

PARADISE REMADE: VICTORIAN WOMEN, RELIGIOUS POETRY, AND THE USES OF HEAVEN

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At the end of 2004, speculating on future directions in Victorian poetry studies, Virginia Blain suggested as a profitable area for inquiry “a new push toward re-opening religious debates from a new knowledge base and a newly sensitized perspective which seeks somehow to put the religion back into the poetry” (72). Blain’s call to re-read Victorian poetry seeking “to put the religion back” is in its own way revolutionary – and, particularly in the case of women’s poetry, overdue. The central importance of Christian religion in the lives of Victorian women and in the construction of Victorian versions of femininity is a commonplace, but only recently have women’s Christian writings of the period begun to receive serious and sustained examination. Christine Krueger’s *The Reader’s Repentance* (1992) focuses on nineteenth-century Methodist women preachers, and argues that women novelists adopted this model in order to take on a prophet’s role, for social criticism. Ruth Jenkins’ *Reclaiming Myths of Power* (1995) discusses both the ideological underpinning of women’s exclusion from spiritual power, and the ways in which nineteenth-century women recreated religious myths “to reinscribe that language and the companion narratives with female experience” (26). Like Krueger, Jenkins focuses on prose writers, including Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Florence Nightingale. Surveying the work of the last few years in *Victorian Literature and Culture*’s 2003 special issue on Victorian religion, Frederick S. Roden reflects that “women’s studies has far exceeded contemporary investigations into nineteenth-century men’s devotion” (394). The articles that appear in the special issue bear out this evaluation, as fourteen of nineteen articles deal explicitly with female authors. Of these, however, only four focus on poetry, either primarily or partially.¹

The ongoing scarcity of treatment of women’s religious verse is due in part to this poetry’s characteristic earnestness and the resistance most of it poses to feminist readings. While feminist scholars have in recent decades offered valuable recuperations and analyses of voices of unorthodoxy and protest, the bulk of

¹ In this issue, Charles LaPorte’s article on George Eliot’s manipulation of the prophetic poetess model presents a significant contribution to the discussion of the female poetic tradition in the nineteenth century. LaPorte does, however, set Eliot’s poetry into a “post-Christian” context; my focus is on those poets who continue to consciously align themselves with an explicitly Christian tradition.

Victorian women's literary activity within Christian discourse has generally been dismissed as complicit with patriarchal oppression – as being insufficiently subversive, and therefore less “interesting” or “useful.” This has proved particularly true in the case of religious verse. For example, Kathleen Hickok's important early survey, *Representations of Women: Nineteenth Century British Women's Poetry* (1984), omits study of devotional poetry even though she notes its importance and congeniality as a genre for women of the era. More recently, Dorothy Mermin's *Godiva's Ride* (1993) too hastily dismisses the range of creative negotiations Victorian women poets undertook with Christian structures, asserting broadly: “women could not afford to question the faith that gave them poetic authority” (115). Elisabeth Jay perceives similar limitations in nineteenth-century religious verse by women, criticising its frequent “tendency to narrow the Romantic sensibility into piously sentimental versifying” (259) and also its “dispiriting” voluminousness. An important exception to the general dearth of critical treatments of women's verse negotiations with religious faith is found in Cynthia Scheinberg's *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England* (2002). Scheinberg limits her analysis to the work of four women poets, but she provides a nuanced and suggestive discussion of the variety and vitality of treatments of religious debates that may be found in Victorian women's verse.

Much more work remains to be done exploring the Christian poetry produced by Victorian women of all denominational and doctrinal backgrounds, voluminous and various as it is. By neglecting to fully examine the construction and operation of Victorian women's Christian verse, we have rendered our understanding of the ways women's literature was engaging with certain contemporaneous cultural debates partial, if not skewed. Certainly, this verse is challenging. It challenges certain of our own modernist-inflected value judgments, most notably our valorisation of expressions of doubt over expressions of faith. It upholds the tenets of Christianity, including those that have traditionally been used to subordinate women; it eschews for the most part the intellectually or scientifically based challenges to the scriptures that have stimulated many studies of, for example, Tennyson and Browning; and, stylistically, the majority of this verse depends on ornament and sentiment rather than irony and complexity. The finely honed tools of critical examination of the last twenty years or so have proved of little use in analysing and even accurately *reading* this body of poetry.

Resistant to recuperation though this poetry may appear, certain scholars have offered useful pointers forward. Jerome McGann, Jane Tompkins and others have called for a re-evaluation of the sentimental. McGann reminds us that in the case of sensibility or sentimental literature,

Adequate reading begins [. . .] by entering into those conventions, by reading in the same spirit that the author writ. To do this requires a considerable effort of sympathetic identification:

considerable, because (a) we have been taught for so long to unread this kind of writing, and (b) because the writing itself is difficult, often in fact a kind of anti-writing. (*Poetics* 4)²

Tompkins argues that the style of a literary text, far from being dismissible as extraneous or embarrassing, does “cultural work” of its own, and she demands a new assessment of literatures often marginalised as secondary or second-rate. The re-evaluatory models offered by McGann and Tompkins, which encourage a re-visioning allied to that suggested by Isobel Armstrong when she contends that the most conventional lyric may best illuminate the operation of conventionality from within (336), may provide a blueprint for examining a challenging kind of literature with new eyes.

To train “new eyes” on Victorian women’s religious poetry, I propose to analyse in this paper the particular case of a triply marginalised body of verse, “second rate” in theme as well as in style and in genre: women’s poetry of a Christian heaven. Matthew Arnold mocked the Victorian heaven as “a kind of perfected middle-class home, with labour ended, the table spread, goodness all around, the lost ones restored, hymnody incessant” (6: 403). Nineteenth-century novels and poems provide endless illustrations of the stereotype Arnold parodies; their paradises are populated by plump-cheeked cherubs, where loved ones gone before smile blissfully from shining golden streets. Popular hymnodist and devotional poet Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander provides a wealth of these depictions, often concentrating on heaven’s physical beauties:

O! For the pearly gates of heaven!
 O! For the golden floor!
 O! For the Sun of Righteousness
 That setteth nevermore. (from “The Roseate Hues of Early Dawn”)

In another of literally countless examples, the lesser-known Lydia Louisa Denning projects an entirely domesticated bliss in “The Christian’s Home”:

O dear, delightful, happy place,
 Where soon we shall each other greet;
 Our home of grandeur and of grace,
 Where all the saints together meet.

² However, even McGann’s own *Poetics of Sensibility* omits a full consideration of religious sentiment, the relation of sentiment to the practice and imagining of Christianity, and in particular the possible deployment of sentiment in poetry for religious purposes.

Victorian Heaven, as a literary trope, has proved, like the sub-genre of Christian poetry, easily dismissible as a perfect nexus of Victorian sentimentality, mawkish piety, love of decoration, and the idealisation of small children. The monolith of this stereotyped view of middle-class Victorian belief, which helps perpetuate and is in turn perpetuated by the monolith of our critical preconceptions about women's religious verse, demands interrogation and complication. In fact, Victorian women poets created many heavens, and particularly in the last decades of the nineteenth century, women poets' treatments of heaven began to diverge in some extremely suggestive ways. I focus in this article mostly on poetry written after 1880, when Victorian women's legal and intellectual horizons were expanding: from the 1870s a number of intrepid young women had begun studying at Oxford and Cambridge; in 1882 the Married Women's Property Act allowed women to retain a degree of control over their own money and property within marriage; and in the final decades of the century, popular newspapers and magazines increasingly debated the true parameters of woman's sphere. While paradise like any other location of cultural value is fluid and "travels" over time, paradisaic shifts at century's end may reflect significant shifts in the ways women articulated ideas of themselves and their "place." Exploring late Victorian women poets' sometimes unexpected negotiations with a Christian paradise will, I contend, enable us to realise and explore the variety of negotiations women made with a broader Christian discourse. Thus the question of how late Victorian women imagined and structured heaven leads to exploration of what these multiple heavens reveal about these writers' engagement with spiritual authority on their earth.

Within necessary constraints of scope, the article will survey a range of voices, uncovering differing methods of engagement with biblical intertexts, and suggesting how variously and strategically women poets use language to reshape their relationship to the power structures controlling this world and the Other. This unexamined multiplicity of constructions of and responses to heaven should alert us to what may be going on even in the blandest-seeming verse: a wrestling for spiritual speaking authority. I aim to show how Victorian women poets' versions of a Christian heaven went beyond sentimentalised cherub-throngs to overtly politicised utopias, but also further; that is, slavish complicity and overt polemic are only two of a range of positions Victorian women took in their religious writings. My ultimate argument is that poetry about heaven enabled women to respond creatively to restrictions on expressive capability and definitional right, challenging univocal Christian androcentrism and diversifying the sources of authoritative speaking on religious topics.

Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang describe the nineteenth-century heaven as the beginning of the "modern" paradise, an anthropocentric heaven as opposed to the theocentric heaven espoused by seventeenth and eighteenth-century divines like Richard Baxter and John Wesley. Nineteenth-century Christians came increasingly to see heaven as extremely close to earth, entered immediately after

death. Their heaven became characterised by recognisable materiality and sensually experienced pleasure as well as activity; this was a dynamic rather than static state. Finally, in the nineteenth century “a focus on human love expressed in communal and familial concerns slowly replaces the primacy of divine love in the beatific vision” (183). Social relationships, the love of spouses, parents and friends, became a fundamental component of heavenly life.

The usefulness of this generalised cultural depiction should not obscure the fact that, theologically, the nineteenth-century Heaven remained the site of a considerable diversity of opinions. The existence of an intermediate state between life on earth and life in heaven, prior to the Last Judgment, continued to be debated: Roman Catholics held the doctrine of Purgatory; Anabaptists and some Lutherans believed the “in-between” soul slept, unconscious of all; followers of Calvin believed not in soul sleep but in an immediate participation in the divine nature. McGann (“Religious Poetry”) and Linda Marshall have both drawn attention to the influence these debates had on the poetry of Christina Rossetti, though they disagree on whether premillenarian belief could coexist with orthodox Anglican eschatology. Victorian divines from J.H. Newman to Archbishop Richard Whately published their thoughts on the intermediate state; churchmen also speculated fervently on the material character of heaven. The heavenly visions and writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) strongly influenced a number of philosophers, writers, and artists in the nineteenth century: he described the almost transparent thinness of the divide between this world and the spirit world.

While relatively few Victorian women had access to the more rarefied theological debates on the nature of the New Zion, all Victorians could readily and regularly hear sermons about heaven at their place of worship. Church of England clergyman F.W. Robertson, for example, preached a sermon on April 29, 1849 which took as text “Eye hath not seen [. . .] what God has prepared for them that love Him,” and expatiated on the limitations of our senses and of our best scientific understanding to even imagine “the King in his beauty, nor the land that is very far off” (*Sermons of F.W. Robertson*). Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon turned his considerable oratorical skill to the subject of heaven on numerous occasions, in 1855 famously preaching on heaven and hell to 12,000 people in a field. In “Heavenly Worship,” preached on December 28, 1856, Spurgeon describes the loudness and sweetness of “heaven’s song,” encouraging his vast congregation to prepare themselves for that great occasion: “Brethren, we must begin heaven’s song here below, or else we shall never sing it above. The choristers of heaven have all had rehearsals upon earth, before they sing in that orchestra” (*Spurgeon Archive*). While differently figured by differing denominational emphases, heavenly symbolism, heavenly architecture, even heavenly music were simultaneously mystical and familiar concepts to Victorian Christians.

Barred from the pulpit as from explicit engagement in exegesis, both the exclusive domains of men, Victorian women nonetheless engaged in their own

theological writing – but they did so indirectly, as Julie Melnyk, Robert Kachur and others have persuasively demonstrated.³ Much of the recent critical work mentioned above has illuminated ways in which women writers' negotiations with Christian discourse could voice latent or explicit critique of existing power structures. It is certainly true that a Christian heaven could provide an imaginative space uniquely suited to enable Victorian women's articulations of utopian positions. Social critiques and idealised social reconstructions could draw on primarily New Testament ideals of equity and justice in order to validate claims for women's rights in marriage and in political affairs. Barbara Taylor's study of nineteenth-century Owenite socialists, for example, reveals a biblical heaven underpinning their articulations of ideal communities (see, for example, 43); Nan Bowman Albinski notes the significant religious foundations of feminist utopias, particularly as they appear in nineteenth-century American women's fiction. Victorian women constructing idealised political states often draw more or less explicitly on certain specific scriptures: Isaiah 65 verse 17 reads, "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind"; Hebrews 11:16 says of the faithful, "They desire a better country, that is, an heavenly."⁴ Such verses could be used to justify often bold descriptions of how the "better country" is to be constructed. For example, poetry printed in the forthrightly feminist *Women's Penny Paper*, (later *The Woman's Herald*), used the concepts of heaven and of the earthly millennium to formulate visions of enfranchised womanhood. An example may be found in "Women's Hymn," which characterises heaven as the "Land of Promise," a transformed earth of social justice, only to be found (or founded) by united, questing and courageously active women:

Sisters! together let us tread Life's pathway,
Hand locked in hand and hearts together beating,
Toward the far-distant blessed Land of Promise
Travelling steadfast!

Never a woe, but love shall try to heal it,
Never a sin, but all shall truly sorrow,
Never a joy, but all shall share its gladness
With thankful praises!

³ See Melnyk, ed. *Women's Theology in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Transfiguring the Faith of Their Fathers*. While the research on Victorian women poets' involvement with contemporaneous theological debate is gathering momentum, analysis of women's treatments of heaven is very limited: beside McGann and Marshall, Terence Hoagwood has examined Elizabeth Barrett Browning's subversive rejection of a patristic paradise in his analysis of *A Drama of Exile*. Other than these studies, critics have looked past (or through) women's poetic constructions of heaven.

⁴ Albinski suggests an important text for American women utopianists is "The kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17: 11; 5).

Lift from the pathway every stone of stumbling,
 Warn the unwary, aid the feeble pilgrims,
 Guard from all perils the tender helpless children,
 Keep them from straying!

When the clouds gather and hide the goal of longing,
 Sing songs of hope, recount the former visions,
 Onward still press, with pure courageous purpose,
 Onward-undaunted!

God is our surety that we at last shall reach it,
 See on the earth the Heavenly Kingdom planted,
 Justice and mercy the chosen law of nations,
 God's will fulfilled!

E. G.

[23 May 1891: 482]

This projected heavenly state is politically and doctrinally provocative. The political ideal is clearly elided with a Christian heaven: the poem presents explicit biblical terminology ("Heavenly Kingdom") and traditional imagery (the clouds may hide the "goal of longing" clearly located above), along with many allusions to biblical passages such as running steadfastly towards the goal.⁵ The poem also conflates the concepts of an existing heaven, awaiting "pilgrims" after death, and of an earthly New Order that will be established in the new millennium, reflecting reasonably widely held Victorian Premillenarian belief. Thus the poem posits a heavenly state both ideal and profoundly practical, "far-distant" and within grasp, divine but also earthly and discoverable. This explicitly politicised millenarianism emphasises solidarity and the eventual eradication of difference: gender and age difference, political and even national difference. Alternatively, heaven's predication on *exclusion* could also be useful to women poets who wished to assert a moral supremacy that could verge on suggesting a purely female heavenly state. Elizabeth Needham's "The Closed Door" lingers on the state of those shut out of heaven, and genders the two camps: all those inside are female (mother, wife), while the despairing speakers outside are male, implicitly but also explicitly in their denotation as husband and father. Stanzas one to four read:

"Open, open, it is I;"
 From a wailing crowd the cry;
 It was Heaven's DAY OF DAYS,
 All the City was ablaze
 With the brightness, feast, and song,

⁵ See, for example, Philippians 3:14, Romans 14:20.

Angels flying, throng on throng:
 These were guests who came too late
 To the royal entrance gate;
 Found the wedding train had passed,
 And the door was bolted fast.

“Open, open, it is I;”
 Some poor orphaned one will cry,
 “See, my mother has gone in,
 We apart have never been;
 She is fed and sheltered there,
 Cold and hunger is my fare;
 Let us once more fondly meet,
 Lord, Thy mercy I entreat.”

“Open, open, it is I;”
 Will some lonely husband cry,
 “My sweet wife is in that throng,
 We were partners all along;
 Through life’s sunshine and its shade,
 Oft and oft for me she prayed;
 Let her prayers be answered now,
 Lord, repentant here I bow.”

“Open, open, it is I;”
 Will some anguished parent shout,
 Must their father be shut out?
 Of the Saviour’s blood I knew,
 Hoped to enter Heaven too,
 Only waited to prepare,
 When my life was eased of care.”

Making this poem all the more suggestive is its epigraph, Matthew 25:10, which refers to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins. In that story, all the participants are women, half of whom are foolish and neglect to keep their lamps burning – and so miss the Bridegroom’s wedding feast. Needham’s version introduces male characters, but only to use them for the roles of the foolish and excluded. Printed in an 1890 volume entitled *Poetic Paraphrases*, Needham’s version of the biblical intertext veers distinctly away from a simple “paraphrase”; it is, in fact, a critical engagement with and rewriting of the scriptural original. In their appeals, the men in the poem reveal where the fault for their ultimate exclusion truly lies, and the faults are those of culturally-coded traditional masculinity: depending on the piety of one’s

spouse; possessing a knowledge of the head rather than a faith of the heart; being pre-occupied with worldly cares. Compared to the simple and stark exclusion of the virgins in the Bible story (the Bridegroom simply says to them, "I know you not"), in this retelling the poet *explains* the exclusion. She also emphasises the essentially domestic suffering of the men shut out from the perfect middle-class (feminised) home that is Paradise: they face cold and hunger, are deprived of fond affection, miss marital sweetnesses. In the essentially Victorian gender economy that structures this heaven, the men are excluded because they adhere to Victorian masculine codes; *because they act like men*. This heaven reveals the ineluctably damning results of exclusionary gender coding, here turned on its head so the first are last, and the last are first.

While radical visions of Paradise may be found in poems like those discussed above, the majority of Victorian poetry on heaven does not state an overt social critique, but conjures reassuring visions of future bliss, the Zion of Isaiah 35:11, in which "everlasting joy shall be upon their heads." This place of everlasting joy could, however, be imagined in more complicated ways than its outwardly conventional poetic clothing might suggest. Katharine Tynan's beatific vision of Zion perfectly illustrates McDannell and Lang's description of the anthropocentric nineteenth-century heaven, but additionally reveals some of the troubling possibilities opened thereby. Tynan imagines heaven in terms of earth – in fact, her conception of terrestrial satisfactions supersedes and renders redundant the possibility of imagining greater, heavenly joys. Tynan's domesticated, earthly heaven is emphatic in its retention of known blisses; this heaven, characterised by a vivid and problematic retained fleshiness, sacralises woman's earthly experience.

"She Asks for New Earth" (*Evensong*, 43)

Lord, when I find at last Thy Paradise,
Be it not all too bright for human eyes,
Lest I go sick for home through the high mirth –
For Thy new Heaven, Lord, give me new earth.

Give of Thy mansions, Lord, a house so small
Where they can come to me who were my all;
Let them run home to me just as of yore,
Glad to sit down with me and go out no more.

Give me a garden, Lord, and a low hill,
A field and a babbling brook that is not still,
Give me an orchard, Lord in leaf and bloom,
And my birds to sing to me in a quiet gloam.

There shall no canker be in leaf or bud,
 But glory on hill and sea and the green-wood
 There, there shall none grow old but all be new,
 No moth or rust shall fret nor thief break through.

Set Thou a mist upon Thy glorious sun
 Lest we should faint for night and be undone,
 Give us the high clean wind and the wild rain,
 Lest that we faint with thirst and go in pain.

Let there be Winter there and the joy of Spring,
 Summer and Autumn and the harvesting,
 Give us all things we loved on earth of old
 Never to slip from out our fond arms' fold.

Give me a little house for my desire
 The man and the children to sit by my fire
 And friends crowding in to us, to our lit hearth
 For Thy new Heaven, Lord, give me new earth!

While Tynan's last line calls explicitly on the Isaiah passage, the speaker quite clearly is not describing a new earth; she is describing the old earth, her own old earth, which she is stating her disinclination to let go. The first stanza sets out the key condition governing this heaven: it must not be too bright for human eyes, and a human and entirely carnal vision subsequently unfolds, entirely conceived of and comprehended by human and specifically female experience. The speaker wishes to retain the universe with the people "who were my all," those for whom she is all, the centre and sufficiency: "Let them run home to me just as of yore, / Glad to sit down with me and go out no more." Not only is this no theocentric heaven, it resembles a matro-centric heaven – a heaven from which God the Father is completely absent, and which centres about the nurturing activity of a literal domestic goddess. Tynan's several meditations on the heavenly state, all similar to "She Asks," help highlight the fact that while this heaven seems thematically opposite to the utopian social critique heavens of the feminists – it retains the existing earth; they project a reconstructed earth – a similar didacticism pervades each projection of Paradise. While the versions differ, we find the same assumption of and insistence on the woman writer's right to produce a version, a feminised but still "authorised" version.

Pre-eminent Victorian poet of the hereafter, Christina Rossetti returns in her verse to heaven over and over again, variously emphasising its restfulness, timelessness, reunion of lovers and family members, and throngs of angels.⁶ A

⁶ See Marshall nn. 4-20 for a fuller catalogue of Rossetti's heavens.

number of poems incorporate, far less conventionally, a startlingly physicalised satiety. Many of Rossetti's poems consider the intermediate state where the souls of the godly dead dwell, before the Day of Judgment and their final resurrection into eternal life in the New Jerusalem.⁷ While Rossetti's paradisaal waiting-room is free of desire, as Marshall suggests, the final heaven Rossetti projects, the New Jerusalem, is emphatically not: it is a literal hotbed of physical satisfactions. "Antipas" (II 283) envisions heaven as an ultimate blending with God, a kind of dissolution into him freighted with the significance of sexual union.

Hidden from the darkness of our mortal sight,
 Hidden in the Paradise of lovely light,
 Hidden in God's Presence, worshipped face to face,
 Hidden in the sanctuary of Christ's embrace.
 Up, O Wills! to track him home among the bless'd;
 Up, O Hearts! to know him in the joy of rest;
 Where no darkness more shall hide him from our sight,
 Where we shall be love with love, and light with light,
 Worshipping our God together face to face,
 Wishless in the sanctuary of Christ's embrace.

In this heaven the redeemed "shall be love with love, and light with light"; here the saints will dwell everlastingly "wishless in the sanctuary of Christ's embrace," as the ultimate satisfaction of desire is eternally prolonged. In "All Saints" Rossetti transfers her typical metaphor for physical passion, fire, to "that holy land / Where all things and Jerusalem are new" to conceive of the Saints as ever burning: "like a conflagration freshly fanned / Their love glows upward, outward, thro' and thro'" (II 245). Again in "All Saints: Martyrs" (II 245), the saints waiting for their translation to the New Jerusalem look longingly "toward consummated throne and diadem" where they will find "loves to their love and fires to flank their fire." These poems draw on the tradition, celebrated in Canticles and explored by the Fathers, that identifies Christ as Bridegroom of the Soul and feminises that Soul. Rossetti's deployment of this tradition enables her to figure Heaven as a state of sexual fulfilment: a site of perfect ongoing consummation and perfect ongoing consumption, a place in which the redeemed are eternally consumed and eternally consuming.

A third strategy by which female artists make use of heaven's provocative possibilities is through engagement with the inherent challenges heaven poses to representation. A key scriptural intertext operating in these engagements is "Eye

⁷ Marshall disagrees with McGann's argument that Rossetti's poems about stages of the afterlife demonstrate her adherence to the premillenarian doctrine of Soul Sleep; Marshall argues that Rossetti's poems accord with accepted Anglican belief in a state of Hades, which has two regions, one of which is Paradise.

hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (I Corinthians 2:9). This ineffability proves for Victorian women poets a highly suggestive poetic touchstone. Famous and voluminous hymn-writer and devotional poet Frances Ridley Havergal entitles one poem "Eye Hath Not Seen" to specifically respond to this conundrum, voiced in the opening lines as a reproach addressed to the poet:

"You never write of heaven,
 Though you write of heavenly themes;
 You never paint the glory
 But in reflected gleams!"
 My pencil only pictures
 What I have known and seen:
 How can I tell the joys that dwell
 Where I have never been?

I sing the songs of Zion,
 But I would never dare
 To imitate the chorus,
 Like many waters, there.
 I sketch the sunny landscape,
 But can I paint the sun?
 Can that by art, which human heart
 Conceiveth not, be won?

This modest disavowal of the speaker's ability to comprehend heavenly glory leads to five further stanzas expressing, in hyper-ornamental poetic language, the impossibility of appropriate expression. Trying to find an analogy in the incommunicability of sensory perception, the speaker ponders the cases of "the Laplander, that never / Hath left his flowerless snows" and "the deaf man who cannot hear / the spirit-winged marvels / Of Handel's sacred art"; the former cannot even conceive of the flora he's never seen, and the marvels of the latter are unimaginable to the deaf. Havergal's poem displays elaborate figuration and metronomically regular metrical form: each eight-line trimeter stanza incorporates the extra flourish of a tetrameter, internally rhyming, seventh line. In lamenting her lack of linguistic resources, the poet consciously demonstrates the full range of those resources. Only occasionally, she notes, may we hear "angel-echoes" that bring us flashes of understanding of the bliss that awaits the Christian. Ultimately, seeing "the beauty of the King!" is Heaven, and is also ultimate, unlimited poetry:

Oh, this is more than poem,
 And more than the highest song;

A witness with our spirit,
 Though hidden, full and strong.
 'Tis no new revelation
 Vouchsafed to saint or sage,
 But light from God cast bright and broad
 Upon the sacred page.

“I would never dare / To imitate the chorus” says the poet speaker, but she voices in this poem her own “angel-echoes”; the poem signals itself as a kind of unmediated channelling of heavenly truth. While careful to disclaim the production of any original revelation – she is only pointing to a pre-existing truth – the speaker dismisses the need for accepted spiritual status to be such a conduit: “no new revelation / [is] Vouchsafed to saint or sage.” All that is needed to understand (and communicate) the eternal bliss that awaits is a receptive spirit, the ability to be moved and bear witness. In terms of Victorian gender roles, then, a woman is completely equipped, indeed sublimely equipped, to convey the message that is “more than poem.” The woman poet is herself illuminated, herself becomes “the sacred page” on which “God’s light [is] cast bright and broad.” The poem implicitly questions the necessity of hierarchical authority and, ultimately, the necessity of words at all – a woman can simply *feel* and *show* God’s heavenly glories.

Across the whole spectrum of Victorian women’s verse on heaven, one significant trope recurs repeatedly: Heaven imagined as a negative space – not just the end of earthly sufferings, but the end of existence, the end of imaginings. This place where things *stop* is not necessarily incompatible with the articulation of social critique noted earlier in this article; certainly at a basic level a political statement may be made in the conjuring of a space in which all social ills are remedied: no more suffering, no more injustice, no more overwork, and so on. However, most of these poems don’t foreground the positive action that might be expected of this kind of critique, nor do they really fit the anthropomorphic model McDannell and Lang propose for the nineteenth century: they *evade* all consideration of the activity and domesticity of heaven. Rather, these poems consider the voicing *of* and voicing *in* heaven; they concern themselves with issues of language and expression. Certain of these poems present the heavenly realm as a place composed solely of negations, bamboozling earthly power of description; a place that eludes articulation and thus silences. Barbara Macandrew takes up this challenge in “The Hebrew Mother”:

[. . .] Eye hath never seen
 On this pale earth such glory, ear hath heard
 No music like the songs which seemed to float
 Across the place. Above the City stood
 No sun, yet forth she looked, clear as the sun,
 Fair as the moon, and terrible as some

Great army. And the shining of her walls
 Was like the glory of a golden Dawn
 On stainless snow. Upon the streets there went
 And came a holy people, clad in white,
 With faces sealed to peace unspeakable [. . .]

The poem strips away all ways in which humans can perceive or evaluate or comprehend the heavenly state; dependable earthly standards like visual and aural perception, describable colour, facial and linguistic expression, even the construction of the solar system, vanish – a certain indefinable terribleness remains.

Victorian male poets writing on heaven do not focus as closely on the aspects of heaven that “eye has not seen, nor ear heard.” Author of the immensely popular *Christian Year*, John Keble imagines in “Easter Eve” the sights, sounds, and company of heaven:

Meanwhile with every son and saint of Thine
 Along the glorious line,
 Sitting by turns beneath Thy sacred feet
 We'll hold communion sweet,
 Know them by look and voice [. . .]

Hymns by Christopher Wordsworth (“Hark! The sound of holy voices”) and Andrew Young (“There is a happy land, far, far away”) rapturously describe the songs of praise echoing through heaven. For female poets, the limits of representation are a far more pressing concern. Lucy Bennett, like Keble a popular poet and hymnodist, writes in “The Land of the Living” that while here on earth “We give Him our best adoration,” “No music with theirs [that is spirits in heaven] may compare”; “No sorrow is there and no sighing, / Nor language its bliss can declare.” Heaven presents an unbeatable challenge: a silencing perfection of song. Similarly, Georgiana M. Taylor writes in “A Worker’s Dream of the Border Land”:

The rapture – oh, how shall I tell it!
 Unspeakable, glorious, divine!
 A rapture with nought to dispel it,
 A bliss through eternity mine!

Taylor’s poem, despite its title, does not articulate anything approaching a socialist vision. Like Macandrew, Bennett and others, she delineates instead a place that defeats earthly vision, that defeats articulation itself. In describing silencing, these poets aren’t rendered silent, but their language records and embodies the struggle, compulsion, and difficulties attending articulation. These difficulties are rendered in the proliferating exclamation marks, the ejaculatory “oh’s,” the numerous lines

fractured by dashes, and the strings of negations that seem to leave no signifieds, only signifiers.

What might this unspeakable heavenly space mean for the woman poet? If this space connotes struggling with the end of expressive possibilities, of imagination and of articulation, then how could this artistic dead end be useful for women poets? I contend it works to highlight the question of vocation and of the right to speak, of being called to speak despite the difficulties. Inarticulateness in the face of the heavenly stage, has, I suggest, everything to do with imposed voicelessness on the earthly stage. The poetry of Heaven provides a venue for articulating the ongoing struggle of Victorian women against gender barriers to authoritative religious speech.

Janet Larson writes of the importance of non-verbal groanings and utterings to Victorian women writing poetry of religious experience. Larson argues that depictions of wordless expression create a new construction that addresses the problems out of which it arises, the powerful discursive dictates that sought to prevent women "seizing the Spirit." In Larson's argument, the Victorian woman explores the fallenness and inadequacies of words as part of her struggle for the Word, for "it is peculiarly with and for language that she must wrestle to gain the 'blessing'" (50). Applying this provocative explanatory model to poetic language, I would suggest that poets who write of female-defined heavens, who construct ornamental protestations of no more tears and no more crying, and who loquaciously describe the indescribable and silencing music of heaven, are providing differing responses to a particular "heavenly" challenge to artistic and imaginative power. The very poetic characteristics that make this verse hard (for a modern audience) to read should be rightly read as strategies: those ejaculations, gushes and flourishes function as signs of an emotive and ineluctable compulsion to speak, a compulsion that overrides proscriptions. In producing suggestively indescribable heaven, women poets are contributing to a broader conversation about other kinds of voluntary or enforced voicelessness, particularly the prohibition that prevented Victorian women from engaging exegetically with the scriptures. While devotional, personal writing was permissible, as were purely reflective meditations on biblical texts, teaching, preaching and the production of original interpretations of religious truth were forbidden to women. But as this article shows, in their devotional verse and in the particular case of devotional verse about heaven, women poets are resisting silencing. "Called" to convey heavenly truth, women poets produce multiple versions talking about what they cannot talk about, taking over scriptural intertexts and reinterpreting them, whether as boldly as Needham's revised parable of the wise women and foolish men, or as subtly as Bennett's conjuring of bliss unspeakable. Read with new eyes, poems that seem to be of simple cessation of earthly states or categories may be read as actively resistant to contemporaneous religious constriction, and poems of semi-coherent emotive effusion similarly articulate a struggle for access to the authoritative Word.

The Christian Heavens of Victorian women poets should not be too quickly dismissed as collections of second-rate stereotypes. The problems and possibilities posed by figuring Paradise are intimately allied with the problems and possibilities inherent in the genre of devotional verse prescribed for women, and our modern marginalisation of theme as of genre demands reconsideration. Re-viewed, women's Christian writings contain a multiplicity of reformulations and, I have argued in this article, may present unexpected critiques of authoritative forms and restricted exegetical privilege. In particular, women's poetry of Heaven adopts a number of strategies to "find room" within the constraints placed on the religious speaking deemed appropriate for women. Exceptions to the simplistic "hymnody incessant" stereotype are found most obviously in overtly politicised poems, those whose aim is not to produce a picture of heaven to aid in worship or in personal consolation, but rather to produce what effectively is propaganda: a heaven in the form of a politically corrected earth. A second kind of exception may be found in those poets who turn the domesticated heaven described by McDannell and Lang into a sensualised Paradise of a distinctly feminised construction, made by their own authority. And thirdly, closer examination of conventional-sounding exclamations of heaven's ineffability should lead us to consider how this verse may stake a particular claim to religious voice and authority. In their transformations of a conventional trope, Victorian women poets participate in a broader debate about artistic and religious voicelessness, making the site of voicelessness a paradoxically liberating venue for a questioning, revisionary, exegetical engagement with master narratives.

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