylor 357). Because the secular self is “buffered,” or self-sufficient like a fortress, access to the outside—where the sublime and the transcendent are located—is no longer accessible. Only by bringing in symbols, which function as alternative channels, can one experience feelings of “porousness.” For a symbol to be effective in the secular age, Taylor explains, it has to be calibrated to the current context; therefore, “It cannot simply rely on established languages” (Taylor 357). The task of Wordsworth and the Romantics is to employ creative genius in order for the reader to experience a formative encounter *via* language that grants access to something that is otherwise blocked off. This impetus explains why beginning in the nineteenth century, “literature is *sort of* but not *exactly* like religion” (Jager, “Romanticism” 800). As M.H. Abrams has explained, Romantic literature reoccupies the function of religion and the religious experience, though in a different way. Charles Taylor explains the broad strokes of this literary moment in history:

So, aesthetic was established as an ethical category, as a source of answers to the question, how should we live? what is our greatest goal or fulfillment? This gives crucial place to art. Beauty is what will save us, complete us...But in order to open ourselves fully to this, we need to be fully aware of it, and for this we need

to articulate it in the languages of art. So created beauty, works of art, are not only important loci of that beauty which can transform us, they are also essential ways of acceding to the beauty which we don't create. In the Romantic period, artistic creation comes to be the highest domain of human activity. (Taylor 359)

Accordingly, the poet can transcend the malaise of modernity and this feeling of emptiness caused by secularity through the power of the symbol, which preserves religious experience by playing off of negative theology's unknowing.

Of course, there are numerous instances of poets who seek to commune with the Divine *via* language and poetry, specifically *via* negative language. From Dante and Milton to Donne and Herbert, religiously-minded poets hold that "The art of language is to point beyond itself, swelling towards signification beyond what is strictly signified" (Schwartz 6). This is the main theme of Regina Schwartz's book *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism*. For Schwartz, Christianity already changed how language works, as the symbol no longer is one sign signifying something else. Instead, "when the priest invoked Christ's words— 'This is my body' ... The intimate relation between the event, the words, and their meaning was not arbitrary, for the interpretation as well as the historical and linguistic event were divinely given" (Schwartz 10). That kind of dynamic, in turn, inspires a sacramental system of language where the sacrament not only confers grace but *is* grace. As Schwartz states:

In the Christian tradition, the Eucharist expresses this mystery... in manifold ways, for in it, mysteriously, the present is united to the past, the material is joined to the spiritual, remembering and repeating know no difference, the subject knows no separation from the object of worship, transcendence is manifest in immanence, and the individual is not separable from the community. (118)

As the Christian imagination informs the Western worldview, I think it is interesting to consider what happens in terms of language when that Christian imagination clashes with Enlightenment rationalism. Whereas Schwartz leaves off before Romanticism, I intend to pick up her thread

and explore a sacramental poetics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at a time when religion, politics, secularity, and literature become more and more entangled.

Before going any further, it is essential to understand what I mean when I refer to a sacrament, a sacramental poetics, or a sacramental imagination. James Smith's summary in *Desiring the Kingdom* not only suffices in such an endeavor; it perhaps captures my entire impetus in this project. Smith invokes a definition by Leonard Vander Zee, who reminds us that a sacramental understanding of the world affirms that "God reveals himself through created things" (qtd. in Smith 141). Thusly, if one is at least receptive to the possibility that the world is created, then the entire world is thereby sacramental, as God "takes up nitty-gritty things like bread and water and wine to function as sacraments, special means of grace" (Smith 141). Additionally, Richard Kearney says, "Sacramental return is a retrieval of the extraordinary in the ordinary...those special awakenings of the divine within the bread and wine of quotidian existence" (86). When I speak of the traditional sacraments, as I do in chapter two in regards to Christina Rossetti and "Goblin Market," I consider them as an orthodox Christian—like Rossetti and C.S. Lewis—might: the sacraments are "particular intensifications of a general sacramental presence of God in and with his creation; they are particular pieces of creation that God takes up as unique channels of grace, and to which he attaches a promise" (Smith 141-142). Participating in a sacramental activity (i.e. sacramental poetics) is to attune one's self to a "primordial intuition" realized in a religious experience. A sacramental poetics—like a postsecular orientation, or a postcritical receptivity— "eschews the dichotomies of naturalism and supernaturalism" so that one can reflect upon the *feeling* that "the whole world, as Hopkins lyricized, is charged with the grandeur of God" (Smith 143-144). Such a feeling, however, depends upon our recognition that we are embodied, affective creatures in a world where, as the

Priest explains in Lewis's novel *Till We Have Faces*, "Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood" (50).

In the first chapter of my thesis, I am interested in how Wordsworth, who is at the forefront of British Romanticism, coopts the early modern construct of religion to come to terms with the new world order of the Enlightenment. I believe Wordsworth gestures at the same affective sense of fullness that post-Romantic writers like Rossetti and Lewis do, exploring themes like the loss of joy, desire, and longing. This theme perhaps plays out most prominently in the poem "The Thorn" where Wordsworth presents a secularized landscape aching with loss and wrestling with knowledge. "The Solitary Reaper" and "Surprized by Joy—Impatient as the Wind" complement this notion that we are, as James Smith says, "desiring creatures" (40). As such, our affective side plays a more central role than the typical Cartesian model suggests. The poet-speakers in these poems exhibit Charles Taylor's notion of the "buffered" self—having fallen into modernity, they are disjointed from their surroundings and from the people around them. A sacramental poetics recognizes this "buffered" posture and taps into our affective recesses—a notion that post-Romantic writers like Christina Rossetti and C.S. Lewis clearly recognize.

In my analysis of Christina Rossetti and "Goblin Market" in chapter two, I am interested in Laura's and Lizzie's affective attunements, their postures, and their dispositions, which are perhaps at the root of the entire plot. I also explore Rossetti's emphasis on liturgy in her own spiritual life, which I argue takes on a prominent role even in her early, more Romantic poems like "Goblin Market." In a way, her Tractarian background defines her poetics, infusing her already post-Romantic inclinations with a sacramental imagination. As the Oxford Movement, led by Edward Pusey and John Henry Newman, takes hold, ritual activity and liturgy inform



Rossetti's "religious imaginary" (Dieleman 100). This most strikingly plays out in the infamous Eucharist scene in "Goblin Market"—a scene charged with eroticism and sensuality, which seems to be in contradiction with orthodox Christian teaching.

The final chapter of my thesis will focus on C.S. Lewis and his last novel *Till We Have Faces*. *Till We Have Faces* is an interesting exploration of dark, earthy religion in seeming opposition to high, spiritual religion. This bildungsroman may, as I suggest, be at once an allegory for post-Enlightenment modernity and a mystical retelling. One of the least understood of Lewis's works, *Till We Have Faces* may have the most to say to a twenty first-century audience living in the wake of secularism. Lewis's distinctly Romantic posture unveils his critique of the secular-religious binary strangling post-Enlightenment modernity. I juxtapose various characters in this novel to Smith's model of human orientation (which is basically an Augustinian model) in order to further confirm that we are *homo liturgicus*—"we are religious animals...because we are liturgical animals—embodied, practicing creatures whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate" (40). In this manner, C.S. Lewis, too, offers something like a sacramental poetics because he tells the story of a secularized individual who comes to learn that she is an embodied being, part of a complex, intricate universe that functions in an incomprehensible, yet clearly meaningful, way.

## Chapter 1: Wordsworth's Sacramental Strategy in "The Thorn" and Other Poems

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor makes the distinction between the presecular, "porous" individual commonplace 500 years ago and the secular, "buffered" individual commonplace today. "To be a buffered subject, to have closed the porous boundary between inside (thought) and outside (nature, the physical)," Taylor explains, "is partly a matter of living in a disenchanted world" (300). A world once inhabited by angels, spirits, and gods has been replaced by an unfeeling mechanistic universe. New science corroborates this new narrative, and unsettling current events—like the French Revolution or the Napoleonic Wars—call into question the validity of the old order. Thus, it is now "a universe ruled by causal laws, utterly unresponsive to human meanings...even if we held that it was designed as a machine for our benefit" (Taylor 280). Nature did not change—our perception did. In response to this secularization, people tended to become more self-sufficient, less reliant on their neighbor, and even less willing to admit that their religion controlled them. On the contrary, the liberated individual was in control now.

But while self-reliance and self-sufficiency seem advantageous in comparison to the alternative, the move toward secularity did not come without consequence. At the heart of a sacramental poetics is a longing for "fullness," the ultimate, or any variety of terms that gets us to "the phenomenological root of the religious as well as aesthetic experience" (Jager, *Unquiet Things* 56). According to Taylor, because secularity has, essentially, changed the vocabulary for experiencing "fullness," we experience it differently (Jager, *Unquiet Things* 56), and poets, artists, and preachers alike must explore different rhetorical avenues to be efficacious in their intent. In describing his own faith journey, C.S. Lewis says in his autobiography *Surprised by*

*Joy* that his pursuit of the ultimate began unconsciously with three childhood memories, or “stabs of joy” (21), which persisted into his adult years as an aching or a longing—not for the specific memories themselves, but for what those memories pointed to. There is some component of our human hardwiring that directs our feelings and our affective responses toward meaning and significance—some “categorical ‘insight’ into the inadequacy of epistemological and representational techniques” (Pfau 310).

Thomas Pfau remarks that part of the early Romantic project by the likes of Wordsworth is to conceive “of literature as a unique heuristic medium that allows individuals to objectify their ‘felt’ connectedness by reconstituting and objectively preserving such holistic experience in the virtual reality of imaginative writing” (15). C.S. Lewis, who will be addressed more thoroughly in chapter three, certainly objectifies his “felt” connectedness in *Surprised by Joy* and his fiction. While many readers praise Lewis for his intellectual journey from skepticism to faith, this journey can just as easily be reframed as a triumph of the human imagination over the forces of unfeeling rationality and logical positivism (Schakel x). Written toward the end of Lewis’s writing career, *Surprised by Joy* derives its title from the early Wordsworth sonnet “Surprized by Joy—Impatient as the Wind.” This sonnet is apropos for Lewis’s autobiography because the sonnet also is its own objectification of “felt” connectedness. Such an intent is innovative as it allows for the connectedness to be a communal experience whereby multiple people can bind themselves to it, thus, in a way, making the experience their own:

Surprized by joy—impatient as the Wind  
 I wished to share the transport—Oh! with whom  
 But Thee, long buried in the silent Tomb,  
 That spot which no vicissitude can find?  
 Love, faithful love recalled thee to my mind—  
 But how could I forget thee? —Through what power,

Even for the least division of an hour,  
 Have I been so beguiled as to be blind  
 To my most grievous loss? —That thought's return  
 Was the worst pang that sorrow ever bore,  
 Save one, only one, when I stood forlorn,  
 Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more;  
 That neither present time, nor years unborn  
 Could to my sight that heavenly face restore.

Several things are worth pointing out in this sonnet that expresses longing and desire. First, when Wordsworth says “I wished to share the transport,” he conveys a sense of community in which the person objectifying the surprise does so in order to share it. Second, there is a reference to “That spot which no vicissitude can find.” More will be said about the function of the Romantic symbol below, but it is worth noting for now that the poet-speaker asks the reader to view this unique spot—a strategy that, I believe, allows this experience to be a religious one. Becoming entangled with the “spot,” without knowing its purpose, opens the participant to the sacramental. Third, Wordsworth feels that his initial surprise by Joy ultimately had been thwarted by a “most grievous loss” and the “worst pang that sorrow ever bore.”

In this sonnet, Wordsworth laments not only his knowledge's limitation (“Knowing my heart's best treasure was no more”) but also his bodily limitation: that he “stood forlorn.” It is this particular mode of being-in-the-world that prevents access to Joy. Adam Potkay reminds us that joy plays a pivotal role in Romantic poetry, and has perhaps always been a shaping influence on literature: “Joy dwells among all forms of being from inanimate nature (hills, budding twigs) through birds and mammals up to humankind and the rational-affective nature we share with God or Nature—this theme, perhaps more than any other, defines Lake-School Romanticism as it stems from the writings of Coleridge and especially Wordsworth” (130). This means that as

the Romantics wrote about Nature, they were also figuring out new ways of being-in-the-world so that they would not stand “forlorn.” As the beauty of Nature came to be associated with weighty concepts like meaning and purpose, “aesthetic was established as an ethical category, as a source of answers to the question, how should we live? what is our greatest goal or fulfillment” (Taylor 359)? Thus, art becomes vital because experiencing beauty in this objectified manner now functions as humanity’s saving grace. However, this salvation is dependent upon our ability to become fully aware of the power and reach of beauty. This conception, in turn, becomes Romanticism’s call-to-arms, as it promotes artistic creation to “the highest domain of human activity” (Taylor 359). In other words, literature can attune us and orient us so that we can experience a sensation of “fullness.”

It is in this light that Colin Jager asserts that in the nineteenth century “literature is *sort of* but not *exactly* like religion...it accesses the kind of power generally associated with religion, but without committing itself to a particular metaphysic” (“Romanticism” 801). Sacramental poetics in the midst of secularity, I believe, relies on this half-way correlation to traditional religion, namely, its affective, phenomenological roots. The goal for Wordsworth, then, is to “pronounce the foundational status of feeling as a fundamental mode of ‘being-in-the-world’;” thus, when Wordsworth says in his Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* that “by repetition and continuance of this act feelings connected with subjects will be nourished...[and] habits of mind will be produced” (qtd. in Pfau 64), he suggests an affective model by which the poet can effect change in the reader. Wordsworth’s goal in many of his poems is to articulate language’s relationship to affect and feeling, to explain how language leads “from ‘feeling’ and ‘sensitivity’ to ‘impulses’ and ‘habits,’” (Pfau 64). However, because language and affect rely on different

vocabularies, or mental frameworks, Pfau remarks that one can never approximate the other. Therefore, the Romantic poem is a “recondite process” (Pfau 64).

Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” exemplifies how language can at best only gesture at an affective experience while nevertheless being efficacious. With his eyes, the poet-speaker can resolutely “Behold...Yon solitary Highland Lass” (lines 1-2), and his ears can confidently affirm that “No nightingale did ever chaunt...No sweeter voice was ever heard” (lines 9, 13).

But his mind cannot cognitively perceive or articulate what any of this experience means:

Will no one tell me what she sings?  
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow  
For old, unhappy, far-off things,  
And battles long ago:  
Or is it some more humble lay,  
Familiar matter of today?  
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,  
That has been, and may be again! (lines 17-24)

Despite not knowing what she sings, the onlooker can feel “the Vale profound...overflowing with the sound” of her “melancholy strain” (lines 6-8). This is an affective recognition that resonates before the brain can even process it. Further, that this is an “overflowing” experience is important. For a “buffered” soul to have such an experience—for its fortress to be penetrated—it must be overwhelmed. The poet-speaker experiences the same sensation as C.S. Lewis’s “glimpses” or “stabs of joy.” Lewis describes this feeling as an “almost sickening intensity” (*Surprised by Joy* 17) that cannot properly be put into words. As with Lewis, this intense experience leaves a lasting impression on the poet-speaker in “Solitary Reaper,” forever connecting him to the woman in the field and her inhabited word. He ponders, “The music in my heart I bore, / long after it was heard no more” (lines 31-32) and, thus, he encounters this

universal current in which we feel that our humanity is “shared with other living things” (Taylor 344).

In “Solitary Reaper,” as in the sonnet “Surprized by Joy—Impatient as the Wind,” the inability for total comprehension is a dominant theme. Further, it is a reality in post-Enlightenment modernity, as new continents are being “discovered” and new science is turning people’s worlds upside down. At the time secularization was occurring, literature became a medium by which humankind hoped to quantify, or even subdue, the cosmos. Nicholas Halmi remarks that, in this manner, Diderot’s *Encyclopedie* was a “compensation for the impossibility of possessing a definitive understanding of either nature or the totality of human knowledge...Metaphorically, at least, the book was to replace nature, as the object of our perception, by becoming nature” (32). In other words, Enlightenment thinking sought to tame that which “overwhelmed” our senses. When examining a Wordsworth poem like “The Thorn,” it becomes apparent that he is critical of such a naïve attempt, as will become clearer further below. It is naïve to presume that one can reach true contentment or fullness through rationalism or other self-sufficient, man-made means. Halmi contends that the Enlightenment’s subsequent quest for quantification—or, put otherwise, control—left this nagging lack of satisfaction, which would spur on “the Romantic theorization of the symbol” (32). The symbol disrupts our incessant rage for order.

Moreover, Halmi explains that “The use of signs was always an accommodation to the human conditions of lacking a fully intuitive knowledge, such as God may be supposed to have, and of lacking the ability to communicate thoughts telepathically” (54). The Romantic theory of the symbol was different in that the meaning of the sign inhered in the sign itself rather than in only what the sign strictly signified. When Wordsworth says in the 1800 note to “The Thorn”

that words are “not only...symbols of...passion” but “*things*, active and efficient, which are themselves part of the passion” (39), he is expressing this key premise.

An easy corollary to this symbol discussion is the shifting opinion of the Christian sacraments taking place in the early modern period. Early Protestant doctrine decried, for example, the idea that when one took communion, one actually ate Christ’s flesh and drank His blood, even though Jesus clearly states “Take eat; this is my body” (*King James*, Matt. 26.26). On the contrary, Catholic doctrine held that the bread literally turned to Christ’s flesh. That the Eucharist could somehow be understood in such diverse ways was a watershed for the Romantics, according to Halmi (105). The idea that symbols, like the bread and wine, can be efficacious without being cognitively understood, created this new avenue: the symbol “reveals something which can’t be made accessible in any other way” (Taylor 357).

Thus, we do not have to *know* what the lass is singing in the field, nor do we need to *know* the fleeting joy, “Impatient as the Wind;” instead, unknowing—and being receptive to an array of possibilities—attunes us to the phenomenological root of a religious experience because it, too, requires the same element of faith that, for instance, a martyr must possess. In Romantic poetry, language should defy old systems of “theology and metaphysics [that] confidently mapped out the domain of the deeper” and instead should make these domains only “indirectly accessible through a language of ‘symbols’” (Taylor 357). And so, the Romantic poet, who wants to save religion from its fall into Enlightenment thinking, attempts to build the faith of his reader by these indirect means. Poetic language, therefore, “cannot simply rely on established languages” and needs “creative power, even genius” (Taylor 357).

This phenomenon plays out particularly well in Wordsworth’s “The Thorn,” published in *Lyrical Ballads*. The plot of “The Thorn” is as follows: the poet-speaker asks the audience to



attend to this thornbush (“if you’d gladly view the spot”), which seems to inhere some kind of magical, or at least significant, quality. Interestingly, right next to the thornbush is a “heap of earth o’ergrown with moss” that is “like an infant’s grave in size” (lines 49, 52). The rest of the poem is speculation as to what lies beneath the soil—is it the remains of an infant? We are then introduced to Martha Ray, who frequents this spot and cries. The speaker knows fragments of her story: she was in love with Stephen Hill, but he left her to marry someone else. Six months later, Martha Ray was visibly pregnant—and then she was not. Inconsolably sad, she journeyed to this particular spot on the mountaintop, next to a thornbush, to cry aloud in anguish. Her repeated cries reverberate on numerous occasions throughout the poem: “Oh misery! oh misery! / Oh woe is me! oh misery” (lines 65-66). The poet-speaker wishes he could tell Martha Ray’s story precisely, but he cannot, much to the dismay of the curious townsfolk. Further, he will not himself speculate about what occurred, though he does summarize what the other townspeople think, namely, that she killed her own child. In the end, the poet-speaker draws the reader’s attention back to the thornbush, back to what can be known. The question is, “what’s the thorn? and what’s the pond? / And what’s the hill of moss to her” (lines 210-211)?

Even though the tragedy would under normal circumstances focus on Martha Ray, Wordsworth speaks more to the community around Martha Ray, who is denied access to knowledge. Theirs is the truly pitiable state, and this state is endemic of the modern state of being-in-the-world. In this poem, Wordsworth describes the malaise of modernity and articulates a model for overcoming it that operates in a distinctly religious manner—it is a model of entanglement and of *religio* (“to bind again”). When traditional ways of knowing are blocked off, unknowing becomes an orientation that allows for receptivity and openness—in an almost postsecular manner. As Colin Jager insightfully observes, in the early nineteenth century:

religion was not some ‘thing’ in the world but rather a mobile discourse that answered particular needs at particular historical moments; that for Europe the crucial moment was an early modern crisis of authority within Christianity, and that around this time a newer, more cognitive definition of religion made it possible to invent ‘religions,’ in the plural, in order to name those activities and postures that characterized Europe’s Others. (*Unquiet Things* 6)

For Wordsworth, the mobility of religion allows him to coopt its space for unknowing in this secularized landscape where modern ways of knowing are preferred.

In Colin Jager’s article “Entanglement and Spirituality in ‘The Thorn,’” he differentiates among three sorts of knowledge in the poem: “There is the *historical* knowledge of what happened to Martha Ray [that nobody knows with rational certainty]. There is the *symbolic* knowledge of what the objects and the actions *mean* [i.e., the thornbush]. And there is the *historicist* knowledge of the habits of mind of the townsfolk” (465). “Wordsworth... calls our attention to a kind of spirituality that resides not in minds but that adheres rather to practices, to words, and to things” (Jager 468). Jager argues that historicist knowledge is often all that we can know contrary to our modern inclinations. Noting nineteenth-century biblical criticism, Jager remarks that, similarly, we cannot know of the *historical* veracity of the Bible because that is unknowable; however, we can learn much about the people and the culture who interpret the Bible at given times, which illumines the closest thing we have to empirical veracity of the Bible. However, while Jager expertly explores the townsfolk’s secular disposition by way of this historicist approach, I argue that the inaccessibility of symbolic knowledge (i.e. discovering why Martha behaves the way she does and ascertaining what her raving actions signify) is equally informative, though in a different sort of way, to the historicist knowledge. The thornbush is no sign; rather, it is like a void that seeks signification. It is capable, therefore, of yielding a religious experience if the viewer admits this capability. Accordingly, Wordsworth bids us to approach this void while inundating us with various repetitions that draw us closer to the earth

and closer to a recognition that we are embodied creatures, being guided through this “thickly textured, magnetized world” (Schaeffer 3).

In his note to “The Thorn,” Wordsworth explains how repetitive language, or tautology, can be effective in capturing emotion and passion. As a comparison, Wordsworth offers a poetic rendering of Deborah and Barak’s song from Judges, chapter five: “Awake, awake Deborah: awake, awake, utter a song: / Arise Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou Son of Abinoam. / At her feet he bowed, he fell, he lay down: at her feet he bowed, he fell; / where he bowed there he fell down dead. / Why is his Chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the Wheels of his Chariot” (39)? Deborah and Barak’s poetic national anthem is similar to Martha Ray’s repeated cries of “Oh misery! oh misery! / O woe is me! oh misery” (lines 254-256)! According to Wordsworth, “repetition and apparent tautology are frequently beauties of the highest kind” because they do not merely signify, or point to passionate feeling; on the contrary, the words are “part of the passion” (39). Pfau argues that “emotion is structurally embedded in language”; thus, “like language, emotion must be understood as inherently social, something that acquires reality and significance only inasmuch as it is bound up or homologous with the aesthetic construct of a poem, and hence as the virtual, heuristic embodiment of a value for another, for a community” (223). Martha Ray’s cries create this mood or ambiance, which, in turn, helps the reader attend to the thorn in an almost religious manner—not as some idol but as an “icon” that gives an individual the capacity “to find him- or herself in a structure that has bearing on how one conducts oneself in the world” (Mahmood 845). Even in the last stanza, the poet-speaker once again affirms, “I cannot tell how this may be, / But plain it is, the thorn is bound / With heavy tufts of moss, that strive / To drag it to the ground” (lines 243-246).

In regards to the townspeople's opinion of Martha Ray's situation, "The Thorn presents a spiritual landscape in which there are several options, ranging from skepticism to cruelty to credulity, and in which there is really no way of establishing which one might be empirically correct" (Jager, "Entanglement" 468). This scenario is all too common in a modern age when one perspective can be rationally challenged by another. It is logical to suppose that Martha Ray did any number of things to put herself in this sad state. So that the reader will not suffer the same fate as the townspeople, the poet-speaker continuously draws the reader's attention to inanimate *things*, showing them to be "active and efficient" and thereby worthy of exploration, even if no certainty can be ascertained: "Archaeology...is the other option for knowledge after oral and written testimony breaks down" (Jager, "Entanglement" 469). The poet-as-archaeologist, and even viewer-as-archaeologist, in which he or she does not speculate from a distance but goes to the spot itself, captures a particular approach to *poesis* that demands a sacramental imagination. The whole world and everything in it has a potential for "fullness," and our inability to tap into it is not so much deflating as it is invigorating, for the Romantic would say, "The rediscovery of what I really am within is made possible by the resonance I feel with the great current of nature outside of me" (Taylor 344).

Such a rediscovery is especially warranted at this historical moment in which Wordsworth writes. As a part of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, "The Thorn" falls in line with the rest of the collection as an attempt by two poets to re-awaken poetry in the hearts of the people in the wake of unmatched cultural upheaval:

It is hardly contentious to argue that the French Revolution, whatever else it did, however awful, also gave unusual expression to such a sublime mixture. Its Supreme Being, its religious festivals, its extraordinary rewriting of the human calendar into the natural cycle of the year, even its paper money or questionable *assignats*, all denote a secular spirituality which replaced received spirituality with one supposedly truer to its natural origins. (Hamilton 222)

“The Thorn” means to affect an audience that has—as Wordsworth has—fallen into modernity, into this state of secular spirituality. In her insightful book *Rituals of Spontaneity*, Lori Branch argues that cultural aftershocks of the Enlightenment, like the French Revolution, play out in Romantic poetry as this new wave of young poets figure out how to “cultivate and maintain a particular spirit of approaching the world” (187). As the title of her book suggests, there is a move during the eighteenth century away from traditional ritual to spontaneous expression as the individual becomes more central than the collective. This spontaneity, I believe, is a manifestation of a “buffered” mentality.

The townsfolk suffer from a worldview that is too anthropocentric, according to Wordsworth. Charles Taylor notes that with the anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment, the good of empowerment and reason are balanced against a “sense of invulnerability,” which is not always good (300). “This sense of self-possession [caused by the Enlightenment], of a secure inner mental realm” (Taylor 300) is exemplified in the townspeople, who approach the world as if it can be tamed and quantified. One can imagine the townsfolk watching “[t]his wretched woman” (line 68) from afar go to “the dreary mountain-top” (line 80), hearing her distantly as she cries “Oh misery! oh misery! Oh woe is me! oh misery!” (lines 76-77), over and over again. The townspeople have their “secure inner mental realm” as they speculate from a distance about Martha Ray’s plight. They are not neighborly; they are not connected; they are not entangled with the situation.

Why the un-neighborliness by townspeople? Maybe it is because Martha Ray was pregnant outside of wedlock. Maybe she was ostracized from the community. Regardless, the townspeople, more than being cruel and judgmental, are cast as lamentable individuals. They whisper and gossip about Martha Ray, asking “But wherefore to the mountain-top / Can this

unhappy woman go...Nay rack your brain— ‘tis all in vain” (lines 100-101, 104). This community exudes “a sense of malaise, emptiness, a need for meaning” (Taylor 302). I argue that the root cause is that they are *only* “rack[ing]” their brains, searching for knowledge to which they are not granted access. The townsfolk have become habituated to this mode of knowing, at least partly because of their worldview. Descartes revitalizes the idea that man is mainly a thinking thing with his philosophical premise “I think; therefore, I am.” This Cartesian model, according to James Smith, “was absorbed particularly by Protestant Christianity... which tends to operate with an overly cognitivist picture of the human person” (42). In this picture, we are masters of our domain, beings who *choose* to ascribe to a given worldview.

In “The Thorn,” the people are so habituated to the Cartesian model that they become disillusioned when it is not enough. Smith explains that such habits “constitute a kind of ‘second nature’: while they are learned (and thus not simply biological instincts), they can become so intricately woven into the fiber of our being that they function *as if* they were natural or biological” (Smith 56). That is why, for example, our seemingly innate nosiness is deemed to be natural. Further, “[o]ur habits thus constitute the *fulcrum* of our desire: they are the hinge that ‘turns’ our heart, our love, such that it is predisposed to be aimed in certain directions” (Smith 56). Thus, what the townspeople desire (knowledge/certainty) is existential. Consequently, its inaccessibility in this situation leads to emptiness and malaise. Whereas the townspeople have this impulse to *know*—which will supposedly be the solution and give them closure—the poet-speaker implores the reader to “view the spot” (line 91)—and be open to feeling the experience of unknowing and accept the alternate reality that perhaps there can be no closure.

What the poet-speaker in “The Thorn” suggests is a new kind of ritual “for maintaining a sense of freshness and felt certainty (Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity* 6)—something that the

townsfolk lack. To be clear, this is not rational certainty; it is, instead, certainty of our place in the world. By dwelling on the spot, the reader strives to transcend the concerns of the limited townspeople and thereby gain access to felt certainty. It is in this quotidian exercise that we can refresh our dispositions and seek out more effective ways of being-in-the-world. The thornbush is this earthly touchstone, then, that can help integrate us into the world, much like the traditional sacraments of Christianity. Richard Kearney has said that the sacramental “is a powerless power, yet ultimately more gracious and effective than the most powerful of powers” (86).

In this regard, Wordsworth suggests that to attend to the thorn rather than to speculate about Martha Ray from a distance is to acknowledge graciously that there is an active world engaging with its inhabitants. Despite how isolated Martha Ray must feel, despite how atomistic the townspeople perceive themselves to be—there is this interrelatedness that keeps life going. In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth employs a newborn baby metaphor to elucidate this point that there is, indeed, an innate mechanism that, like the thornbush, helps us to be integrated in the world:

Bless'd the infant Babe,  
 (For with my best conjectures I would trace  
 The progress of our Being) blest the Babe,  
 Nurs'd in his Mother's arms, the Babe who sleeps  
 Upon his Mother's breast, who, when his soul  
 Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,  
 Doth gather passion from his Mother's eye!  
 Such feelings pass into his torpid life  
 Like an awakening breeze, and hence his mind  
 Even [in the first trial of its powers]  
 Is prompt and watchful, eager to combine  
 In one appearance, all the elements  
 And parts of the same object, else detach'd

And loth to coalesce. (Book II, lines 238-250)

In this image, being integrated into the world is not formulaic. Just as a newborn struggles to grow, develop, and survive—just as she depends upon her mother and her life-giving milk, which constantly adjusts to suit her needs—so, too, does man’s “soul / Claim manifest kindred with an earthly soul.” We are not, therefore, thinking animals, as the Cartesian model proposes; we are, as will become even more evident in the next chapter, liturgical animals, embodied beings bound to the earth and the environment.

Thus, the key notion for Wordsworth’s sacramental poetics is summed up by Thomas Pfau: “Wordsworth posits that the Enlightenment’s key objectives of cognitive, moral, and social improvement (‘enlightened,’ ‘exalted,’ ‘ameliorated’) cannot be realized by the...abstract machinations of reason. Rather, they demand...a heuristic model of literature as mandating engaged, rather than distracted, reading” (Pfau 65). A heuristic model that is open and flexible then admits the possibility of the sacramental so that we, too, may become surprised by joy or enraptured by some experience we cannot fully comprehend, and, thereby, experience a sense of “fullness” that guides and directs our being-in-the-world. Lori Branch explains why such an orientation may be useful in the secular age:

The question which Wordsworth’s poems should raise, and which is more relevant at the start of the twenty-first century even than the nineteenth, is the extent to which the spiritual practice in the formation of persons and identities might be the basis not necessarily of escapism (though it may be that) but of a constructive politics and of a powerful yet vulnerable, nonviolent resistance to coercive societal and economic forces that cater to the subject’s desire either for mastery or to identify with and submit to power. (Branch 209)

Sacramental poetics advocates for a politics of entanglement and engagement rather than distancing and buffering. It is, in a way, underlying Rita Felski’s postcritical receptivity, which seeks to free literary criticism from “skepticism as dogma” (9). If readers can be open to a world



that is always already exerting some force on its inhabitants, then they will be able to integrate  
“parts of the same object, else detach'd / And loth to coalesce.”

## Chapter 2: “Make Much of Me”: Christina Rossetti’s Attunement and “Worldsense”

In a poem like “The Thorn,” Wordsworth employs repetition to invoke a necessity for ritual, which Lori Branch believes plays out in Wordsworth’s later, more religious poetry, such as his *Ecclesiastical Sketches*. In this regard, Wordsworth’s later poetry shares an affinity with the Oxford Movement, also known as the Tractarian Movement, which emphasizes a renewal in liturgy and ritual in the Anglican Church as a means for combatting increasing civic intrusion and secularization (“Oxford Movement”). As Branch notes, Wordsworth “lived long enough to share the Tractarians’ antiquarian passion for liturgy...One of the unavoidable side effects of a love for spontaneity, it seems, has been a vexed nostalgia for the ritual that was jilted in its favor” (*Rituals of Spontaneity* 3). The movement grew in popularity on account of the *Tract for the Times* series, published in 1833 by John Henry Newman, Richard Hurrell Froude, Edward Pusey, among others. These tracts gave rise to the alternative name Tractarian Movement, an apropos name for the purposes of this thesis as I have already discussed how literature, such as these very tracts, becomes almost like a religious medium by which a writer (or reader) can objectify his “felt” connectedness.

An unforeseen consequence of literature’s increasing role in people’s spiritual lives is that, despite Britain’s deeply Christian heritage, “worship spaces ceased to be the uncontested dominant means for imagining religious unity on a national scale, envisioning the place of one’s own religious group within the nation, or seeking influence over potential believers” (King 10). The Oxford Movement attempts to counteract this alarming “inward turn,” in which Christian formation became an increasingly solitary exercise. Its leaders emphasized liturgy and ritual as central and formative in Christianity, placing communal worship before theology or other

individualistic religious practices. However, even an aging, increasingly conservative Wordsworth would grow disillusioned with the Tractarians, disappointed in the leaders' conversion to Roman Catholicism: "Once Newman and Faber converted to Roman Catholicism in 1844, Henry Crabb Robinson records how an incensed Wordsworth vowed to include a note in further editions 'expressing his regret that he had ever uttered a word favourable to Puseyism'" (Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity* 177).

Even so, Wordsworth left a huge impression on the leaders of the Oxford Movement. Lori Branch points out that Wordsworth's "pervasive language of ritual and church building" influenced Tractarian leaders to appropriate his poetry" (*Rituals of Spontaneity* 206). The Tractarians liked, for example, the cultivation of habits of mind, or the "high service within" as Wordsworth calls it in *The Prelude*, because such a cultivation points to communal liturgy as the means through which one achieves a sense of the ultimate (Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity* 13-14). Influential throughout the nineteenth century, the Oxford Movement, in turn, has recently come to be understood by scholars as a primary actor in Christina Rossetti's poetics. Not only is Rossetti exposed to Romanticism *via* the Anglican Church, she is also exposed to Romanticism as the lady of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a literary movement that consciously pays homage to the Romantics. In this chapter, I will examine how Rossetti's two major influences intersect in order to illuminate how Romanticism and nineteenth-century religion shape her expression of a sacramental poetics. Rossetti, like Wordsworth, embraces the incommensurability of modernity, utilizing its potential energy to propel herself and her readers to be more attuned to the world, looking up *and* around, fully engaged.

Initial critical reception recognized Rossetti's Romantic roots on account of her brother's involvement in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, some even going as far as to say that she "was

the true poet of the Pre-Raphaelite circle” (Peterson 423). Her earlier work is noted for its dual emphasis on spirituality and sensuality, a trademark that distinguishes her from mainline Victorian Christianity. Even her juvenilia poetry reveals this “love of nature, attraction to sensual beauty, and fascination with spiritual discipline that would characterize her mature work” (Peterson 423). However, in her earlier poetry, Rossetti’s love of nature clashed with her conception of the world that is also fallen as well as with her belief that her true home was in the world to come (Peterson 424). Still, her early works, like “Goblin Market,” display “a sweet singer of love and death, a modern Sappho, the beautiful lady of Pre-Raphaelitism” (Peterson 423).

Only recently has scholarship credited Rossetti’s religious life as formative to her poetics. Previously, the woman’s perceived role in the Anglican Church led many scholars to believe that her religion stultified her poetry, most notably in her last collection *Verses*, which was strictly devotional in nature. Until more recent scholarship—with its focus on evaluating and challenging previous scholarship—feminist literary history interpreted practicing Christian women writers as consequently “didactic, submissive, unenlightened, and uncreative reproducers of male religious hierarchy” (qtd. in Dieleman 4). Karen Dieleman, however, believes that Victorian churches, which are notorious for being bound up with cultural and social mores—are actually generative for women’s religion poetry. As such, Christina Rossetti’s lifelong membership to the Anglican Church did not subdue or diminish her poetic energy, as previous scholarship has long assumed when comparing an 1862, “Romantic” poem like “Goblin Market” to her final collection in 1893, *Verses*. Quite the contrary, even her youthful poetry invokes the same strong religious orientation as her later, more devotional work.

At age twelve, Rossetti's family began attending Christ Church, Albany Street, London before moving to Torington Place in 1876, where she attended Christ Church, Woburn Square, until she died in 1894 (Dieleman 102). During Rossetti's years worshipping at Christ Church, the Anglican Church came under the influence of the Oxford Movement and its leaders like John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey. The Oxford Movement reacted against "the perceived threat that liberal reforms posed to the Church of England" and "Against the growing trend of secularization sweeping across Europe" (Taft 313-314). Saba Mahmood's definition of secularism is useful here: it is "not simply...the doctrinal separation of the church and the state but the re-articulation of religion in a manner that is commensurate with modern sensibilities and modes of governance" (836-837). The Oxford Movement's reaction against growing secularization, then, falls under the umbrella of Romanticism, since Romanticism partly shares this goal of reclaiming religion from the Enlightenment agenda, which sought to change the traditional way of knowing. Interestingly, John Henry Newman cites imaginative writers like Walter Scott and Romantic figures like Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth as figures who influenced the Oxford Movement's theology (Taft 314). In this way, Romanticism becomes the antidote to the illness of secularism, in a similar fashion to the "fiery antidote" (line 559) that would cure Laura in "Goblin Market."

An instrumental factor in Rossetti's poetic emphasis on the sacramental is the Anglican Church's newly implemented focus on liturgy as the means to receive communion during worship:

All the elements of the Anglican Communion liturgy encourage the believer toward communal, contemplative, and receptive modes of *shaping* and *being*. This is not to say the liturgy instills passivity or erases the individual but that its primary orientation is toward encounter with the God who manifests himself in Word and sacrament, an encounter that shapes and reshapes worshippers in their spiritual journey. (Dieleman 106)

Therefore, the three parts of the Anglican church service—the introit (the entrance), the liturgy of the Word, and the liturgy of Communion—play a pivotal role in forming the faith of the practitioner (Dieleman 104). This theology, which is rooted in liturgy, ritual, and otherwise bodily practices, thereby informs Rossetti’s religious imaginary as expressed in her poetry.

Saba Mahmood’s recent work on the religious icon details how attending a church service devoutly can create a religious imaginary. Though she primarily deals with the controversial cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammed in twenty-first-century contexts, Mahmood explains that a religious icon is no mere image (whether of Jesus Christ or of Muhammed); an icon refers:

to a cluster of meanings that might suggest a persona, an authoritative presence, or even a shared imagination. In this view, the power of the icon lies in its capacity to allow an individual (or a community) to find him- or herself in a structure that has bearing on how one conducts oneself in the world. The term *icon*...pertains not just to images but to a form of relationality that binds the subject to an object or imaginary. (845)

The Anglican church service, and specifically the Eucharist, the culminating event of the service, functions as an icon for Rossetti in that it creates space for her to develop what Karen Dieleman calls “worldsense.” As opposed to *worldview*, the notion of *worldsense* gets closer to capturing how a sacramental poetics functions. Recalling that a key element of sacramental poetics is that it is difficult to pin down in linguistic terms, *worldsense* emphasizes bodily attunement in a sacramental orientation. It is my contention that this distinctly sacramental posture places Rossetti among a long line of poets—Dante, Donne, Herbert, Wordsworth—who, each in their own way, taps into this posture that permits encounter and relationality: vertical encounter with God and horizontal relationality with a human community.

The Oxford Movement’s renewed interest in ritual, such as the Eucharist, enlivens Rossetti’s sacramental poetics. John Henry Newman promoted ritualism as part of the Oxford

Movement's theology because "minute ritual" allows for "the inculcation of religious truth" (qtd. in Taft 314). This inculcation, to clarify, occurs *via* the icon that is the Anglican church service. Appealing to Emile Durkheim's definition of religious rites as "fixed modes of action" (qtd. in Taft 314), Joshua Taft argues that the receptive and disciplined nature of rituals takes on a pivotal role in her poetics. The Eucharist, for instance, is the climax of the Anglican church service, as everything that precedes it is building toward this final part—the ultimate moment of community. This time for communing with the Church body and with God *via* physical elements is a microcosm of not only the Christ event but all of human existence. Rossetti participates in the Eucharist not as a scheduled chore but as an especially charged instance of what she had been doing all along in her quotidian existence. Further, as Dieleman believes "sustained practices—of any kind—have a powerful formative effect on how we imagine the world and our place in it and consequently on how we talk or write about it" (6). Accordingly, if a poet, whose task is to form something (poesis), operates in this habituated manner, her poetry will reflect this worldsense. "Goblin Market," a non-devotional poem, epitomizes Rossetti's capacity to charge a secular landscape with a sacramental spirituality. The landscape in "Goblin Market" is an icon, or a network, through which a poet and reader alike participate in relationality, which I argue is what makes the poem efficacious, more so than any supposed Christian theme.

When in this fairy tale story Laura and Lizzie first encounter the goblin men and their enticing plea to "Come buy, come buy" (line 4), their initial postures, in fact, give away the plot that follows. As they lay "Crouching close together" (line 36), Laura may understand that one "must not look at goblin men" (line 42)—knowing full well how an acquaintance, Jeanie, "pined and pined away" (line 154) after partaking of the goblin fruit—but she soon does so anyway, as

she lacks the discipline to act according to her spiritual will. Her subsequent fall, then, greatly resembles the sinner's fall: "the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak" (*King James*, Matt. 26.41). Laura fails to guard her senses from danger, misunderstanding the nature of the sinner's fall. A different posture of attention, one like what Jesus models, would be more protective. Jesus teaches, "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee" (*King James*, Matt. 5.29). Laura's sister, Lizzie, understands the role of the body. She exclaims concernedly, "Laura, Laura, / You should not peep at goblin men" (lines 48-49). Lizzie strikingly "covered up her eyes" (line 50) so that her mind would not err. Not to be swayed by the allure of the goblin men is to do more than consciously heed a warning like Jeanie's story; it also involves grappling with a "thickly textured, magnetized" world (Schaeffer 3) that can be just as powerful and formative as church liturgy or other iconic structures.

These initial postures then lead to expected outcomes. Peeping Laura soon begins to stare directly at the goblins, even tempting her sister to do the same. To ward off the temptation, Lizzie "thrust a dimpled finger / In each ear, shut eyes and ran" (lines 67-68) while "Curious Laura chose to linger" (line 70). Lizzie chooses to control her senses before they control her. And thus, we have the plot set up with Laura being the easy prey: "Laura stretched her gleaming neck...Like a vessel at the launch / When its last restraint is gone" (lines 81-86). Even though Laura never approaches the goblin men, these lines denote a high degree of complicity in what is to come. Her lingering posture, though seemingly innocent, indicates to the goblin men that she will soon buy.

The fruit that Laura buys with her lock of hair is quite problematic. While exotic and seemingly dangerous, the fruit will eventually be Laura's saving grace when comingled with Lizzie's body. It may cause her initial fall, but it also becomes her "fiery antidote" (line 559).



Rossetti clearly emphasizes the body—in all of its physicality and sensuality—in this poem. The opening lines do not pique our “higher senses;” they pique our so-called lower, more primitive senses, such as hunger and appetite:

Morning and evening  
 Maids heard the goblins cry:  
 “Come buy our orchard fruits,  
 Come buy, come buy:  
 Apples and quinces,  
 Lemons and oranges,  
 Plump unpecked cherries,  
 Melons and raspberries,  
 Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,  
 Swart-headed mulberries,  
 Wild free-born cranberries,  
 Crab-apples dewberries... (lines 1-12)

The litany of foreign delicacies arouses our appetite, making our tongues salivate, and this is an interesting move for a Christian poet. As Denise Gigante observes, “Taste has always ranked low on the philosophical hierarchy of the senses as a means of ingress to the mind. Whereas sight and hearing allow for a proper representative distance from the object of contemplation...taste, like its closest cousin smell, is bound up with the chemical physiology of the body” (3). Thus, taste registers before contemplation can occur. Rossetti orients the reader away from the philosophical, contemplative mode of being-in-the-world that mainline Christianity preferred.

Having cut a lock of her hair to pay the goblin men for their fruit, Laura “sucked their fruit globes fair or red: / Sweeter than honey from the rock” (lines 128-129). To “suck” the fruit denotes a degree of unruliness, as this can in no way be a couth social practice. “Not only is

taste bound up with the unruly flesh; traditionally, it is associated with *too* intense bodily pleasure and the consequent dangers of excess,” according to Gigante (3). However, that Laura may be exercising her bodily senses too much is not all bad, just as the goblin fruit are not all bad. While her physical appetite may cause her initial fall, those same instincts and her natural, affective knowledge will serve her well in consummating the impending Eucharistic salvation. For now, when Lizzie chastises Laura, Laura retorts:

“Nay, hush, my sister:  
I ate and ate my fill,  
Yet my mouth waters still;  
Tomorrow night I will  
Buy more” (lines 164-168)

Taft stresses the “repetitive, voracious consumption” incited by the fruit (326). When Marylu Hill says that “Goblin Market is first and foremost a poem about hunger and our desire to eat our fill of that which will satisfy us” (458), we can believe her because the addictive quality of the fruit implies a lack of satisfaction—or a lack of “fullness.” In contrast to “the culture of taste” that tried to be “propelled by natural cravings for virtue, beauty, and truth” (Gigante 4), Rossetti depicts the human as being oriented by “feelings inexpressible and as yet insatiable” of which we are barely conscious (Hill 459). Neither Laura nor Lizzie *knows* why they act on these feelings—an interesting contrast to the modern, self-sufficient individual who obsesses over such things.

These “feelings inexpressible” spur on Lizzie to act on her ailing sister’s behalf. Soon after Laura partakes of the fruit, she “turned cold as stone” (line 253), following the same sad trajectory as Jeanie. Laura could no longer hear the goblin cry “Come buy our fruits, come buy” (line 256). The symptoms of the goblin fruit are both physical and spiritual. Hill remarks that “we long to eat but do not yet know what will satisfy our hunger” (458). Rossetti later picks up

the same theme in a devotional piece entitled “All Saints”: “O God, Who hast filled us with yearnings of an infinite desire, longing insatiable, groanings that cannot be uttered” (qtd. in Hill 458). Just as Laura is at a loss to satisfy her hunger, Rossetti remarks in “All Saints” that we all possess this inner desire. Yet, these “groanings cannot be uttered,” or articulated, because the inner desire hearkens to something beyond what we can put into words. Lizzie feels a similar inexpressible longing: Lizzie “Longed to buy fruit to comfort [Laura] / But feared to pay too dear” (line 310-311). The fear is the cognitive part of herself that tries to tame the affective, feeling side. Lizzie “thought of Jeanie in her grave, / Who should have been a bride” (lines 312-313). The mention of Jeanie’s potential future demonstrates how deeply Lizzie is *thinking*, as opposed to *feeling*. But when “Laura dwindling / seemed knocking at Death’s door: / Then Lizzie weighted no more” (lines 320-322). I agree with Hill, who states, “Desiring here is clearly good...it draws us mysteriously heavenwards to that which we have not ‘seen or heard’” (458).

As sweet, innocent Lizzie “halted by the brook” (line 326), Rossetti emphasizes that “for the first time in her life” Lizzie “began to listen and look” (lines 327-328). In order to save her sister, it is good Lizzie who has to change her ways. Lizzie approaches the goblin men, offers them a coin for their fruit, and denies their attempt to persuade her to partake of the fruit. At that point, the incensed goblin “trod and hustled her, / elbowed and jostled her, / clawed her with nails...Tore her gown” (lines 399-401, 403) in what would be considered as sexual assault.

Through all of this, Lizzie does not succumb and thereby becomes transfigured:

White and golden Lizzie stood,  
Like a lily in a flood, —  
Like a rock of blue-veined stone  
Lashed by tides obstreperously, —

Like a beacon left alone  
 In a hoary roaring sea,  
 Sending up a golden fire, — (lines 408-414)

It is difficult not to compare Lizzie to a risen Christ who had sacrificed himself on a cross at the hands of awful people. Despite readers' tendencies to allegorize the poem in this manner, Rossetti maintained that this poem is, in fact, not an allegory (Peterson 430). I understand this to be because Rossetti intended "Goblin Market" to do more than signify a specific chapter in the Christian story, which is all that allegory would do. Rather, because Rossetti has a sacramental orientation—because the Eucharist is not a symbol pointing to one thing but to all things—this poem attempts to gesture toward the "big picture." Simon Humphries affirms that Rossetti, because of her Tractarian background, often veils particular religious truths, making them inaccessible to "those unfit to receive them" (407). This tactic, then, is not all that different from Wordsworth's in "The Thorn." In Lizzie—like the thornbush—we see this reserve and depth. The next scene—the Eucharist scene—makes Lizzie's depth more evident. It also further problematizes the notion that this poem could be a Christian allegory at all—as recent criticism has claimed that the scene is charged with female erotic desire (Peterson 431).

After withstanding the onslaught by the goblin men, Lizzie returns to Laura covered in the juices of the goblin fruit:

She cried "Laura," up the garden,  
 "Did you miss me?  
 Come and kiss me.  
 Never mind my bruises,  
 Hug me, kiss me, suck my juices  
 Squeezed from goblin fruits for you,  
 Goblin pulp and goblin dew.  
 Eat me, drink me, love me;

Laura, make much of me:  
 For your sake I have braved the glen  
 And had to do with goblin merchant men.” (464-474)

Lizzie’s speech clearly mirrors Christ’s speech during the Last Supper— “Take, eat; this is my body.” Humphries, furthermore, insightfully observes that Lizzie calls them “my juices” now rather than the goblin fruits’ juices (394). Could some form of alchemy have taken place? Humphries also cites the “Goblin pulp and goblin dew” as “a crafty parallel to Communion in both kinds, bread and wine” (394). Partaking of the bread and wine during an Anglican church service is not only to remember or memorialize Christ’s sacrifice, it is an intensification of the communing body of Christ that is the church (Dieleman 110). Further, the Oxford Movement emphasized the “Real Presence” of Christ in the Eucharist as opposed to a virtual presence where the bread and wine were only *like* the body and blood of Christ (Dieleman 156-157). As Edward Pusey, a leading voice of the Oxford Movement, said, “denying the Real Presence is tantamount to denying what Jesus promised at the Last Supper and elsewhere in the Gospels” (qtd. in Hill 457). One partakes of not only the bread and wine but also the mystery of God. Edward Pusey also taught, “when we too are taught to pray so that we ‘may so eat the Flesh of Christ, and drink His Blood’ ...we mean a real, actual, though Sacramental and spiritual drinking; we do not mean a spiritual cleansing by a figurative eating and drinking” (qtd. in Hill 466). If one proceeds in a figurative mindset, then one does not admit the mystery of God because figuring the Eucharist is taking a God-ordained action and squeezing it into human terms. If we value the Eucharist scene in “Goblin Market,” it is only if we assent to the mystery of God and his abiding, sacramental presence in the world that endows it with fullness. Once again, Pusey’s sacramental theology explains this well: “He mingles His body in our body, and blends His spirit with ours...He feeds us with His own Blood, and by every means entwines us with Himself” (qtd. in Hill 467). To

adhere to a sacramental worldview is to recognize that we are entangled and embodied beings, yearning for the type of communion of which Laura partakes.

To emphasize the necessity of entanglement in restorative communion, Rossetti correlates spiritual salvation to physical pleasure with the body as the locale. When Lizzie says, “Come and kiss me” (466), there is a physical pleasantness to this request. In what follows, Rossetti employs “orgasmic imagery” in depicting the communion (Hill 466). Laura “clung about her sister, / Kissed and kissed and kissed her . . . She kissed and kissed her with a hungry mouth” (lines 485-486, 492). Thus, according to Marylu Hill, “she describes the erotic and sacred body in the fullness of its potential pleasure and delight” (465).

But the situation quickly changes: Laura’s “lips began to scorch, / That juice was wormwood to her tongue, / She loathed the feast” (lines 493-495). How can a Eucharistic scene turn bitter and loathsome? There is no biblical corollary. Then, the suffering worsens: “Swift fire spread thro’ her veins, knocked at her heart, / Met the fire smoldering there / And overbore its lesser flame . . . Sense failed in the mortal strife” (lines 507-509, 513). In light of this, I argue that this Eucharist scene points to the *sacramental* rather than the *sacrament* of the Eucharist by itself. Lizzie and the juices are not the Eucharist as no mention of Christ is made in the entire poem, nor does Lizzie’s communal offering even signify the sign of the Eucharist; instead, the scene invokes the same kind of unknowing as in Wordsworth’s poetry. In this regard, the poem is sacramental, as the reader can “make much of” this scene, perhaps even attaining a sense of “fullness.” That is a trademark quality of a sacramental poetics.

The fact that supposed higher order virtues like chastity, selflessness, beauty, and love comingle with hunger, pain, and desire is what makes this poem work—specifically in a sacramental way. Regina Schwartz observes that in sacramental poetics, there is a comingling of

the conceptual and the sensual, observing how the Christian story exemplifies this: “[the Christian story] is no competition between lowly carnal love and higher spiritual love; rather, it is a comingling of them both to produce the fruit of human and religious love” (93). Karen Dieleman also corroborates this sacramental posture when she describes the Tractarian analogical imagination active in Rossetti’s religious imaginary. Tractarians held to analogy rather than typology. Even the non-believer can, for example, grasp the typological concept that manna in the book of Exodus prefigures Christ as this can be conceived even academically, requiring no engagement of the self or of faith. However, it takes faith and a changed worldview—or as Dieleman calls it, “worldsense”—to imagine a realer, more holistic understanding of Christ working in the world at large. Because of her Tractarian background with its emphasis on the sacramental and the power of ritual, Rossetti’s religious imaginary and, consequently, the imaginary that she impresses upon her reader “reaches further and deeper than such type-to-antitype reading” (Dieleman 115).

“Goblin Market,” thus, is more than mere allegory—more than a sign pointing to something else. As Karen Dieleman explains, “the analogical imagination is an entire attunement, a way of coming to the world alert, as it were, for all manifestations of order, harmony, and relationship, however veiled behind difference” (116). In this manner, “Goblin Market” strives to be more than an intellectual exercise or moral exemplum; instead, the poem “might analogize worship that values manifestation (sacrament) as much as or more than proclamation (word)” (Dieleman 101). This strategy is reminiscent of Wordsworth’s push to get readers away from Cartesian model analysis, and, as will be discussed in chapter three, the analogical imagination resembles the kind of “worldsense” that recognizes “a magic deeper still.” I believe that the influence of the Tractarian analogical imagination endows Rossetti with a

sacramental poetics. “A sacramental poetry is a poetry that signifies more than it says, that creates more than it signs, yet does so, like liturgy, through image, sound, and time, in language that takes the hearer *beyond* each of those elements” (Schwartz 7).

A Eucharist scene presented in all of its physicality is therefore a very effective move for Rossetti, who wants to convey the idea that, as Gerald Manley Hopkins would later put it, the whole world is charged with God’s grandeur. To capture the totality of this is to include the body. James Smith, I think, expresses the reasoning behind a renewed emphasis on affect: “Before Christians had systematic theologies and worldviews, they were singing hymns and psalms, saying prayers, celebrating the Eucharist, sharing their property, and becoming a people marked by a desire for God’s coming kingdom—a desire that constituted them as a peculiar people in the present” (qtd. in Dieleman 7). These were quotidian activities that allowed for a manifestation of God without any intellectual summoning. Rossetti, I believe seeks to replicate this way of knowing by maximizing the uncertainties and undermining the traditional Cartesian model so that an intuitive model takes its place. Rossetti accurately portrays a character who intuitively integrates herself in a sacramental environment, and Rossetti accomplishes this feat by casting Lizzie as a “liturgical animal” (Smith 40). If Lizzie is Christ-like in her motives and actions, it is first because she is an “embodied, practicing creature whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate” (Smith 40).

Lizzie acts as a liturgical animal as she operates with this distinct “way of knowing self and other, person and community in the world that is other than and more than a cognitive knowing. Liturgical knowing is affective and physical, imaginal and embodied” (qtd. in Dieleman 9). Liturgical animals, furthermore, ascribe to a sacramental world. It is a way of knowing, a way that depends upon the body, physicality, sensuality—all of the elements that are



neglected in the Cartesian model. As Laura “kissed and kissed [Lizzie] with a hungry mouth” (line 492), Rossetti is emphasizing habits and impulses and movements that are cultivated naturally by our affective instincts. In this, the language of the scene becomes “bound with other thick, embodied forces” (Schaeffer 8).

Through this scene, Rossetti also plays on how much we do not understand. The underpinnings of the *Goblin Market* tale do not offer any detailed explanation for how this sanctification process works, for either Lizzie or Laura. This, too, is part of the Tractarian analogical imagination that so influences Rossetti. More than an erotic moment, this scene is an expression of a “sacramental return.” When Kearney says a “sacramental return is a retrieval of the extraordinary in the ordinary” (86), one can imagine how “*Goblin Market*” figures into this: at first take, this tale is extraordinary, full of mysterious creatures and a magic healing; however, on a second take, it is a tale of one sister loving the other, doing everything in her power to help her. It is the exterior landscape that supplies the extraordinary—and the reader, as well as Lizzie and Laura, does not even know how any of this works. As Kearney states, “the sacramental invokes the power of yes in the wake of no” (86). Certainly, when Laura could no longer hear the cry of the goblin men and yearned to be filled by what she did not know, it is Lizzie’s sacramental orientation and her unfounded feeling to do something that “invokes the power of yes” in a world that appeared to be fallen.

Rossetti also calls her reader to a “sacramental return.” This return is not a return to a presecular or a premodern disposition; on the contrary, “it marks an opening toward a God whose descent into flesh depends upon our response to the sacred summons of the moment. This calls for a special attentiveness to infinity embodying itself in daily acts of eucharistic love and sharing. An endless moving over and back between the infinite and the infinitesimal” (Kearney

86-87). Such an attitude can be achieved within the malaise of modernity, in an age, as Hölderlin describes, that is marked by the “flight of the gods” (Schwartz 12). For, as Simon Humphries notes, “When Laura is suffering, neither she nor Lizzie prays to God for her recovery—at home, or in church; and when Laura recovers, neither she nor Lizzie thanks God for that” (406). And despite any lack of clarity, Laura and Lizzie still know precisely how to be in the world. It is only in the “Days, weeks, months, years / Afterwards, when both were wives / With children of their own” (lines 543-545) that they codified the experience into a teaching moment with a pithy moral. In this way, Rossetti packages weighty contents into this fairy tale in the same manner that God’s immanence is packaged into the sacrament.

### Ch. 3: Recovering Joy in *Till We Have Faces*: Psyche's Intuition and Orual's Suspicion

In C.S. Lewis's autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, he describes how his adult life and his adult perspective formed from crystallized childhood moments. As a child, Lewis records that he was exposed to three "glimpses" or "episodes" that illuminated a world charged with significance—incomprehensible significance, but significance nonetheless. There was the childhood memory of "a flowering currant bush on a summer day" that invoked a sensation that, according to Lewis, was too difficult to put into words; there was also his reading experience of Beatrix Potter's *Squirrel Nutkins* that troubled him in a way that he could "only describe as the Idea of Autumn;" finally, there was the "almost sickening intensity" of reading a translation of *Tegner's Drapa* (16-17). These three childhood experiences have two features in common: firstly, they invoke an inexpressible desire; and, secondly, they point him to an "unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction" (17-18). Lewis calls this Joy.

He then continues his story by explaining how his mother's subsequent death would alter his pursuit of Joy. In what he interestingly calls his "first religious experience," Lewis prays to God that He would save his mother, and Lewis set himself "to produce by will power a firm belief that [his] prayers for her recovery would be successful" (20). When the prayers did not work, Lewis reflects that he had "hypnotized" himself into this willed belief. He writes, "I had approached God, or my idea of God, without love, without awe, even without fear. He was...to appear neither as Savior nor as Judge, but merely as a magician; and when He had done what was required of Him I suppose He would simply—well, go away" (21). Accordingly, Lewis's spiritual trajectory is one in which he begins in a "porous" state and then transitions to a "buffered" state. The remainder of his autobiography traces how Lewis re-learns Joy—a process

that demands the use of the imaginative faculty to integrate seemingly disparate pieces of the human condition. Lewis concedes that “The thing has been much better done by Traherne and Wordsworth, but every man must tell his own tale” (16). In Lewis’s story, the theme is one of loss and recovery: “With my mother’s death all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable, disappeared from my life. There was to be much fun, many pleasures, many stabs of Joy; but no more of the old security. It was sea and islands now; the great continent had sunk like Atlantis” (21).

For Lewis’s heroine in his final novel *Till We Have Faces*, the great continent had also metaphorically sunk, leaving her insecure and in a state of malaise. Orual is an archetypal “buffered” individual, though the setting occurs in a presecular society. Like Lewis’s own early identity, Orual is influenced by modernization, intellectualism, and humanism. The manner in which C.S. Lewis juxtaposes Orual to other various characters in this retelling of the Psyche myth is a useful model for understanding what a sacramental poetics strives after. What happens in the reading experience of *Till We Have Faces* is what Richard Kearney calls a “sacramental return.” An elderly Orual is the narrator of her own story. As she looks back on her life-story, she sees things with fresh eyes not because she has had enough time to process cognitively the shape of her life but because a change affected her present and reached back in time to reorient her past through a “magic deeper still.” Orual *learns* (in a sacramental, affective fashion) that in her life-story had been all of these “special awakenings of the divine within the bread and wine of quotidian existence” (Kearney 86).

In *Till We Have Faces*, C.S. Lewis centers his retelling of the Psyche myth around Orual, Psyche’s older sister, because Orual’s situation is full of mythic potential. It is a bildungsroman of sorts, tracing Orual’s growth and development as a human being. Ironically, her trajectory is

one that starts with her in control of a certain worldview and ends with that worldview shattered. She starts with knowledge and ends with unanswerable questions. Yet, she is better off for it. Sacramental poetics seeks to instill the same effect. In this regard, though Orual strives ardently to demythologize the gods that plague her so, she eventually (and inevitably) remythologizes them (Schakel 11).

Before launching into any textual analysis, it is important to observe that C.S. Lewis seems to write himself into his own story, with his spiritual arc in many ways resembling Orual's. Many admirers of C.S. Lewis think only of his conversion from unbelief to belief in the late 1940s or early 1950s, but Peter Schakel observes that another consequential shift occurs after the time of C.S. Lewis's conversion to Christianity that marks, at the very least, an equally important milestone:

Prior to that [conversion]—in *Mere Christianity* and the Ransom trilogy, for example, Lewis relied heavily upon, or put his ultimate trust in, reason (the capacity for analysis, abstraction, logical deductions), with imagination (the image-making, fictionalizing, integrative power) playing a valued but limited supporting role. After that, Lewis's confidence in imaginative methods increases, and imagination becomes the more striking feature of his work from 1950 on—in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, for example. (x)

This shift to a heavier reliance of the imagination can, I argue, be equated with his coming to an understanding of the “deeper magic,” or the sacramental imagination, coursing throughout the universe. It is not that the imagination supersedes logic and rationality; instead, the imagination gives meaning and significance to logic and rationality. The imagination is a tool that orients him in the world.

Compared to the matter-of-fact rhetoric of Lewis's earlier works, *Till We have Faces* is perplexing and full of mystery. Yet, many admirers of Lewis consider this last novel to be his finest. I want to consider this novel because it is the pinnacle of his imaginative genius and the peak of his understanding of a sacramental world, at least as far as it concerns his writing. It is

also interesting because Lewis had reportedly been working on this story for decades, dating back to his undergraduate years at Oxford University (Schakel 6). As is made clear on the cover of the book, *Till We Have Faces* is a retelling of the Psyche myth, a myth that had been ruminating in Lewis's mind for years, struggling to find an adequate expression. Lewis himself explains that the only reason he was able to write the story was because "what seemed to be the right form presented itself and themes suddenly interlocked" (qtd. in Schakel 6). The increased reliance on the imagination, with its ability to integrate thought cohesively, seems, therefore, to be the key factor. And his imagination furthermore permitted him to experiment heavily with a mythic form that gives "a 'taste' of Reality through the imagination" (Schakel 6). In contrast to his past subscription to rationalism and logic, which requires proofs and answers, a mystical tale can be holistically (not just intellectually) satisfying in its state of unknowing.

Part of Lewis's exigence for retelling the Psyche myth appears to have originated in his dislike of modern interpretations of this myth. Lewis voices frustration, for example, at Robert Graves's opinion that the Psyche myth is "a neat philosophical allegory of the progress of the rational soul towards intellectual love" (qtd. in Schakel 5). Such a maxim was too simplistic, according to Lewis, and even missed the point entirely (Schakel 5). However, it is not only modern interpretations of which Lewis was critical. He believed that in the original myth "Apuleius had failed to develop the story's mythical potential" (Schakel 5). By this, Lewis indicates that the traditional rendering of the story lacks the "divine mystery or awe"—or "numinousness" as Rudolf Otto calls it—that makes any myth truly mythic (Schakel 6).

Lewis's confidence in his tale's mythic potential resides quite simply on the fact that even he was still puzzled by parts of the story, left to grapple with the divine mystery. In a letter to his friend Clyde Kilby, Lewis says, "An author doesn't necessarily understand the meaning of

his own story better than anyone else” (qtd. in Jebb 112). Strikingly, this is said of a project that had been brewing for decades. But apparently, Lewis finds it satisfactory that mystery remains. Lewis states, “Into an allegory a man can put only what he already knows: in a myth he puts what he does not yet know and could not come to know in any other way” (qtd. in Jebb 113). In reading this novel, one gets the sense that Lewis poses a question to his readers that he once posed to himself, leaving it to ruminate in the reader’s mind well after the first (or second) reading. As James Como has written, “The power of *Till We Have Faces* may lie in the fact that it is myth, not autobiography, but, as Lewis himself acknowledges, it may be that he could not yet be fully aware of the full import of that myth” (qtd. in Jebb 113).

In *Till We Have Faces*, we witness the gradual, sometimes painful change in perspective that Orual endures as she encounters the gods. As narrator to her own story, Orual relays her sacramental return occurs as she essentially reads her life-story as an elderly woman. In a similar manner, the reader’s perspective changes when encountering the sacramental during the reading experience. “To encounter the divine utterly changes one’s perspective and priorities; it is a familiar theme in mystical literature, though it is unfamiliar to many modern readers, even those generally friendly to religion” (Schuler 308). Modern readers, even those of a traditional religious persuasion, are uncomfortable with mystical literature. We do not want to be *utterly* changed—that is, indeed, the effect of secularity. Modern, secularized readers appear to prefer “either obvious typology or unequivocal allegory” (Schuler 307). These can be tamed. Mystical literature and sacramental poetics, with their emphasis on the unknowable, defy human control, requiring that the reader approach the text exposed rather than veiled. It is as Regina Schwartz describes in *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism*: “a sacramental understanding of participation enfolds the reader or viewer into this process. Entering the world of the poem, he

participates in its discoveries, seeing what it sees, hearing what it says, feeling what it feels. No mere spectator of the work, the viewer is changed during his encounter with it” (8).

Also in the letter to Clyde S. Kilby, Lewis calls *Till We Have Faces* “a work of (supposed) historical imagination. A guess of what it might have been like in a little barbarous state on the borders of the Hellenistic world of Greek culture, just beginning to affect it” (qtd. in Schakel 11). Lewis identifies in his preface to the British edition the theme of “dark idolatry and pale enlightenment at war with each other and with vision” (qtd. in Schuler 303). The novel tells the story of Orual, the King of Glome’s oldest daughter. She has a younger full sister, Redival, who Orual perceives as a trouble maker. She also gains an even younger half-sister, Psyche, whom she loves very much. In fact, even as children, Orual takes on a motherly role toward Psyche. An elderly Greek slave named the Fox is brought on by the king to teach and care for his children. The Fox, Orual and Psyche develop a very close relationship, and he instills much of his Greek wisdom in them.

The kingdom of Glome can be understood as a pre-Christian society. They have a tribal government, and they engage in chthonic religion. They worship Ungit, an earth goddess, whose temple houses an unformed stone that was said to have risen from the earth itself in a primordial fashion. There is the Priest of Ungit with an accompanying cult, replete with priestesses who assist with the sacrifices. The Fox, with his enlightened philosophy, scoffs at the people’s way of life and does his best to mold Orual and Psyche in a more “civilized” manner. Orual always had had a precarious relationship with Glome’s gods, even before the Fox came along. As a child she was afraid of the old Priest’s appearance in his bird mask, of the smell of the priestesses who are doused in a mix of fragrance and ritual blood sacrifices. She hated how dark the temple was, how mysterious Ungit was. Lewis initially tempts the reader to condescend to



this barbarian religion. The blood sacrifices, of both animals and humans, are associated with the “seemingly irrational demands that a deity like [Ungit] makes on the affections of a human like Psyche” (Schuler 303). They also remind the primarily Western audience of the “primitive” religions that Christianity superseded. However, it becomes clear as the novel progresses that Ungit cannot be so easily discarded despite the secularizing forces of humanism, technological advancement, and rationalism. And, furthermore, there is something efficacious to this “traditional” worldsense, or way of being-in-the-world.

While most of the blood sacrifices are from animals, there are on occasion human sacrifices if the times are exceptionally difficult. Still a child, Orual witnesses Glome endure the start of a famine, an outbreak of disease, a lack of rain, and political unrest—all of which did not bode well for the king, who was notoriously bad at interacting with his subjects. In the midst of this, a young Psyche, who is exceedingly beautiful, begins to be perceived by the people as a goddess, capable of healing the sick. When it is learned that she, in fact, cannot heal disease by touch, the people turn on her and revolt. Consequently, the Priest pressures the King to sacrifice his daughter Psyche, citing her as the source of all the problems caused by Ungit’s wrath and jealousy. The king conceded without heeding Orual’s and the Fox’s protestations.

In spite of the many attempts by Orual and the Fox to thwart the ritual sacrifice, Psyche is sent to the top of the mountain to be “devoured” by, or (perhaps) married to, Ungit’s son, the “God of the Mountain,” also called Shadowbrute. Psyche, who had always felt a calling to the mountain and to the beyond, accepts her fate without much hesitation. Orual is aghast at her younger sister’s attitude, and this marks a rift in their relationship. Days after the ritual sacrifice, after Orual recovers from hysteria, she journeys to the top of the mountain to bury her sister’s bones; however, she finds no bones and instead finds Psyche alive and loose from any shackles.

Psyche explains that she needs no rescuing, that she now lives in a castle as the bride of the God of the Mountain. In fact, Psyche claims that Orual is standing right in front of the castle, but Orual cannot see anything and thinks that Psyche is mad from lack of food and water—despite the fact that she looks healthy and well fed. Orual becomes suspicious, furthermore, as Psyche relates that she is not allowed to look at her new husband’s face; nevertheless, she has no choice but to leave Psyche, who refuses to return home. As Orual walks away from Psyche, she turns back one more time, peering into the mist. Psyche is gone now, but Orual thinks she sees what might be the God of the Mountain’s castle, Psyche’s new home. Could what Psyche claims be true? Orual puts this notion out of her head, complaining about the nature of the gods: “They set the riddle and then allow a seeming that can’t be tested and can only quicken and thicken the tormenting whirlpool of your guess-work. If they had an honest intention to guide us, why is their guidance not plain? Psyche could speak plain when she was three; do you tell me the gods have not yet come so far” (134)?

Before examining Orual’s subsequent actions and reactions to Psyche’s mythic entanglement, it is essential to further elucidate how Lewis examines several different modes of being-in-the-world. As James Como has rightfully suggested, the question Orual—and by extension Lewis and his reader—faces is this: “What is personhood and what are we to make of it” (qtd. in Jebb 112-113). Beginning in childhood and continuing through adulthood, Orual struggles between two modes of being-in-the-world, while outright rejecting the other, true mode that permits a sacramental orientation. The Fox, the Priest, and Psyche represent these three distinct and opposing modes—*homo rationale*, *homo religiosus*, and *homo liturgicus*—that, as James Smith explains, offer three distinct ways that a person can *choose* to orient himself.

Smith's beginning model is the *homo rationale* because it is the most popular conception to date of what it means to be human. *Homo rationale* is "a dominant model, as old as Plato but rebirthed by Descartes and cultivated throughout modernity" (Smith 4). According to this model, what makes the human is his ability to think. Furthermore, Smith explains that the *homo rationale* is defined by an "essentially immaterial mind or consciousness—occasionally and temporarily embodied, but not essentially" (42). The mind is its own master. Orual's teacher, the elderly Greek slave lovingly called the Fox, is an archetype for the *homo rationale*. Lewis clearly exaggerates the Fox's Greek heritage to make him the quintessential Greek of Plato's time. Of Orual's earliest memories of the Fox, she recalls that he had a collection of pithy philosophical statements by which he lived and taught, for example, "No man can be an exile if he remembers that all the world is one city" and "Everything is as good or bad as our opinion makes it" (7). These sorts of statements indicate a general reliance on human resiliency and self-sufficiency. In addition, the Fox shows an aversion to Glome's earthy religion upon arrival. "He shuttered at the thought of blood sacrifices" and was quick to note that Ungit was "undoubtedly Aphrodite, though more like the Babylonian than the Greek" (7-8). The Fox's philosophy remains quintessentially stoic, characterized by rationalism and materialism, that is, until he is in the afterlife (Orual converses with the ghost of the Fox at the end of the novel). Some scholars have noticed that the arc of the Fox's philosophical growth parallels Lewis's own journey from unbelief to rational belief and then to a more holistic belief that incorporates an increasing role to the human imagination (Schakel 14). Part of Orual's continual strife with the gods certainly originates with the influence of the Fox's teaching.

Preceding the advent of *homo rationale*, however, is *homo religiosus*, man's supposed first way of being-in-the-world, represented by the old Priest. In a modern perspective, such as

Orual's, *homo religiosus* is critical of *homo rationale* for how thought is considered to be an objective activity. Rather, much of what orients us in the world is the faith and feeling that precede rational thought. "So before we are thinkers," this model says, "we are believers; before we can offer our rational explanations of the world, we have already assumed a whole constellation of beliefs" (Smith 43). Thus, in this conception, "humans are understood not as fundamentally thinking machines but rather as believing animals, or essentially religious creatures, defined by a worldview that is pre-rational or supra-rational" (43).

Therefore, Lewis depicts the Priest as having a greater understanding of the gods than the Fox. Peter Schakel, indeed, claims that "A major purpose of *Till We Have Faces* is to convey a fuller, more adequate awareness of the divine nature than that of the rationalists, which 'will not produce that fear of the Lord in which wisdom begins, and, therefore, will not produce that love in which it is consummated.' Ungit, too, is a 'numinous' god, not a god of the rationalists" (qtd. in Schakel 21). When the King is resistant to the idea of sacrificing Psyche (only because her beauty would one day be a great political asset *via* marriage), the old Priest articulates the strength of Ungit and her mysterious ways, exclaiming:

I...have dealt with the gods for three generations of men, and I know that they dazzle our eyes and flow in and out of one another like eddies on a river, and nothing that is said clearly can be said truly about them. Holy places are dark places. It is life and strength, not knowledge and words, that we get in them. Holy wisdom is not clear and thin like water, but thick and dark like blood. (50)

The gods cannot be quantified in postulates or theorems. They are frightening. In contrast to the Fox, who is at ease when referring to the gods, there is a palpable sense of fear and trembling in the Priest's demeanor. Orual was, in fact, frightened of the Priest as a child. Looking back on her childhood, she reflects:

I think what frightened me (in those early days) was the holiness of the smell that hung about him—a temple-smell of blood (mostly pigeons' blood, but he had sacrificed men, too) and burnt fat and singed hair and wine and stale incense. It is

the Ungit smell. Perhaps I was afraid of his clothes, too; all the skins they were made of, and the dried bladders, and the great mask shaped like a bird's head which hung on his chest. It looked as if there were a bird growing out of his body. (11)

When, at the beginning of the novel, Orual's mother died, the King needed to take a new wife; naturally, Orual and Redival were to participate in a religious ceremony so that the new marriage would be fruitful. The Priest directed the ceremony, taking great pains to ensure that it would please Ungit. However, Orual specifically notes that "He did not understand a word of the hymn" (11), but he clearly believed the ceremony must be done to perfection in order for the marriage to be successful. As *homo religiosus*, the Priest operates in a manner that is more governed by beliefs, even if those beliefs are unsubstantiated. He does not need to know why Ungit requires something; he just obeys.

Yet, this is a perceived weakness of the *homo religiosus* model. "While it contests a narrow, naïve focus on ideas [*homo rationale*], this model of the human person seems just to move the clash of ideas down a level to a clash of beliefs," according to Smith (44). In a secular landscape, beliefs are understood as no different than the rationalist's theorems and propositions. Thus, Smith finds equal room to criticize the *homo religiosus* model, saying, "the person-as-believer model still gives us a somewhat reductionist account of the human person—one that is still a tad bit heavy and quasi-cognitive" (45). What Smith ultimately advocates—and what Psyche ultimately embodies—is a more affective model that, contrary to previous models, honors "the complexity and richness of human persons" (46). In the previous models, "significant parts of who we are—in particular, our noncognitive ways of being-in-the-world that are more closely tethered to our embodiment or animality—tend to drop off the radar or are treated as nonessential" (46).

Orual certainly over-emphasizes the immaterial world as her younger self relies almost exclusively on her autonomous mind. *Homo liturgicus*, however, is an Augustinian model that “resists the rationalism and quasi-rationalism of the earlier models by shifting the center of gravity of human identity, as it were, down from the heady regions of mind closer to the central regions of our bodies, in particular, our *kardia*—our gut or heart” (Smith 47). When Psyche explains to Orual how and why she felt at peace going to the mountaintop to be devoured by, or married to, the God of the Mountain (for the people knew not which), it is evident that neither logic nor belief guided her:

The only thing that did me good...was quite different. It was hardly a thought, and very hard to put into words. There was a lot of the Fox’s philosophy in it—things he says about the gods or ‘the divine nature’—but mixed up with things the Priest said, too, about the blood and the earth and how sacrifice makes the crops grow. I’m not explaining it well. It seemed to come from somewhere deep inside me, deeper than the part that sees pictures of gold and amber palaces, deeper than fears and tears. It was shapeless, but you could just hold onto it; or just let it hold onto you. Then the change came. (109-110)

Psyche “is the kind of creature who is oriented by this kind of primal, ultimate love—even if [she] never reflect[s] on it” (Smith 51). That Psyche’s feeling is “shapeless” denotes its mystical origin, and this is Orual’s first exposure to a different kind of being-in-the-world, one that is liturgical in nature.

While a young Orual rejects and despises the *homo liturgicus* model as naïve, a mature Lewis slowly builds upon Psyche’s character so that she has “a natural, almost intuitive response to God, an inner loveliness and loving-ness which is reflected in her physical beauty” (Schakel 14). In a previous scene prior to Psyche’s sacrifice, the audience can already see glimpses of her liturgical orientation, her ability to recognize the embodied nature of the earth’s inhabitants, to feel her way around her environment. While in a holding cell, Psyche says to Orual:

[the Priest] is not what the Fox thinks. Do you know, Sister, I have come to feel more and more that the Fox hasn’t the whole truth. Oh, he has much of it. It’d be

dark as a dungeon within me but for his teaching. And yet...I can't say it properly. He calls the whole world a city. But what's a city built on? There's earth beneath. And outside the wall? Doesn't all the food come from there as well as all the dangers...things growing and rotting, strengthening and poisoning, things shining wet...in one way (I don't know which way) more like, yes, even more like the House of—. (70-71)

Psyche's articulation of all of this resonates as being sacramental. Psyche attempts to articulate something that cannot easily be articulated ("I can't say it properly"). Her articulation is a sign that distinctly points to something beyond. She extends the Fox's city metaphor, retaining the figurative language that is the only possible tool for her to say what she feels. Importantly, she is acting on a feeling. It is only a feeling that causes her to believe that the Fox only has part of the truth. The result of this sacramental attitude—an attitude based on registering different realities and being open-minded—has the pragmatic result of giving comfort and courage to her.

However, more essentially, it becomes her baseline that raises her so that she can stand a little higher than everyone else.

Orual, of course, is deeply skeptical of Psyche, and if she did not love Psyche so much, Orual would have abandoned her to the Shadowbrute from the start. Ultimately, however, her love for Psyche and her gut-like affection for her still will orient her toward a good end. She is well-meaning, certainly capable of being a good soul, but there is this selfishness about her. She sees Psyche's impending sacrifice with complete tunnel-vision whereas Psyche displays a willingness to seek out alternative realities, probing after something beyond.

When Orual returns from the mountain, still processing her encounter with Psyche, she relays the events to the Fox, who agrees that Psyche is mad or drugged or being held by force by mountain men. So, with renewed vigor, Orual returns to the mountain, but is once again rebuffed by Psyche, who insists that this is where she now belongs. Orual tries to give Psyche a lamp so that she can look upon her husband at night. Additionally, Orual even stabs herself in

the arm to prove to Psyche how insistent she is that Psyche return. Reluctantly, Psyche concedes to take the lamp so that Orual does no further damage to herself, but she still refuses to leave with Orual. After the two part and Orual is walking back to Glome, there is an apocalyptic scene in which Orual encounters the God of the Mountain in the midst of thunder, lightning, and raging winds. The god tells Orual that because Psyche returned with the lamp in an attempt to look upon his face, she is banished from the castle and forced to wander as an exile, facing a life of hardship imposed by his mother Ungit that even he himself could not endure (otherwise, he would presumably). And he says to Orual in a climactic moment, “You too shall be Psyche,” which reverberates in Orual’s mind for the years to come. Orual becomes even angrier at the gods, claiming that if the gods would have been more clear, she would have left Psyche alone: “For [the gods] will neither (which would be best of all) go away and leave us to live our own short days to ourselves, nor will they show themselves openly and tell us what they would have us do” (249).

Orual lacks a posture of openness; her enlightened perspective is just as closed off as even the Priest’s or the Fox’s perspectives. All along, Orual is marked by her inability to see. In an earlier moment on the mountaintop with Psyche, an exasperated Orual exclaims, “Have done with it, Psyche...Where is this god? Where the palace is? Nowhere—in your fancy. Where is he? Show him to me? What is he like” (122)? Orual has this notably modern mixture of enchantment and disenchantment. She is willing to grant the gods’ existence, but only on her terms. She is bothered at times both by the Fox’s unbelief and Psyche’s crazy belief— “Oh, I can’t bear it” (122). It is as if there is a physical pain associated with Orual’s perspective. She resorts to rationalizing things, rationalizing why Psyche seems so earnest, so pure in her belief that she is the wife of the God of the Mountain. As Orual explains:



I asked myself why I'd forgotten, and how I'd forgotten, that first notion of her being mad. Madness; of course. The whole thing must be madness. I had been nearly as mad as she to think otherwise. At the very name *madness* the air of that valley seemed more breathable, seemed emptied of a little of its holiness and horror. (122)

While Orual laments the emptiness she feels once Psyche is gone, her earlier self, in fact, wishes for emptiness, preferring it to a “thickly textured, magnetized” world (Schaeffer 3). In this regard, secularity is like a coping mechanism. Holiness is overwhelming. Therefore, the modern person has this tendency to “wish away” the gods or to seek a middle ground where she can believe—but believe safely.

Despite Orual's fears, C.S. Lewis encourages the audience to be open to the efficaciousness of myth, of the sacramental, and of uncertainty, for it is seemly impossible to ever snuff out the “magic deeper still.” We are constantly faced with the task of reckoning with Ungit, who presides ominously over the entire plot. In a way, Ungit gives significance to each character's actions and reactions, endowing them with an exigence, or a need that needs to be addressed. For Orual, as well as any audience participant who considers himself to be modern, that exigence is to face and reckon with her own precarious relation to a world full of the unknown. Orual had done what most modern people of today had done: she assumed that since Ungit was this formless, shapeless, abstract entity—that because Ungit was faceless—Orual could *choose* not to face her. Hegel epitomizes this modern inclination in terms of aesthetics, which, as was explained in chapter one of my thesis, has begun to act in a way similar to religion's phenomenological root:

Thus, for instance, the Chinese, Indians, Egyptians, in their artistic objects, their representations of the gods, and their idols, adhered to formlessness, or to a vague and inarticulate form, and were not able to arrive at genuine beauty, because their mythological ideas, the content and conception of their works of art, were as yet vague and obscure. The more perfect in form works of art are, the more profound is the inner truth of their content and thought. (376)

C.S. Lewis would, I believe, critique this approach to religion and art for the same reason he is critical of modern interpretations of the Psyche myth, namely, that any attempt to repackage something as earthy and thick as myth into a nice philosophical treatise, devoid of any features of embodiment, is naïve and ineffective.

Years after Psyche goes into exile and after Orual ascends to the throne of Glome, the God of the Mountain's prophecy to Orual that "You too shall be Psyche" persists as a nagging reminder of the gods' never-ceasing meddling in the lives' of humans. Orual decides immediately after Psyche's banishment to don a veil—a naïve attempt to convince herself that she could thenceforth be impenetrable. The veil functions as a buffer between herself and the exterior world of gods and humans. If the gods would not make themselves manifest, then neither would she. As she proceeds as Queen of Glome, Orual attempts to denude and declaw Ungit, but she underestimates Ungit's power and reach in all of her formlessness. She describes how the new priest "Arnom had opened new windows in the walls and her house was not so dark. He also kept it differently, scouring away the blood after each slaughter and sprinkling fresh water; it smelled cleaner and less holy" (234). Because of the Fox's influence, Arnorn begins to take more of an interest in talking about the gods like a philosopher, asking how and why. "The great change came when he proposed to set up an image of her—a woman-shaped image in the Greek fashion—in front of the old shapeless stone. I think he would like to have got rid of the stone altogether, but it is, in a manner, Ungit herself and the people would have gone mad if she were moved" (234).

One day soon after, Orual is summoned to perform her queenly duties at the house of Ungit. Orual first looks upon the new statue; then, she "looked at Ungit herself" (270), reflecting

as if for the first time on Ungit's true nature. Orual has a religious experience in considering the origin myth:

[Ungit] had pushed her way up out of the earth—a foretaste of, an ambassador from, whatever things may live and work down there one below the other all the way down under the dark and weight and heat. I have said she had no face; but that meant she had a thousand faces. For she was very uneven, lumpy and furrowed... She was now more rugged than ever because of all the blood they had poured over her in the night. In the little clots and chains of it I made out a face. (270)

Even Orual, who detests Ungit and tries to force her out, is affected by the unshapen form of Ungit. Ungit manages to penetrate the “buffered” wall Orual had erected within her soul, symbolized by the veil she now wore.

As the ceremony proceeds and the sacrifices commence, Orual notices that the people still prefer to make sacrifices to the old Ungit rather than the new statue. Orual stops one woman to ask her a question:

“Do you always pray to *that* Ungit,” said I (nodding toward the shapeless stone), “and not to *that*?” Here I nodded to our new image, standing tall and straight in her robes and (whatever the Fox might say of it) the loveliest thing our land has ever seen. “Oh, always this, Queen,” said she. “That other, the Greek Ungit, she wouldn't understand my speech. She's only for nobles and learned men. There's no comfort in her.” (272)

Significantly, the new statue of Ungit fails to function as a religious icon in the same way as the shapeless stone. Recall from chapter two that an icon is this structure, or field, in which individuals are embedded in a distinct way that permits a special means for relationality. Orual's and Arnom's attempt, though perhaps unconscious, to alter the icon is ultimately a failure.

Years and years later, the ghost of the Fox will explain to Orual in one of the concluding afterlife visions that even he—the enlightened, modern one of Glome—did not know why the people still preferred the old Ungit. However, he knows now that he had erred in one significant way:

[the younger Orual] never asked me (I was content she shouldn't ask) why the people got something from the shapeless stone which no one ever got from that painted doll of Arnom's. Of course, I didn't know; but I never told her I didn't know. I don't know now. Only that the way to the true gods is more like the house of Ungit...oh, it's unlike too, more unlike than we yet dream, but that's the easy knowledge...The Priest knew at least that there must be sacrifices. They will have sacrifice—will have man. Yes, and the very heart, center, ground, roots of a man; dark and strong and costly as blood. (295)

The kind of sacramental poetics that Lewis experiments with in this novel pushes the audience to pursue more than the easy knowledge. As is the case with Orual, even if what lies beyond the easy knowledge is painful (like Laura's "fiery antidote"), it is still worthwhile because that pursuit is what will ultimately provide us with meaning, fullness, and Joy.

At the end of Book One, the reader learns of the novel's impetus. While travelling outside of Glome, Orual hears a priest tell the myth of this new goddess Istra (Psyche's real, non-Greek name). Presumably, the people of Glome deified Psyche after her sacrifice, and her story spread to the surrounding area. The story the priest tells, however, deeply insults Orual because the other sister in the story is depicted as being jealous of Istra (Psyche) rather than—as Orual saw it—being protective of her. Thus, Orual sets out to write a complaint against the gods, planning to forward a copy of her book to Greece, where the men are supposedly not afraid to question things. Her primary complaint is this: "I say the gods deal very unrightly with us. For they will neither (which would be best of all) go away and leave us to live our own short days to ourselves, nor will they show themselves openly and tell us what they would have us do" (249). The writing process becomes the primary catalyst for Orual's transformation, in which she is forced to come face to face with the reality that she had been lying to herself for her entire life.

C.S. Lewis acknowledged in a letter that his retelling took shape around the idea that "a human being must become real...must be speaking with its own voice (not one of its borrowed voices), expressing its actual desires (not what it imagines that it desires), being for good or ill

itself, not any mask, veil, or *persona*” (qtd. in Jebb 113). Orual’s veil, then, symbolizes her own buffered self and extends, in my opinion, to be indicative of the modern person’s proclivity towards buffering. “Self-knowledge is not actually sought by Orual; on the contrary, her life has been a long process of evasion until, at the end of her life, her defenses are overcome, and she is forced to consider the consequences of her actions” (Jebb 113). In the much shorter Book Two, Orual quickly learns of her faulty posture of attention as Lewis “conveys a consciousness forced to face that which it has tried to bury.

The shorter Book Two abruptly commences with Orual’s confession that she had been all wrong, that the gods are, indeed, just. She explains that soon after starting the writing process for Book One, she began to experience dreams and visions that showed how ignorant she had been. In the very last vision, she is led to a huge chamber in the land of the dead where she is given the opportunity to read her complaints directly to the gods. She expects to read the book she had just written—the contents of Book One—but the text transfigures into her true feelings, which reveal that she all along had been jealous of the gods because she felt Psyche loved them more. This feeling had tainted her perception of the truth the whole time. After the complaint is read, the gods say nothing, but Orual sees that their “answer” was really to make her understand. From there, she travels in this vision with the ghost of the Fox, who reveals what Psyche’s life had been like as a wanderer in exile. He reveals that Psyche labored through arduous tasks for the sake of Orual and had just finished the last requirement. At that point, Orual is reunited with Psyche, and then the God of the Mountain rejoins Psyche and says to Orual, “You too shall be Psyche,” fulfilling the prophecy from years and years ago. Orual awakes at peace and then passes away, presumably having been redeemed.

Thusly, Orual is enfolded into her own life in a process mirroring the reader participation in sacramental poetry: “a sacramental understanding of participation enfolds the reader or viewer into this process. Entering the world of the poem, he participates in its discoveries, seeing what it sees, hearing what it says, feeling what it feels. No mere spectator of the work, the viewer is changed during his encounter with it, rendering a sacramental poetics effective” (8). Orual, as reader and writer of her own story, says, “The change which the writing wrought in me (and of which I did not write) was only a beginning—only to prepare me for the gods’ surgery. They used my own pen to probe my wound” (253-254).

It is important to note that the force of change comes from without, not within. She observes, “What began the change was the very writing itself” (253). In Book Two, we get almost a psychoanalytic exploration of the writer’s mind, of how writing changes perception. It is the idea of the pilgrim vocation, of Aslan bursting onto the scene, bringing creatures into the fold. Yet, Orual also experiences the sacramental vocation of the gods as they usher her into the here and the now, helping her to see things as if for the first time. Thus, as Sharon Jebb states, “The changes in Orual are wrought by a relentless dialectic of external mirrorings, partially conscious rememberings, and divine showings” (119). For the first time, Orual understands how intricately the material world is woven together, how her actions, even as a little girl, reverberate through time, affecting other people. For instance, she realizes that her strained relationship with Redival, her full sister, dates back to her own feelings of loneliness at being left out of the close-knit bond between Orual, Psyche, and the Fox. A sacramental universe will do that because “a poetry that is sacramental...expresses far more than it contains” (Schwartz 6). Somehow, writing orients Orual so that she is open in a postsecular, postcritical manner. Her postsecular orientation allows her to stand in front of the text that is her life and examine it honestly.

Book Two, thus, completely breaks down the interior-exterior binary so that Orual develops full personhood through her unveiling. Charles Taylor notes that “we show most clearly the presence of God in our fullest self-presence. Evil is when this reflexivity is closed in upon itself” (qtd. in Jebb 125). Orual recalls something that the Fox had taught her as a child: “Child, to say the very thing you really mean, the whole of it, nothing more or less or other than what you really mean; that’s the whole art and joy of words” (294). The now mature Orual, who realizes that she had not expressed herself fully her entire life, calls the Greek maxim “glib” (294). Through her own transformation, she can now take the rationalist, philosophical approach and infuse it with the urgency and consciousness found in the knowledge of her own shortsightedness. Having been probed by her own pen that the gods *placed* in her hand, Orual says the following, in a passage that expresses the theme of the novel:

When the time comes to you at which you will be forced at last to utter the speech which has lain at the center of your soul for years, which you have, all that time, idiot-like, been saying over and over, you’ll not talk about joy of words. I saw well why the gods do not speak to us openly, nor let us answer. Till that word can be dug out of us, why should they hear the babble that we think we mean? How can they meet us face to face till we have faces? (294)

Orual’s recognition captures what I think is the heart of Regina Schwartz’s project in *Sacramental Poetics*. How can we dig out something authentic so as to make ourselves open to a divine encounter? Orual had been lying to herself: she lies when she indicts the gods of cruelty; in reality, she is the one at fault; she knows it, but will not admit it.

In order for anyone, poet and reader alike, to encounter the Divine or experience fullness, Lewis indicates that it is important to possess openness and transparency. Only then can the veil be lifted, the buffers be knocked down. What is the effect, then, of the sacramental? It is to silence our babblings, our incoherent, isolated, island-like premonitions. In its place, the sacramental restores the great continent. The now elderly Orual finishes her Book Two with this

statement: “Joy silenced me. And I thought I had now come to the highest, and to the utmost fullness of being which the human soul can contain” (306). She passes away before completing her book, but Arnom sends the book to Greece just as she had requested—which is fitting. Just when one thinks that they will be able to understand it all—what drives our desires and our yearnings—it eludes us once again. Still, there is peace.



## Coda

It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations pertaining to religion's primacy in how humankind orients itself in the world. While cultures, nations, and creeds slip into various significations, religion remains this magnetizing force "that puts us into continuity with other bodies" (Schaeffer 3). By taking a postsecular approach to various texts by Wordsworth, Rossetti, and Lewis, I have attempted to argue that a sacramental poetics strives to lift the veil (of secularity, of ignorance, of any number of social constructs) in order to achieve a sense of fullness. Our innate sense of longing marks us as a species and helps to enable the kind of relationality that moves—our hopes, our fears, our bodies—closer to that indefinable realization of the ultimate.

As literature begins to function "*sort of* but not *exactly* like religion" (Jager, "Romanticism" 800) in the nineteenth century, and as the Romantics realize that objectifying their felt connectedness induces a religious phenomenological experience, it is worth exploring why writers concerned with issues of religion and spirituality hone in on religion's negative capability. Upon feeling—not just seeing—the failings of the Enlightenment agenda and its orderly, clock-like conception of the universe, Wordsworth was among the first poets who, having fallen into modernity, wrestles with finding an effective way of being-in-the-world. As Lori Branch notes, "Wordsworth struggled to recover a religiousness that was not secularized into a system of moral knowledge and insisted more and more on a structure of uncertainty, faith, and freedom as part of the inherent dignity and religiousness of human nature" (*Rituals of Spontaneity* 178). Rossetti and Lewis also seek to dignify religion in modernity, not as the

solution to the secular but as what can ultimately invigorate secular strategies with meaning and significance.

The sacramental has remained a consistent motif for imaginative thinkers tasked with integrating disparate pieces of human existence and the human condition. It recognizes that even in quotidian existence, there is this general feeling that we are all conducting ourselves according to some gut-like, intuitive way-of-knowing in order to experience “fullness.” Though we do not understand the origins of this desire or what it all means, this unknowing keeps us in pursuit of something ever more about to be. In Wordsworth’s “The Thorn,” we are to attend to the thornbush, not to understand Martha Ray’s situation but to enable a felt connectedness that enables a “powerless power” (Kearney 86). Similarly, in “Goblin Market,” we are to accept the curative effects of the goblin fruit comingled with Lizzie’s flesh without knowing how any of it works or why it means something to us. And, finally, in *Till We Have Faces*, we learn to pursue the mystery of the divine nature of the world, as both Orual and Psyche did in their own ways, despite the fact that what we are pursuing will only leave us dumbfounded and silenced. In each of these texts, the author’s sacramental poetics seeks to attune our minds, bodies, and spirits to a meaningful universe.

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