VICTORIAN RELIGIOUS WOMEN WRITERS AND COMMUNAL IDENTITIES

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In nineteenth-century Britain, the dominant ideology of the subject was isolate individualism, which represented the individual as autonomous, separate from and prior to community. There is growing evidence, however, that Victorian women's sense of identity was not well-represented by the individualist tradition, that women saw the self as more social and less isolated than the dominant construction implied. Feminist legal scholars such as Robin West have argued that this vision of the self as "epistemologically and morally prior to the collectivity" expresses a particular masculine rather than universal construction of selfhood. Regenia Gagnier's *Subjectivities*, as well as other work on literary self-representation and autobiographical self-construction,[1] reveals the dissonances and distances between female (and working-class) subjectivities and the hegemonic bourgeois male model of the autonomous self. While some feminists regard women's different sense of self as a result of their social subordination and marginalisation, their status as "relative creatures," others see it as more deeply rooted. According to Nancy Chodorow's object-relations theory, early development in a society where women are children's primary caregivers determines women's more other-regarding self-definition: "Girls emerge from this [oedipal] period with a basis for 'empathy' built into their primary definition of self in ways that boys do not. Girls emerge with a stronger basis for experiencing another's needs or feelings as one's own" (167). Feminist ethicists, sometimes citing the Chodorovian analysis, have also criticized the individualist language of abstract rights as inadequate to a description of women's moral reasoning, which is seen as more communal and particularist.

Whether the differences in self-definition are a result of women's unique experiences in male-dominated societies, or of their early identification with the nurturing mother, or even, most controversially, of evolutionary development, they presented serious problems for the nineteenth-century woman writer. Many feminist scholars, including Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Margaret Homans and Marlon B. Ross, have analyzed the anxieties and problems experienced by women as they attempted to construct a public self in keeping with the dominant ideology of the literary subject, against societal expectations and against their own sense of

[1] See, amongst others, Danahay, Jay, Kearns, Nichols and Rzepka.

selfhood. Religious women writers, however, were able to draw on Christian traditions of communal identity to craft an alternative subjectivity, more communal and more expressive of their own sense of self. Protestant individualism was, of course, an important element in Christian ideologies of selfhood, especially in nineteenth-century Britain, when it found itself strengthened by a more secular Romantic strain. But this individualism coexisted with an older tradition which emphasised the centrality of the Christian community and its communal experience.[2] Moreover, this tradition was reinforced by communal religious institutions of Church, chapel and a multitude of paraecclesiastical groups within particular communities. This surviving tradition gave religious women writers a foundation on which to construct a different sense of self, reflected in a different literary subjectivity.

One way of exploring this subjectivity is to analyse the frequent use of the first-person plural pronoun in this writing. This communal "we" is prevalent across genres in women's religious literature – in religious magazines, novels, hymns and poetry – though its usage varies from genre to genre. The connection between these uses of "we" and Christian traditions of communal identity is clearest in the ways in which Victorian religious women writers make use of traditional religious genres, adapting and combining them with more secular forms to produce a new subjectivity and to claim a voice in their religious tradition and in Victorian society at large.

Religious Literature and Religious Writers

Before examining subjectivity in the work of religious women writers, the category itself needs further explanation. In trying to distinguishing "religious" from "nonreligious" writing, we encounter several problems. First, because Victorian society and its discourses were still strongly influenced by Christian ideologies, much Victorian writing appears remarkably religious to the modern secular eye. This problem may be particularly acute in the case of women writers, since a certain level of piety was expected in Victorian women and, by extension, in their writing. Many works without any strong religious investment may nevertheless be imbued with this kind of proper piety. Moreover, some women writers began their careers as religious writers, but later moved definitively into a more secular, mainstream culture; a few moved in the other direction. Other women writers may have written an occasional religious article or poem, although their main body of work was not particularly religious.

Doctrinal differences also complicate the definitions here. In this paper I argue that this communal subjectivity is evident across a wide range of Christian denominations in nineteenth-century Britain, but variations in doctrine and practice

[2] In the terms used by Raymond Williams, individualism belongs to the dominant ideology of Victorian Britain, while the religiously-authorised communal identity is part of the residual ideology.

affect how this communal subjectivity is manifested. Evangelicalism – both within the Church of England and in Dissenting denominations – promoted a more individualistic version of Christian experience; doctrines emphasizing the crucial role of individual conversion and the "priesthood of the believer" complicate the relationship of the individual believer to the Christian community, as we see in the novels of Emma Jane Worboise and the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning (see below). On the other hand, the de-emphasis of clerical authority and empowerment of lay people tended to allow women writers a greater scope for participation in Evangelical discourse. While the Tractarians, among others, put a great deal more emphasis on the importance of the Church as a Christian community, they also adhered to the doctrine of "reserve in communicating religious knowledge," – the title of Isaac Williams's Tract 80 – which sometimes muted the religious content in the women's writing in this tradition.

In addition to the difficulties introduced by doctrinal difference, generic distinctions also complicate the task of distinguishing a category of religious women writers. The religious writing by women that I consider here and elsewhere encompasses a wide range of purposes, topics and genres – novels, hymns, poems, magazine articles, devotional manuals, including polemic, meditation, exegesis, theological argument, moral instruction and personal narrative. While this diversity makes the common tendency toward communal subjectivity all the more remarkable, it also makes it more difficult to specify the precise scope of "women's religious literature."

But the difficulties are not insuperable. To define the scope of "religious writing" or religious discourse in the Victorian period, we need to examine the relationship of that writing to the institutions that defined Victorian religious culture. Many of the authors I discuss regularly published in and were associated with religious periodicals or religious publishing houses, such as James Clarke's or the SPCK, marking them publicly as religious writers; some of them, such as Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, Charlotte M. Yonge and Emma Jane Worboise, actually edited religious periodicals. The regular literary reviews and occasional lists of recommended authors in religious periodicals also help to define what the Victorians regarded as distinctively religious literature. Introductions in literary anthologies, mainstream literary reviews, and even obituaries provide additional indications of whether the writers were publicly perceived as religious writers. Furthermore, these writers are sometimes self-identified as Christian writers – or specifically Evangelical writers or Tractarian writers – in prefaces or introductory remarks. Defined in this way, the distinction between religious and nonreligious writing is not always sharp – there remains room for argument about particular writers and works – but it is clearly discernible.

For example, an argument for the inclusion of Christina Rossetti among these religious women writers would invoke her identification of sections of her early books of poetry as specifically religious; her contemporary reputation as a religious

poet; the profound engagement of her works with specific Christian texts and ideas; and her publication of her late work with the SPCK. Charlotte Brontë, on the other hand, despite the wealth of Biblical allusions in her works and the importance of religious faith in the lives of some of her characters, was not regarded as a religious writer in Victorian Britain; she published not with religious houses and periodicals but with Smith, Elder; and reviews of her work appearing in religious periodicals, some quite hostile, clearly marked her as an outsider. So despite her personal Christian faith, she would not be included among these religious writers.

For the purposes of this paper, we can identify as religious women writers those who were consciously and publicly participating in a larger Victorian religious discourse from within a religious frame of reference: working with and through the institutions of Victorian religious culture; responding to other religious literature and ongoing Victorian religious debates; addressing religious issues, whether moral, doctrinal, or political; and invoking religious or spiritual authorities to underwrite their public participation. In addition, as I will argue, they saw themselves as writing for an imagined congregation of readers who shared their religious concerns, if not their specific doctrinal commitments. It was membership in this community that helped authorise their identities as women writers, and this communal identity is evident in the novels, hymns and poems that I discuss in this paper.

Religious Novels and the Homiletic "We"

When modern readers of Victorian religious fiction complain of its didacticism, its "preachiness," they accurately register significant differences between these works and mainstream literature and correctly identify those differences as stemming from their debt to the sermon. In particular, women's religious novels can usefully be analysed as a hybrid genre combining elements from mainstream novels and from homiletic tradition.

Feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter, Dorothy Mermin, Christine Kreuger and Robyn Warhol have all noted the similarities between women's religious novels and sermons, and the novelists themselves sometimes claimed for their works a status commensurate with that of the sermon. As Emma Jane Worboise, religious novelist and editor, wrote "there is no profession more truly *sacred* than authorship; like the ministry, it ought to be a *vocation* rather than a profession [. . .] True and worthy authors [. . .] are dedicated to the noblest toil on earth! They rank with the ministers of God's Word, and in another way they do His work [. . .]" ("Inkshed" 34). Their readers, too, took the religious teaching in these novels seriously, approaching them with an expectation of edification rather than mere entertainment.

The similarity between Victorian religious novels and sermons is strengthened by shared stylistic traits and rhetorical methods. Individual episodes, and novels as a whole, reflect the homiletic tradition of the *exemplum*, even as they maintain the narrative structure of the novel. Rhetorical devices such as the "concatenation of

passages," or series of allusions, common in sermons, appear in these novels as well. The novelist-preachers also adopt the method of homiletic *exegesis*, sometimes filtering their textual analysis through an admirable character, but often speaking in their own person to the "congregation" of readers. And the "texts" for these "sermons" are often represented through the novelistic device of epigraphs; these regularly appear at the start of the novels' chapters in the same position on the page that Biblical texts occupy at the start of published sermons. The most telling stylistic similarity between women's religious novels and traditional sermons, however, concerns their use of the homiletic "we."

The homiletic "we," unlike the editorial "we," represents a genuine inclusion; "we" stands for the congregation – all the people hearing, or, sometimes, reading the utterances – and the preacher, engaged together in the same intellectual endeavour and moral struggle. Unlike sage writing, which, as George P. Landow characterizes it, "attacks the audience" ("Aggressive" 35)[3] utilising "aggressively individualistic techniques" ("Aggressive" 45), the religious novel, through the homiletic "we," locates the speaker within the community, not above it, and while it generally promotes changes in belief and/or action, it does so on the basis of communal rather than individualistic values. If the sage is, in Carlyle's words, "the world's Priest," the female religious novelist is, perhaps, "the world's vicar."

The homiletic "we" also helps clarify the distinction between novels in general and this sermonically-inflected fiction. Most twentieth-century novels attempt to make contact with the solitary reader, as if they were written for her alone, in one-to-one communication. Although most nineteenth-century reading was also private, the Victorian novel could not always assume a solitary reader, since novels were often read aloud within the family circle or in groups of women. While Jane Eyre tells her story to the solitary listener ("Reader, I married him"), Dickens and Thackeray clearly perform before a diverse crowd, a London theatrical audience, often invoking the attention of sub-groups within the crowd: "If Miss Rebecca Sharp had determined in her heart upon making the conquest of this big beau, I don't think, ladies, we have any right to blame her" (*Vanity Fair* 31). Women's religious novels, too, perform before an audience, but it is the traditional audience of the sermon: a congregation, sometimes mixed, usually implicitly female, gathered to receive spiritual, theological, or moral teaching, hoping for entertainment but expecting encouragement and enlightenment.

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[3] Both John Holloway's *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* and Thais E. Morgan's collection *Victorian Sages and Cultural Discourse: Renegotiating Gender and Power* offer much less restrictive definitions of the sage and sage writing, but the generic group quickly becomes so large and inchoate as to make the description "sage writing" useless. Landow's more precise definitions, explored in his *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* and "Aggressive (Re)interpretations of the Female Sage: Florence Nightingale's Cassandra" help us make important distinctions between different kinds of, and relationships with, cultural authority.

A few passages from women's religious novels will illustrate their sermonic quality and their reliance on the homiletic "we." The first example is a short exegetical passage from Dinah Mulock Craik's *Christian's Mistake*:

> "*Faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*"
>
> There is a deeper meaning in this text than we at first see. Of "these three," two concern ourselves; the third concerns others. When faith and hope fail, as they do sometimes, we must try charity, which is love in action. We must speculate no more on our duty, but simply do it. When we have done it, however blindly, perhaps Heaven will show us the reason why. (64)

Despite often-cited injunctions against women's participation in Scriptural exegesis, passages such as Craik's are common in women's religious fiction.

In *Sir Roland Ashton*, when a romantic reversal leaves the hero praying for fortitude, Catharine Long breaks into the narrative to "preach" on a text by Hannah More:

> "Why should we not go to religion for the loss of our temper, as well as for the loss of our child?" asks that mistress of the human heart, Hannah More. Ah! if all would but do so, what a smiling face would this world wear, compared with its present fretful and frowning look! [. . .]
>
> That "trifles form the sum of human things" (another of Hannah More's excellent sayings) all will acknowledge; yet how few act as if they believed it! For one hour which is agonised by fearful griefs, or torn by afflictive bereavements, how many thousands do we spend in oppressive and stinging bitterness, owing to the tempers – selfish, malignant, unfeeling – of ourselves or others! [. . .]
>
> Sir Roland was wise therefore, and faithful to himself and to his God, to check with a strong hand, the first beginnings of evil [. . .] (I:226-7)

Here Long clearly treats her story as a kind of extended exemplum, using this homiletic passage to apply its lessons directly to the lives of her readers. Her use of exclamatory sentences, frequent quotations and moral anecdote further indicates her debt to sermonic discourse.

While the homiletic voice is usually that of the third-person narrator, even with a first-person (singular) narration, the narrator can become her author's mouthpiece in first-person plural passages such as the following, from Worboise's *Maude Bolingbroke*:

> It is written, "the effectual prayer of a righteous man availeth much," and may I not attribute to the earnest prayers of my forsaken sister, those events which, by the wisdom and love of my Heavenly Father, emancipated me from a bondage far more bitter than that under which his own chosen people groaned when oppressed by the Egyptian tyrant? I really think we do not sufficiently value and practise intercessory prayer; perhaps, this arises from selfishness; perhaps, from thoughtlessness; but from whatever it arise, it is surely very culpable. How did the holy patriarch, the "father of the faithful," plead with God for the doomed city of Sodom! how did Jeremiah lament over the desolation of Jerusalem, and pray that the Lord would return and have mercy upon it! and how did Daniel, the man greatly beloved, seek by prayer, and supplication, and fasting, and sackcloth and ashes, that the face of the Lord might shine upon the desolated sanctuary! And shall we, who are bound by so many bonds of affection not only to individual recipients of our love, but also to all who are joined unto the household of God; shall we not find it our sweet duty, our highly-valued privilege, to kneel at a throne of grace, and entreat blessings for all those who are united to us in temporal or spiritual union? [. . .]
>
> But to return, I wrote to my solicitor in London [. . .] (459)

Using the homiletic "we" and a "concatenation of passages," Worboise's Maude Bolingbroke calls the readers whom she addresses to an enhanced appreciation of community and communal responsibility through intercessory prayer. Though it clearly stands apart from more narrative passages, the "sermon" arises from the events of the narrative and connects the lessons of that narrative with the lives of its imagined community of readers.

The religious novels quoted above all employ the homiletic "we" to a greater or lesser extent, but some religious women novelists seldom adopt the first person plural pronoun. High-Church author Charlotte M. Yonge, the most widely-read of these novelists, almost never uses it, putting sermonic content into the mouths of characters instead; this indirect sermonising may result in part from her doctrinal commitment to "reserve in communicating religious knowledge." It may also have allowed her novels to become more popular with mainstream readers precisely because her work did not depart so much from generic expectations. On the other hand, in *Helen Fleetwood* Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna often adopts a more antagonistic, prophetic second-person, one heard more often in the Evangelical sermons of her tradition, as here where she addresses "Christian masters":

> Yes, ye thoughtless holders of these treasuries of immortal souls, your dead are quickly buried out of your sight, and speedily forgotten; but do they not live, to greet you when the earth discloses her blood, and no more covers her slain; and when, in reference not merely to the perished body, but to the writhing souls for ever cut off from life, for ever doomed to conscious unutterable death, a voice you cannot close your ear against, asks in thunder the awful question, "WHO SLEW ALL THESE?" (*Works* 630)

While still undoubtedly sermonic, this passage establishes a very different relationship with the reader than does the homiletic "we." At other points, Tonna, serialising the novel in her own magazine, reverts to a noninclusive editorial "we." But at important moments Tonna does establish a sense of community with her readers – particularly the women readers of the *Christian Lady's Magazine* – through an inclusive first person plural, as here:

> Two classes, hitherto bound together by mutual interest and mutual respect, are daily becoming more opposed the one to the other. We may close our eyes to the inevitable consequences, appalling even as concerns present things alone; but no such wilful blindness to the evil will either quench its existence or arrest its course. If those who alone have power to do so refuse to listen, we cannot help it; but as we must all expect to be buried in the ruin they are bringing on the country, it is no less our duty to lift the voice of remonstrance, than it is theirs to regard that voice. (*Works* 627)

The sense of practical powerlessness – and, thus, comparative innocence – increases the sense of a woman speaking to women here, calling on them to speak out against male oppressors of the poor.

But while these religious novels by women have important homiletic characteristics, they are significantly different from traditional sermons. First, while the sermon is essentially an oral and public genre, these novels remain written and private. Their authors tried to use the rhetoric of the novel, however, to foster a sense of community among its readers, to create a kind of "virtual congregation." But to what extent did they succeed?

Indications of the experience of readers are difficult to come by, but I have discovered evidence that suggests that the individual reader of these novels did feel herself part of a larger, sympathetic community of readers. While studying copies of Worboise's novels that the Bodleian Library had acquired from the Liverpool Circulating Library, I discovered that readers, sometimes clearly women, also

communicated with future readers through notes written in the margins.[4] *Thornycroft Hall* was the most thoroughly marked. Sometimes a note signified little more than a nod of the head during a sermon: "Too true" or even the more equivocal "A very good book, but too good to be true" written on the final page. There was one short debate over a quoted verse about men's infidelity: "Essence of wisdom" wrote one female reader. "No! No! No! quite a mistake, just the reverse," replied another. "Shame! to put such ideas into girls' heads" appeared in still another hand, followed by some illegible remark about "their husbands" (321). Readers were also exercised about more explicitly theological matters: a passage about Broad Church tolerance of Dissent was marked by one reader, crossed out by a second, then re-marked with this note: "The individual who crossed that out is wrong" (226). And, finally, a comment that demonstrates the writer's sense of a community of female readers, a comment directed to other women about women's concerns: beside a passage detailing the trials of patience wrought by a squalling infant is a two-line comment; the first line has faded beyond recognition, but the second line reads: "I wish young babies would be born grown up" (454).

Obviously, it is difficult to estimate just how prevalent the practice of writing marginal comments intended for future readers was, especially since circulating library copies of such books were less likely to survive the rigours of repeated reading than were private or copyright library copies. A criticism made by Charlotte M. Yonge in her "Autobiography," however, indicates that the practice was common: "As to new books, in those days circulating libraries consisted generally of third-rate novels, very dirty, very smoky, and with remarks plentifully pencilled in the margins" (111). These marginal comments that Yonge deplores testify to the readers' sense of themselves as part of and occasionally in communication with a community or congregation of readers.

It is important to remember that Victorian women's religious novels, while they owe much to homiletic tradition, are not merely traditional sermons by another name. Although they adopt a communal subjectivity derived from the homiletic tradition, these novels are multivocal and built around a narrative structure. Their multivocality, while it undermines the authority accorded to any one voice, even the "preacher's" own, allows women writers to express themselves without completely silencing other voices, something they as women may have been particularly reluctant to do. It provides them with the opportunity to suggest through their novels ideas that would not receive a hearing if expounded univocally; thus they use multivocality to make room for their own silenced voices. The narrative form of the novel may also have been particularly appropriate for the expression of Victorian

[4] Of course, the marginal notation of books was common practice, although the notation of novels indicates the seriousness with which their ideas were read. Nevertheless, most *marginalia* are written with the original reader's future use in mind; the women who annotated copies of these novels knew that they would probably never see the books again – they were writing not for themselves but for future readers.

women's religious and moral ideas. In *In A Different Voice*, Carol Gilligan suggests that women's moral thinking tends to be "contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract" (19), a kind of moral deliberation embodied in the religious novel. Thus, the religious novel, which might initially seem to be a compromise for women denied access to the pulpit, turns out to be uniquely appropriate and powerful.

By importing the homiletic "we" with its implications of communal identity into the tradition of the English novel, religious women writers created for themselves a hybrid genre, one better-suited than either original genre for expressing their moral insights and their more communal sense of self. Moreover, the homiletic "we" may have influenced mainstream literature in unrecognised ways, in particular in the later fiction of George Eliot. Critics agrcc that over the course of her career Eliot's narratorial voice moves away from the particularised masculine narrators of her early fiction, but there is no agreement about how to characterise the narratorial voice of her later novels, *Felix Holt*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. One traditional view, represented in the work of J. Hillis Miller and Barbara Hardy, held that Eliot moved toward a more communal voice, suggested by her increasing use of first person plural pronouns. More recently, however, critics have tended to regard this "we" as not authentically communal, but rather as an assumption of masculine cultural authority and voice. Robyn Warhol sees Eliot moving away from the "engaging narrator" of her earlier works toward a more impersonal narrative style, abandoning her attempt to establish a relationship with the reader, while Susan Sniader Lanser claims that "in the later novels Eliot's narrators assert authority without engaging the reader in its construction or acknowledging dependence on an audience" (95). She regards the first person plural not as communal but as "a totalizing 'we'," the functional equivalent of uncontextualised passive constructions: "the unmarked Male of Authority itself, all the more powerful for being invisible and impersonal" (96).

A different reading is suggested, however, if Eliot's work is seen in the context of women's religious literature, a subgenre with which she was familiar from her cnthusiastically religious youth. Certainly, the use of "we" allows Eliot to avoid identifying with either gender explicitly; she neither portrays herself as masculine, as in the earlier fiction, some of which was written before her identity became common knowledge, nor as feminine, which might undermine her cultural authority. But her complex and variable use of the pronoun can be read, at least in part, as an adaptation of the communal voice of women's religious novels, rather than exclusively as a adoption of an authoritative masculine voice. Significantly, Eliot's increased use of "we" coincides with her adoption of epigraphs, which were absent in her early work and omnipresent in her later novels: as I have argued above,

both epigraphs and a communal "we" were characteristics of women's religious novels deriving from homiletic models.[5]

But religious novelists constructed their imagined communities on the foundation of real Christian communities, including local congregations; many of their Christian readers felt a pre-existing sense of community and believed in a common Christian experience which authorised the communal voice. Eliot, on the other hand, imagined a universal human community, the proper congregation for her "religion of humanity"; because readers seldom felt a strong sense of communal identification with the whole of their species, Eliot had to construct her community from scratch, insisting on the commonality of human experience. Some of the variation in Eliot's narratorial tone and stance may in fact result from the tensions inherent in such a project.[6] In addition, her "we," while it strives to be more inclusive than that of the religious writers, actually seems to many readers less inclusive, more like an ungrounded claim to authority. Viewing her work within the context of women's religious novels, however, we can regard Eliot's appeal to community as an authorising strategy itself, an attempt to claim authority through membership in the human community, and her universal "we" can be traced back to its communal – and ultimately homiletic – origins.[7]

Religious Poetry and the Congregational "We"

The novel was not the only genre of women's religious writing that adopted a more communal subjectivity: similar shifts in subjectivity can be analysed in periodical essays, devotional works and even in autobiography. The move toward communal subjectivity is most remarkable, however, in the genre most influenced by Romantic individualism: lyric poetry. Just as religious novelists changed the literary

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[5] In *Fictions of Authority*, Susan Sniader Lanser notes the introduction of epigraphs into Eliot's late work and discusses them at some length (97-100). Although she argues, correctly, that epigraphs are characteristic of women's novels and that they are frequently scriptural, she sees Eliot's use of them – particularly her use of her own writing as epigraph – as a further indirect attempt to claim masculine authority: "the extrafictional 'George Eliot' stands among male voices as the dominant though unidentified voice" (99). I would argue, however, that the use of epigraphs indicates her participation in a female tradition of fiction, and in particular in one freely adapted from sermonic practices.

[6] One can witness the struggle to hold this human community together in *Middlemarch*; when Eliot is trying to insist upon a sympathetic identification with an unsympathetic character such as Casaubon or Lydgate in his less perceptive moments, she often resorts to first-person singular ("For my part I am very sorry for him" (280); "The faults will not, I hope, be a reason for the withdrawal of your interest in him" (149)), demonstrating an awareness that her readers would resist a "we" that brought them into community with this aspect of human experience.

[7] While discussions of Victorian sage writing have noted the homiletic quality of these "secular sermons," it is important to note in the case of Eliot the communal (as opposed to oppositional) tone of the homiletic discourse and the fact that women's religious novels had preceded Eliot in feminising this discourse and importing it into the realm of fiction.

subjectivity of the novel by incorporating the homiletic "we" of the sermon tradition, so religious poets revised the dominant Romantic lyric subjectivity by invoking a communal identity represented in the hymn tradition.

Recently, Victorian hymns have begun to receive some long-overdue critical attention. Critics such as Lionel Adey and Susan Tamke analyse cultural and social themes in Victorian hymns,[8] while Ian Bradley provides an entertaining overview in *Abide With Me: The World of Victorian Hymns* (1997). Even more significantly, J.R. Watson, who has written widely on Romantic poetry, has turned his attention to hymns as a poetic genre, publishing a monograph on *The English Hymn* (1997) as well as *An Annotated Anthology of Hymns* (2002). He also wrote the entry on the "Hymn" for the Blackwell *Companion to Victorian Poetry*; the inclusion of the genre in this guide indicates a growing awareness of its significance, due in large part to Watson's own efforts. For many years, however, the Victorian hymn received little attention from literary scholars and scarcely more from cultural critics, and even today the field remains small. I believe this is partly because the hymn departs in such significant ways from the normative poetic standards derived from Romantic doctrine and dominant throughout the nineteenth century.[9] Romantic ideology regarded poetry as the expression of the unique experience of one extraordinary individual, a genius, a *vates*. The focus was on the originality of the vision and the individuality of the author, an individualism that could border on solipsism. But if Romantic lyrics were the poetry of individuality, hymns were the poetry of community.

Hymns speak not out of the unique experience of the Romantic "I," but out of the common experience of the congregational "we," and they most often employ the plural pronoun. G.B. Tennyson and Susan Drain both attempt to distinguish devotional poetry from hymnody (with perhaps limited success) by characterising the former as private, the latter as public and communal (Tennyson 5; Drain 35-8). Drain notes that "Just as the prayers in the church service voice common concerns, so hymns derive their force from common experience" (40). John Keble even regarded "the use of the first person singular" as "uncongregational" (Drain 302) and sometimes hymnal editors adapted a poem or hymn for congregational use by changing the poet's "I" to "we" (Drain 311-12). On other occasions, though, the original first person singular was left intact. Even so, the congregational context changed the vision of subjectivity expressed by that singular pronoun, replacing the individual conceived as autonomous and prior to community with an individual rooted in and defined in part by his/her communal attachments.

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[8] See Adey 1986 and 1988, and Tamke. Drain also makes an important contribution to the field.

[9] The fact that scholarship on the eighteenth-century hymn (and, in fact, on earlier hymns) is so much more widely practised and so much further advanced than work on Victorian hymns provides support for the idea that Romantic ideology plays a role in the relative neglect of these nineteenth-century hymns.

This alternative subjectivity was particularly important for women hymnists. Many critics have noted the difficulties that the Romantic "I" presented for women writers:[10] the self-assertiveness and self-centredness required violated women's socially-prescribed roles; the lyrical self-revelation entailed was associated with "indecent exposure" and even sexual impurity;[11] women found it harder to deny the profound effects of material and cultural conditions on identity; women's other-directedness made the silencing of other voices problematic; and their sense of themselves as women included relationship and community, rather than denying them. Moreover, the individualism of this construction of self threatened both men and women writers with isolation and solipsism. The communal subjectivity of the hymn tradition allowed women writers to avoid these obstacles erected by Romantic ideology and, perhaps, to employ a subjectivity more in keeping with their pre-existing sense of themselves.

Religious women poets who wanted to participate in the high poetic tradition, however, continued to face all these problems. A possible solution was to attempt to import the subjectivity of the congregational "we" into lyric poetry. Such a strategy is evident in the religious work of several women poets in nineteenth-century Britain, including the two most prominent: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti.

Barrett Browning might seem an unlikely example in a discussion of communal subjectivity in lyric poetry. Much of her early career was spent as a virtual recluse, her isolation reinforced by her father's "aversion to outsiders" (Mermin 58), and her Dissenting religious tradition was one that emphasised an individual relationship with God, the priesthood of the believer, with a correspondingly weaker emphasis on religious community. Moreover, she was the creator of *Aurora Leigh*, which celebrates the woman poet's right to full participation in an individualist literary subjectivity. But while Barrett Browning's later poetry seems to conform to the dominant individualist ideology, her early work records her experiments with alternative ways of defining the self, especially in *The Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838) and *Poems* (1844); here, the individual voice is more closely and complexly related to a congregational one as the poet challenges the claims of Wordsworthian Romantic subjectivity.

The tension between Romantic individualism and a more communal Christian identity permeates the 1838 volume, but is clearest, perhaps, in "Earth and Her Praisers." The poem's climax is a competition between a Romantic poet and a Christian to see which one is the truest Nature poet, the proper Praiser of Earth. In a perceptive parody of Wordsworth, Barrett has the self-absorbed Romantic end up unable to move beyond self-glorification to outward-directed poetry:

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[10] See especially Gilbert and Gubar 539-49; Homans, Rosenblum 7-10, 110-114; and Ross.

[11] See, especially, Mermin.

'Neath a golden cloud he stands,
Spreading his impassioned hands.
'O God's Earth!' he saith, 'the sign
From the Father-soul to mine
Of all beauteous mysteries,
Of all perfect images
Which, divine in his divine,
In my human only are
Very excellent and fair!
Think not, Earth, that I would raise
Weary forehead in thy praise,
(Weary, that I cannot go
Farther from thy region low,)
If were struck no richer meanings
From thee than thyself. [. . .]
Earth, I praise thee! praise thou *me*!
God perfecteth his creation
With this recipient poet-passion,
And makes the beautiful to be.
I praise thee, O beloved sign
From the God-soul unto mine!
Praise me, that I cast on thee
The cunning sweet interpretation,
The help and glory and dilation
Of mine immortality!' (ll. 120-34; 149-158)

This Romantic paean is followed by silence – "There was silence. None did dare / To use again the spoken air / Of that far-charming voice," (159-61) – representing the dominance of the Romantic paradigm. But a speaker identified only as a Christian is ultimately willing to reply, and his reply incorporates a communal subjectivity:

'O Earth,
I count the praises thou art worth,
By thy waves that move aloud,
By thy hills against the cloud,
By thy valleys warm and green,
By the copses' elms between [. . .]
– 'O beautiful
Art thou, Earth, albeit worse
Than in heaven is called good!
Good to use, that we may know

Meekly from thy good to go;
While the holy, crying Blood
Puts its music kind and low
'Twixt such ears as are not dull,
  And thine ancient curse!'

* * *

XI

'Earth, we Christians praise thee thus,
Even for the change that comes
With a grief from thee to us [. . .]' (ll. 159-73; 182-90; 220-22)

Barrett here identifies the religious poet with the "we" of the Christian congregation and congregational hymnody. The collective voice does not dominate or silence the individual voice of the inspired Christian poet: the "we" makes his (and, thus, her) "I" more authoritative and less liable to the accusation of self-centredness, but the individual Christian Soul, not the congregation, remains the proper praiser. This "I" is not, however, the lyrical Romantic "I" that finds its fullest selfhood in solitude: by situating the individual within a community, Barrett constructs an alternative subjectivity that rejects the isolation and ungrounded autonomy of the Romantic paradigm.

The poems in the rest of the volume replay this alternation (or intertwining) of communal and individual voices; most notable are a series of four poems entitled "Hymn." By shifting from the lyrical "I" to the corporate voice of congregational singing in these poems, Barrett is able to construct an alternative poetic subjectivity, less troubled than the autonomous Romantic self which appears (and is often silenced or punished) in other poems in the volume.

In the volumes that follow, Barrett gradually abandons her critique of Romantic ideology and her experiments with alternative subjectivities. Her poem "A Vision of Poets" from *Poems* (1844) seems to mark a crucial kind of transition. In this allegorical poem, the questing poet is led by a queenly lady, who insists that he drink from four pools of water, the last of which represents World's cruelty: only then is he granted the vision of the title, a vision of a great medieval church in which an angel sits before an enormous organ. The congregation is composed not of a Christian community, but an elite anthology of poets, including great writers from the classical period (Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, Sappho, and so on) through to the Romantics (Burns, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Coleridge). These poets form a congregation because, while not all intended to serve the Christian God – Shelley was, as Barrett well knew, an atheist – through their pursuit of Beauty, they could be used by Him for His own good purposes. The lady-guide of the vision explains how the angel's organ works: "'His organ's clavier strikes along / These poets' hearts, sonorous, strong, / They gave him without count of wrong – / 'A

diapason whence to guide / Up to God's feet, from these who died, / An anthem fully glorified'" (ll. 442-7) As in so many of Christina Rossetti's late poems, community is represented by the harmony of corporate music; here, though, the angel struggles with the music:

> Then rose and fell (with swell and swound
> Of shapeless noises wandering round
> A concord which at last they found)
>
> Those mystic keys: the tones were mixed,
> Dim, faint, and thrilled and throbbed betwixt
> The incomplete and the unfixed:
>
> And therein mighty minds were heard
> In mighty musings, inly stirred,
> And struggling outward for a word:
>
> Until these surges, having run
> This way and that, gave out as one
> An Aphrodite of sweet tune,
>
> A Harmony that, finding vent,
> Upward in grand ascension went,
> Winged to a heavenly argument, [. . .] (ll. 472-86)

Rather than any Christian congregation joined in communal hymn-singing, it is this communion of poets with its problematic harmony that provides for Elizabeth Barrett Browning an imagined community. It is this vision that helps reconcile her desire for communion and "brotherhood" with her commitment to a Romantic paradigm of isolate individualism, and it is this paradigm that informed her later poetry.

The trajectory of Christina Rossetti's negotiations with communal subjectivity is the opposite of Barrett Browning's. While Barrett Browning's early lyrical "we" recedes as she turns to an individualist subjectivity underwritten by her Dissenting tradition, Rossetti's embrace of communal subjectivity, reinforced by the emphasis on community in High Anglicanism, becomes stronger later in her career. To employ a scientific metaphor, for Barrett Browning communal subjectivity is an early experiment; for Rossetti, it becomes a research paradigm whose possibilities she explores throughout her late poetry.

In the transitional volume, *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881), the shift from individual to communal subjectivity can be seen most clearly in a comparison between the volume's two sonnet sequences, *Monna Innominata* and *Later Life*. In

her first and more famous sequence, *Monna Innominata*, Rossetti tries to make room for the woman's voice within a masculine poetic tradition by allowing the traditionally silent beloved of the Petrarchan sonnet sequence to speak, using the lyrical "I" of the individualist subjectivity. Notoriously, however, the woman's voice ends by recounting its own silencing, representing, perhaps, a failure to recuperate this lyrical subjectivity for the woman speaker. When Rossetti revisits the problematic genre of the sonnet sequence with *Later Life: a Double Sonnet of Sonnets*, she again writes about love and a desire for union, but not the traditional heterosexual pairing; again the work is lyrical, but here she does not use the first-person singular, the lyrical "I," but the first-person plural, the lyrical "we."

Sonnets 1-3 in *Later Life* are written in the first person plural, the second tending to homiletic exhortation, the third to congregational hymn, but they are similar in that they contain lyrical sentiments expressed collectively. For instance, in light of the title of the sequence, the "sun hurrying toward the west" in Sonnet 2, the sense of urgency in "All left undone, we have yet to do the whole" indicates Rossetti's awareness of age and approaching death, although it also has apocalyptic resonances. In Sonnet 3, "Our wordless tearless dumbness of distress" recalls Rossetti's earlier lyric (written in the first-person singular), "A Better Resurrection":

> I have no wit, no words, no tears;
>   My heart within me like a stone
> Is numbed too much for hopes or fears;
>   Look right, look left, I dwell alone. (I: 68)

But in the later sonnet, the lyric speaker is no longer alone: she is "we." Sonnets 4 and 5 see the first occurrence of "I," the traditional pronoun of the sonnet; Sonnet 6, while it reads like a lyric, again uses the plural pronoun. Throughout the sequence the voices alternate, the plaintive soloist "I" and the choral "we."

This harmonic unity is not easily achieved for Christina Rossetti, and the sonnet sequence documents her struggles with the tensions of individual and communal identities. Sonnet 8 takes up the issue of difference and unity directly:

> We feel and see with different hearts and eyes: –
>   Ah, Christ, if all our hearts could meet in Thee
>   How well it were for them and well for me (8:1-3)

The reality of different perspectives and experiences seems to demolish the lyrical "we" that can allow Romantic self-expression without refusing community, but Rossetti is able to resolve the tension in the following sonnet using the image of two stars. Sirius and the Pole Star, despite the difference, even inequality of their fates – Sirius blazing brightly in a warm summer, Polaris lonely and wintry – and despite the distance between them, still have

> [. . .] orbits pitched in harmony
> Of one dear heaven, across whose depth and length
> Mayhap they talk together without speech. (9:12-14)

The separated "we" – the Christian congregation – still "talk together": they both *communicate*, perhaps through the speechless medium of the printed, perhaps through a more mystical communion of souls; and they *speak collectively*, out of a corporate experience. Thus Pole Star and Sirius justify Rossetti's lyrical "we."

Later sonnets in the sequence deal with other challenges to this reconciliation of individuality and community, especially the problems of gender inequality and death, but in the end Rossetti seems to resolve the difficulties and tensions between communal identity and personal expression, crafting a poetic subjectivity that she continues to use for the rest of her career.[12]

While the communal subjectivity, the lyrical "we," is already prominent in *A Pageant and Other Poems* (1881), it becomes dominant in *Verses* (1893). Diane D'Amico notes the increasing use of the first person plural in the poems collected in the volume:

> Rossetti's poetry becomes, in a sense, less personal. By that I mean that even though the poetry is presented [. . .] as if it were indeed her own voice, and not a persona distinct from the poet, nevertheless it is a voice that could be interpreted as belonging to every or any human being who seeks God. As Rossetti matured, she was attempting to change the poetic voice of her religious poems so that it might represent not just the personal expression of one soul but also that of her audience. (*Christina Rossetti* 160)

Here Rossetti's goals are similar to those of the hymn-writers who try to achieve simultaneously personal and congregational expression. In fact, many poems in *Verses* (1893) use the image of congregational singing to represent the possibilities for an individual identity defined within religious community. The unity of Christians in heaven is often embodied in the unison of their voices, which are in turn compared to water and to thunder: "One thunder of manifold voices harmonious and strong, / One King and one love, and one shout of one worshipping throng" ("What hath God wrought!" II: 287); "As the voice of many waters all saints sing as one, / As the voice of an unclouded thundering" [. . .] "Twelve thousand times twelve thousand voices in unison" ("Before the Throne, and before the Lamb" II: 287). But the danger of loss of self, of utter absorption in the "throng" becomes acute here. Other poems make clearer the persistence of the individual voice in the

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[12] For a fuller discussion of this sequence, see Melnyk.

congregational song. In "So great a cloud of Witnesses," the poet imagines Paradise in terms similar to those above:

> Where the song of saints gives voice to an undividing sea
> On whose plain their feet stand firm while they keep their jubilee.
> As the sound of waters their voice, as the sound of thunderings,
> While they all at once rejoice, while all sing and while each one sings [. . .]
> (II: 291)

Here, though, while the saints again sing in unison – "all sing," the individual voice is not submerged – "each one sings" as part of the harmonious whole.

Both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti experiment with a communal subjectivity imported from the tradition of hymn-writing. While Barrett Browning's experiments were relatively short-lived, and through much of her career she worked instead to recuperate the dominant literary subjectivity for women writers, Rossetti worked at a more fundamental level, using communal identities to reimagine the possibilities for lyric subjectivity. Significantly, in the work of both poets, the periods in which they explored alternatives to the dominant individualist subjectivities (early Barrett Browning and late Rossetti) are generally dismissed by critics as uninteresting or inferior, a reflection of our continuing allegiance to Romantic constructions of poetic identity.

Communal subjectivity appears in the religious writing of nineteenth-century British women from many different Christian denominations, though it is significantly inflected by the doctrines and practices of each particular sect or school. Similarly, though inflected by specific generic traditions, communal subjectivity inhabits many different genres – polemics, periodicals, personal narratives, devotional manuals, novels, hymns and even the individualist genre of lyric poetry. Moreover, religious women writers use and combine religious and secular genres – sermon and novel, hymn and poem – in ways that allow them to adopt a more communal perspective. The persistence of this communal emphasis helps us to recognise within this discourse a resistance to dominant constructions of identity and an attempt to imagine (or reimagine) alternatives. Because of our own, sometimes only half-conscious commitments to post-Romantic individualism, these communal subjectivities have gone unnoticed or, when noticed, have been dismissed as failures to achieve a powerful and autonomous voice, failures attributed to the restrictions of gender or the repressions of patriarchal Christianity. Now, however, our own critique of Romantic selfhood allows us to see past its assumptions and to gain new insights into the lives and self-concepts of Victorian women. But the recognition of communal subjectivity, even as it helps us to recover and interpret Victorian women's writing, may do more: it may help us as we struggle to move beyond the myth of the autonomous, self-defining Self towards less isolating, more comprehensive conceptions of selfhood.

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