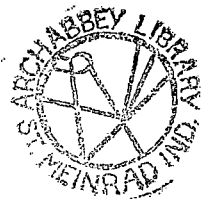


An Analysis of Coventry Patmore's Poem "Eros and Psyche"  
and Its Theme of Mystical Love

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In the memory of

and

in thanks to

my parents

and

my friend, Blaise Hettich,

who continue to help me on my own way to

"Love's mighty kingdoms three,"

I dedicate this study

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### Introduction

Coventry Patmore was an English poet of the second half of the nineteenth century, a happily married man, and a convert to Roman Catholicism. A poet from his youngest days, he wrote much verse on the virtue and bliss of the married state. His conversion to Roman Catholicism profoundly influenced his thought, particularly that concerning marriage, and therefore transformed his poetry. The poet had always recognized and rejoiced in the holiness of human marriage as a divinely ordained manifestation of real love in the physical world. The study of the Church's greatest writers and teachers, its doctors and mystics, led Patmore to see all life, particularly the married state, as a fuller manifestation of love, as a physical representation of God's love for each human soul. This new view changed the course of Patmore's poetry. The poet became a man wonderfully aware of the reality of God's love in this world as evidenced by his own joyful partaking of the marital privileges. Hence, his poetry would flow from this new view.

Already an executor of the accepted poetic expression of the time: linguistic and syntactic archaisms, themes of love, marriage, and familial homelife in the Victorian decorum -- a man whose ideas were consistent with the other writers of his time, Patmore appeared somewhat outspoken in his embracement of a new idea. He created poetry which, though still embellished with Victorian finery, proclaimed a subject foreign and impenetrable to most Victorian minds. In his earlier poetry he had written of married love in the ideological and linguistic jargon of the nineteenth-century Protestant English gentleman. With his conversion, the poet

embraced new ideas and fearlessly incorporated them into his poetry. The result was a misunderstanding and gradual rejection of his work. Though his syntax and vocabulary retained its Victorian trappings, the Christian concept of mystical love, presented in fresh, bold, erotic language, estranged the poet from his contemporaries. His ideas appeared foreign and incomprehensible, his language, blatant, even lewd. The poet remained a literary figure of some notability, but obscurity arose concerning his work, an obscurity which has only begun to evaporate in recent years.

This analysis is designed to present the literary and interpersonal influences which stimulated Patmore's acceptance of the basic Christian principle of love. In chronological order, it may be seen that Patmore's literary influences range from the greatest Doctors of the Church to the more unorthodox interpreters of Christianity, from Aquinas to Swedenborg. The Victorian mind is briefly sketched in all its morality-stricken sensibility, serving as a backdrop for the appearance in the poet's life of a number of strong-headed, well-balanced Christians, each of whom would enrich and encourage the poet in his beliefs and his writings.

The second section of this analysis reveals the effect of such a literary and social milieu upon Patmore's writings, in this case his poetry. The poem chosen for analysis, "Eros and Psyche," from the collection, The Unknown Eros (1878), is a dialogue between the human soul and God, presented under the guise of married love in all its erotic vitality. The literary analysis demonstrates the poet's use of accepted Victorian poetic literaria, coupled with the seemingly unorthodox theme of mystical love. A reading of this poem, after reflection upon the time and place of its writing, explains the poet's inevitable obscurity. It was a subject beyond the understanding of many of its readers. It was therefore easily misun-

derstood and consequently often discarded as obscure, even immoral.

The obscurity has lasted long, and therefore, little has been written on the man and his poetry. The text of the poem contained in this analysis, is from the best, most complete, and most recent edition of Patmore's poetry, Frederick Page's edition, The Poems of Coventry Patmore (1949). The first and only, truly comprehensive study of Patmore's ideas and work is J. C. Reid's The Mind and Art of Coventry Patmore (1957). This work is cited as most valuable by other sources<sup>1</sup> and was the primary source for the present study, containing the most detailed analysis of the poet's thought and writings, as well as an exhaustive bibliography.

The primary purpose of this analysis is to present the poetic abilities of Coventry Patmore as revealed in one of his compositions. This entails a literary analysis of the poem which explores its linguistic and syntactic sense and its thematic development. An analysis of the poet's own ideological and literary development is necessary groundwork for a study of the poet's work, and so serves as an introduction to the poem itself and the following literary analysis. As a secondary purpose, it is hoped that this study will awaken in its reader what it has in its author, the awareness of a body of thought and poetry inspired by the loftiest of Christian concepts, mystical love-union, existing outside the time-tested writings of the Church's more illustrious sons and daughters.

Chapter One  
The Development of the Concept of Love  
in Patmore's Thought

The cadre from which Patmore developed his idea of mystical love, represented in terms of human married love, as expressed in the poetic collection, The Unknown Eros, involves three major phenomena in the poet's life: his literary background, his cultural milieu, and his interpersonal relationships.

A history of the literary ideas concerning love between the divine and the human, as physically symbolized by human married love, as Patmore understood and used the theme and its analogy begins, chronologically, with the pagan Greeks, who originated the Eros-Psyche myth, a myth which the poet borrowed and reworked in a Christian context. The myth is the story of the god of love, Eros, wooing a human being, Psyche. The names, Eros and Psyche, in gradual common use, came to represent the act of love and the human soul. Plato, the first man to organize a real, comprehensive, universal philosophy, in the West, developed a highly abstract idealism, which celebrated the immaterial as true reality, the World of Perfect Forms, and rejected the material as impure, that which imprisoned and prevented the immaterial from exercising its true independent existence. For Plato, real love must be a completely abstract experience, a spiritual consummation. Concrete physical love was regarded as hopelessly concupiscent. "Now Eros 'is man's conversion from the sensible to the super-sensible, it is the upward movement of the soul; it is a real force, driving the soul upward to seek the world of the Forms.'"<sup>2</sup> "The Eros thus described by Plato is born of Want and Energy... Plato gives the essence

of that Eros which is antithetical to Agape; for it is a kind of have-not whose nature it is to be filled with the riches of heaven. Its sense of need is the motive giving a dynamic to its desire."<sup>3</sup> This rejects the physical and necessitates an egocentric drive, two elements contrary to the Christian doctrine of love and therefore contrary to Patmore's ideas. For Aristotle:

The divine Being is wrapt up in self-contemplation, but because of his presence he draws all nature by love. He is the magnet, the object which attracts, and so Aristotle can fairly be said to make Eros the driving force of all the world, and the lower is ever striving towards what is higher than itself under the stress of Eros.<sup>4</sup>

Here, there is already the notion that nature is caught up and moved, not by its own egocentric desires, ultimately, but by the self-contemplative love of the divine Being, who is Eros himself. Human physical love was, for Aristotle, no longer an impediment to union with the Divine, since it strove to transcend its present situation by means of Eros' power. In later centuries, the Church, under Aquinas, and even later Patmore himself, would incorporate this idea into their philosophical system.

The term Eros served two identities: it was egocentric love, and, it was the God of Love Himself. The early Church viewed Eros as egocentric human love and called other-centered love "Agape," which is perfectly manifested in God-Love. Patmore would write of the actions of Agape, naming its activator Eros, a literary stylization, in the tradition of the Greek Eros-Psyche myth. Eros, for Patmore, as for Aristotle, was not the human egocentric act as the early Church deemed it, but the activator of all love.

St. Paul (Eph. 5) first associated Christ's love for the Church with a man's love for his wife, and it is from this association, that God's love for man would be spoken of in terms of human married love.

During the early Christian centuries, Gnostic heretics resurrected the old Platonic idea that the immaterial was good, the material evil. Human physical love was declared evil; marriage was despised, and true love was sought in a spiritual realm, independent of the physical. Augustine attacked this view and re-instated Paul's ideas, re-affirming the marriage analogy as a fitting description of God's love for man.

The whole tenor of Augustine's teachings, especially his anti-Manichaeism attitude to the body, reinforced Patmore's already firmly shaped convictions, for he recognized that the general views of his own age on sex, marriage and the body had much in common with those of the Manichaeans in Augustine's day.<sup>5</sup>

In the twelfth century, in his sermons on the "Canticle of Canticles," St. Bernard emphasized the personal love transacted between God and each individual soul.

The saints's eloquent exegesis of the Song of Songs excited Patmore's poetic impulses, and The Unknown Eros is stamped with its mark. Not only the general concept of God's burning love for the soul and the soul's for God, expressed in terms of physical imagery, but the intense spirituality of the whole, the absence of 'eroticism' and the assimilation of the language of physical love into an austere religious interpretation-- all of these things made St. Bernard an inevitable model for the poet.<sup>6</sup>

In the following century, St. Thomas Aquinas, in his revival of Aristotelian thought, extended the matter-form concept (matter and form are each necessarily dependent on the other for the existence of a thing) to declare the goodness of the material in its unity with the immaterial. "Patmore regarded man as a unity of soul and body in Aquinas's sense, and saw the flesh as worthy of a dignity it derived both from its union with the soul and from its sanctification by the Incarnation of Christ."<sup>7</sup>

On marriage, Patmore is every closer to Aquinas than were those of his fellow-Catholics who had become tainted with Jansenism. His attitude towards the

permanence, the unity and dignity of marriage, and its divine origin, is Catholic, but more specifically Thomist. A good number of Catholic writers, from medieval times down to the present day, have regarded the sexual act in marriage as a consequence of the Fall, carrying thereby a taint, and being, even in the sacrament, a concession to the weakness of the flesh. However, St. Thomas argues, as more recent Catholic writers have emphasized, that the marital act can be, and in the right circumstances is, an act of virtue. So fully does this coincide with Patmore's expression of the holiness of the body and the purity of marriage that there can be little doubt that he found in St. Thomas sanction for his quite un-Puritanical hymning of the pleasures of married love.

Spanish mystical writings of the sixteenth century, particularly those of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, influenced Patmore as well, though it is to be noted:

There is so much common to St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Augustine and St. Bernard which has become part of the tradition of Catholic mysticism that it is difficult, if not impossible, to single out the separate contributions of each to Patmore's poetry.<sup>9</sup>

The Psyche odes reflect Patmore's reading of Catholic mystics, and employ ideas which belong in the main tradition of orthodox mystical writings. The weaving into these poems of so much of the contemplative experience of the saints, expressed with such passion indicates that he felt himself akin, at least poetically, to the mystics who gave him the greater part of his imagery and most of his mystical 'psychology'.<sup>10</sup>

The ideas of Richard Hooker, a sixteenth-century English theologian, and those of Bishop Joseph Butler, a theologian, and Robert Waring, an essayist, both of the seventeenth century, were in some way agreeable to Patmore's views on Christianity and marriage, but affected the poet's works only to a minor degree.

Hooker's views on the relationship between man and woman and on marriage were in tune with Patmore's own, and, on the occasions when he does quote Hooker, it is not on matters of ecclesiastical law or Christian doctrine, but as 'psychologist' of love... Butler's

Analogy, like the Ecclesiastical Polity (Hooker), helped to convince Patmore of the reasonable<sup>ness</sup> of Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

He (Patmore) seems to have been struck by the psychological truth of Waring's often quaintly expressed observations... For instance, Waring's notion of the civilizing power of love...<sup>12</sup>

A major contribution to Patmore's thought, especially in his younger years, were the writings of the eighteenth-century Swedish philosopher, Emmanuel Swedenborg. "In the case of Swedenborg and Patmore, the parallels in idea, phraseology and emphasis are so many and so close that it is certain that many concepts which give a flavour of originality to Patmore's poetry are Swedenborgian in origin, although they were, in many cases, modified by Thomist ideas."<sup>13</sup> "It is possible to show not only that Patmore was indebted to Swedenborg for certain basic concepts of love and marriage, which he acknowledged, but that Swedenborg played his part in directing Patmore towards the Catholic Church."<sup>14</sup> Patmore "regarded Swedenborg primarily as 'a great psychologist', as a fount of poetic imagery, as a gifted perceiver of hidden truths, and later as a stimulating expresser of Catholic doctrines."<sup>15</sup> Swedenborg believed all visible things to have a spiritual meaning, "everything that is is the embodiment of some aspect of Divinity."<sup>16</sup> There were differences of opinion between the poet and the philosopher: "For Patmore, marriage in heaven is not the literal spiritual marriage of man to woman that it is in Swedenborg, but the union of the soul with God, to whom every soul, whether of a man or of a woman, is in the spiritual sense female."<sup>17</sup> However, these differences were smoothed over by much agreement. "The emphasis he (Patmore) places upon the chastity of marriage, rare in his age, even among Catholic writers, suggests that it was Swedenborg who helped him to see its importance."<sup>18</sup> "Although Coventry

Patmore passed from Swedenborg to Aquinas, he never really cast the Swedish philosopher from his consciousness."<sup>19</sup> Swedenborg's influence would remain, a peculiar mixture of sound Christian doctrine and a somewhat unorthodox, personal interpretation of that doctrine.

The writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Samuel Taylor Coleridge instigated various developments in the young poet's thought, namely his introduction to Swedenborg, and, especially via Coleridge, his early religious outlook.<sup>20</sup> The poet, William Wordsworth, also influenced Patmore's ideas on love and marriage. "For Wordsworth, since Nature was an inexhaustible revelation of beauty and wisdom, it must be a reflection of God Himself: for Patmore, the natural relationship of marriage is a source of so much delight that it must be a foretaste, as well as a symbol, of the union of the soul with God."<sup>21</sup>

The recorded Christic visions of a young French girl, Marie Lataste, in 1839, attracted Patmore's attention as well. Her revelations were strikingly Thomistic, "it is no wonder that Patmore, the devoted reader of St. Thomas, should have been attracted to Marie Lataste."<sup>22</sup>

Such elements, then, in the writings of the peasant girl, whatever their real origin, are so typical of Patmore's own thinking that it seems likely that her 'communications' helped to reinforce his convictions concerning marriage, the nuptial analogy, the value of the contemplative life, the mystical significance of chastity, and much else. It is the lack of anything strikingly original in her work, however, which makes it impossible to plot with certainty relations between Patmore's work and her own. The most that can be said is that she went with other writers, to shape attitudes in Patmore which were in harmony with Catholic doctrine, and yet were in the final analysis Patmorean.<sup>23</sup>

"Among other writers studied by Patmore were St. Catherine of Genoa, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Francis de Sales and St. Catherine of Siena," as

well as the spiritual literary masters, Dante and Newman, but these, though they "served in various ways to colour his thinking and enrich his poetry,"<sup>24</sup> were all minor influences compared to the theological giants, Aquinas, Augustine, and, Bernard of Clairvaux.

Throughout this history of the concept of God's love for the soul, what Patmore would title the Eros-Psyche union assumed various literary garb, from Paul's initial recognition of the sacredness of marriage as a fitting analogy of Christ's relationship to the Church, through Bernard's glorification of the "Canticle of Canticles" love story, through the Spanish mystics' impassioned poetic descriptions of man's union with the Divine, up to Wordsworth, who experienced physical Nature as beautiful and full of wisdom, the reflection of a loving divinity. Patmore's idea was not new, but it was an idea that had lost favor with, and had been all but forgotten by the world the poet lived in.

The social attitudes and mores of the Victorian age were victims to the Gnosticism which had crept into man's world of ideas again and again, under the guise of a search for purity, for uncontaminated heavenly perfection in this world.<sup>25</sup> The history of Western man is full of this natural heresy: Manichaeism, Christian Gnosticism, Catharism, Jansenism, Puritanism. Patmore was born into a period of history which was busily consuming the idealized romantic natural philosophies of Rousseau and Chateaubriand, the idyllic chaste love of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's romance, Paul et Virginie, and the nostalgic neoplatonism of Shelley. The search for purity, for a chaste, unblemished happiness, spurred many writers and thinkers on to conjecture about this ideal world. A literate public, already scarred with the Puritanism and Jansenism of the seventeenth century, sated and exhausted with the 'freedom' and licentiousness of the rational Enlightenment, eager

ly embraced the seeming order, the moral rectitude, the religious overtones of this new idealism, attempting to realize these new lofty goals. The great human error arose again: man expected all mankind to suddenly change his ways, to seek immediate reform, to embrace a common vision, to drop his concupiscent, self-centered ways, to seek the better. What resulted was a distorted puritanism, whose clouded vision blinded men to their own selfishness, frustrating their lives with the contradictory 'vision versus reality.'

A deadly self-contempt arises in such circumstances, one which leads to contempt for others, which sees the physical world as an impediment to the truth, an evil in the way of good. Man begins to detest that physical part of himself which seems to tie him to this world's physical evil. The body becomes an instrument of evil to be carefully guarded by the aspiration to goodness in man. Thus a dichotomy arises, a conflict erupts, and the aspirant in man, what he terms 'soul,' becomes the watchdog of a depraved body. As men alter and are altered by an idea, so attitudes and mores of a whole society are altered. Within nineteenth-century England and all the peoples that it influenced, a certain gnosticism arose, developing into an elaborate code of etiquette and manners, of social and personal privations. Society labeled the physical, the body and its basic functions, as evil and sought solace in a fantastical nostalgia of spiritual purity, all to be realized in a very physical world. Society distorted part of reality into representing an illusive whole, the spiritual; denied the other part of reality, the physical, as real; yet remained, as is the true state of the entire universe, within a physical reality. A perversion of truth resulted.

Coventry Patmore, through his literary studies, and through the inti-

mate human relations in his life, became keenly aware of this fear and condemnation of the physical. His studies brought him into contact with the greatest Western thinkers' healthy concept of man -- an integral whole, whose origin and nature is good, and therefore, whose spiritual and physical characteristics are good. The puritanism of his own time contradicted his intellectual tendencies, and Patmore battled this heresy throughout his life.

The poet's healthy philanthropic beliefs must also be attributed to the profound interpersonal relationships in his life, primarily, his first marriage.

The most fruitful and most lasting personal influence on Coventry Patmore was his ideally happy first marriage. He married Emily Augusta Andrews in 1847. Their love was based upon a remarkable harmony of outlook and temperament. Emily, a woman of strong personality and deep religious convictions, was gifted with almost all the qualities that go to make an outstanding wife and mother, and with her, Patmore entered into the fulness of married love. She became for him 'Love's self, so Love's interpreter', who not only possessed womanly tenderness, but had the ability to make this real and intelligible to her husband.<sup>26</sup>

Her good sense and lack of sentimentality made a powerful appeal to the young husband, and helped to accentuate the same native qualities in him... The daily companionship with Emily, which did not stale, but only deepened, their mutual affection, gave Patmore a profound understanding of womanhood, and provided the greatest emotional experience of his life, the stuff of which his poetry is made.<sup>27</sup>

Six children were testimony to this marriage's fruition, as well as the poetic fervor of The Angel in the House, a collection of verse, praising real domestic virtue, enduring married love and familial devotion. Patmore's other two marriages, the first of which catalyzed his conversion to Roman Catholicism, only furthered his positive views concerning the sanctity of the body and of married love, as did his relationship with his daughter,

Emily, and in later years, his friendship with the writer, Alice Meynell. The Unknown Eros, which glorifies and transfigures married love as the physical symbol of Christ's loving action within the human soul, was composed during his second marriage. His daughter, Emily, a member of a Roman Catholic contemplative order from 1875 (two years prior to the publication of The Unknown Eros), was the real inspiration of the spiritual heights of this poetic collection.

It is of the deepest significance that as Sister Mary Christina, so close to her father's heart, was advancing in the ways of contemplation and dedication, the *Psyche* odes were written, and that, after her death in 1882, Patmore wrote no more poetry.

It is clear from The Unknown Eros and from The Rod, the Root, and the Flower that Emily's life as a 'bride of Christ', and her dedication to Divine Love assisted Patmore in his struggle to submit himself to God as woman to man; and that her consecrated virginity made him see more deeply into the spiritual nature of virginity.<sup>28</sup>

Voluntary celibacy, which the poet had earlier considered inferior in practice and commitment to marriage, took on new meaning.

In Patmore's progress beyond and through the sanctified analogy of married love to a wider acceptance of love in which, mystically, the body is made holy through rejection of the pleasures of the body, and in which, while married love is still accepted as a great and holy love, a foreshadowing of the union with God, dedicated celibacy is a love of at least equal and perhaps higher virtue. Sister Mary Christina's example is paramount.<sup>29</sup>

In summary, Patmore's composition of The Unknown Eros, a work which glorified and sanctified with deific significance a subject almost completely avoided and spurned by his contemporaries, can only be understood and appreciated in light of his broad literary education, and the mature, well-minded people, particularly women, who shared and helped enrich his life. He was thoroughly schooled in real love.

He elevated and spiritualized human love in The Angel in the House, and humanized Divine Love in The Unknown Eros. In the later work is no celebration of an abstract desire, but a revelation of a personal intimacy from the joys of married love to another, higher love. This, for Patmore, is the goal of life and the heart of its mystery, the burning heart of the Universe. And only those who have on earth understood and experienced love can have any conception of, or are in a fit condition to obtain, the love of God. For as he writes: 'Divine love and sweetness cannot exist where there has been no knowledge of natural love and sweetness.'<sup>30</sup>

With this sort of literary and emotional preparation, The Unknown Eros, the poem, "Eros and Psyche," could be written.

"Eros and Psyche"

'Love, I heard tell of thee so oft!  
 Yea, thrice my face and bosom flush'd with heat  
 Of sudden wings,  
 Through delicatest ether feathering soft  
 Their solitary beat.  
 Long did I muse what service or what charms  
 Might lure thee, blissful Bird, into mine arms;  
 And nets I made,  
 But not of the fit strings.  
 At last, of endless failure much afraid,  
 To-night I would do nothing but lie still,  
 And promise, wert thou once within my window-sill,  
 Thine unknown will.  
 In nets' default,  
 Finch-like me seem'd thou might'st be ta'en with salt;  
 And here--and how thou mad'st me start!--  
 Thou art.'

"O Mortal, by Immortals' cunning led,  
 Who shew'd you how for Gods to bait your bed?  
 Ah, Psyche, guess'd you nought  
 I craved but to be caught?  
 Wanton, it was not you,  
 But I that did so passionately sue;  
 And for your beauty, not unscath'd, I fought  
 With Hades, ere I own'd in you a thought!"  
 'O, heavenly Lover true,  
 Is this thy mouth upon my forehead press'd?  
 Are these thine arms about my bosom link'd?  
 Are these thy hands that tremble near my heart,  
 Where join two hearts, for juncture more distinct?  
 By thee and by my maiden zone caress'd,  
 What dim, waste tracts of life shine sudden, like moonbeams  
 On windless ocean shaken by sweet dreams!  
 Ah, stir not to depart!  
 Kiss me again, thy Wife and Virgin too!  
 O Love, that, like a rose,  
 Deckest my breast with beautiful repose,  
 Kiss me again, and clasp me round the heart,  
 Till fill'd with thee am I  
 As the cocoon is with the butterfly!  
 --Yet how 'scape quite  
 Nor pluck pure pleasure with profane delight?  
 How know I that my Love is what he seems!  
 Give me a sign  
 That, in the pitchy night,  
 Comes to my pillow an immortal Spouse,

And not a fiend, hiding with happy boughs  
 Of palm and asphodel  
 The pits of hell!"

"'Tis this:  
 I make the childless to keep joyful house.  
 Below your bosom, mortal Mistress mine,  
 Immortal by my kiss,  
 Leaps what sweet pain?  
 A fiend, my Psyche, comes with barren bliss,  
 A God's embraces never are in vain.'

'I own  
 A life not mine within my golden zone.  
 Yea, how  
 'Tis easier grown  
 Thine arduous rule to don  
 Than for a Bride to put her bride-dress on!  
 Nay, rather, now  
 'Tis no more service to be borne serene,  
 Whither thou wilt, thy stormful wings between.  
 But, Oh,  
 Can I endure  
 This flame, yet live for what thou lov'st me, pure?'

'Himself the God let blame  
 If all about him bursts to quenchless flame!  
 My Darling, know  
 Your spotless fairness is not match'd in snow,  
 But in the integrity of fire.  
 Whate'er you are, Sweet, I require.  
 A sorry God were he  
 That fewer claim'd than all Love's mighty kingdoms three!'

'Much marvel I  
 That thou, the greatest of the Powers above,  
 Me visitest with such exceeding love.  
 What thing is this?  
 A God to make me, nothing, needful to his bliss,  
 And humbly wait my favour for a kiss!  
 Yea, all thy legions of liege deity  
 To look into this mystery desire.'

'Content you, Dear, with them, this marvel to admire,  
 And lay your foolish little head to rest  
 On my familiar breast.  
 Should a high King, leaving his arduous throne,  
 Sue from her hedge a little Gipsy Maid,  
 For far-off royal ancestry bewray'd  
 By some wild beauties, to herself unknown;  
 Some voidness of herself in her strange ways  
 Which to his bounteous fulness promised dainty praise;  
 Some power, by all but him unguess'd,  
 Of growing king-like were she king-caress'd;  
 And should he bid his dames of loftiest grade  
 Put off her rags and make her lowlihead  
 Pure for the soft midst of his perfumed bed,  
 So to forget, kind-couch'd with her alone,  
 His empire, in her winsome joyance free;

What would he do, if such a fool were she  
 As at his grandeur there to gape and quake,  
 Mindless of love's supreme equality,  
 And of his heart, so simple for her sake  
 That all he ask'd, for making her all-blest,  
 Was that her nothingness always  
 Should yield such easy fee as frank to play  
 Or sleep delighted in her Monarch's breast,  
 Feeling her nothingness her giddiest boast,  
 As being the charm for which he loved her most?  
 What if this reed,  
 Through which the King thought love-tunes to have blown,  
 Should shriek, "Indeed,  
 I am too base to trill so blest a tone!"  
 Would not the King allege  
 Defaulted consummation of the marriage-pledge,  
 And hie the Gypsy to her native hedge?  
 'O, too much joy; O, touch of airy fire;  
 O, turmoil of content; O, unperturb'd desire,  
 From founts of spirit impell'd through brain and blood!  
 I'll not call ill what, since 'tis thine, is good,  
 Nor best what is but second best or third;  
 Still my heart fails,  
 And, unaccustom'd and astonish'd, quails,  
 And blames me, though I think I have not err'd.  
 'Tis hard for fly, in such a honied flood,  
 To use her eyes, far more her wings or feet.  
 Bitter be thy behests!  
 Lie like a bunch of myrrh between my aching breasts.  
 Some greatly pangful penance would I brave.  
 Sharpness me save  
 From being slain by sweet!  
 'In your dell'd bosom's double peace  
 Let all care cease!  
 Custom's joy-killing breath  
 Shall bid you sigh full soon for custom-killing death.  
 So clasp your childish arms again around my heart:  
 'Tis but in such captivity  
 The unbounded Heav'ns know what they be!  
 And lie still there,  
 Till the dawn, threat'ning to declare  
 My beauty, which you cannot bear,  
 Bid me depart.  
 Suffer your soul's delight,  
 Lest that which is to come wither you quite:  
 For these are only your espousals; yes,  
 More intimate and fruitfuller far  
 Than aptest mortal nuptials are;  
 But nuptials wait you such as now you dare not guess.'  
 'In all I thee obey! And thus I know  
 That all is well:  
 Should'st thou me tell  
 Out of thy warm caress to go  
 And roll my body in the biting snow,

My very body's joy were but increased;  
 More pleasant 'tis to please thee than be pleased.  
 Thy love has conquer'd me; do with me as thou wilt,  
 And use me as a chattel that is thine!  
 Kiss, tread me under foot, cherish or beat,  
 Sheathe in my heart sharp pain up to the hilt,  
 Invent what else were more perversely sweet;  
 Nay, let the Fiend drag me through dens of guilt;  
 Let Earth, Heav'n, hell  
 'Gainst my content combine;  
 What could make nought the touch that made thee mine!  
 Ah, say not yet, farewell!  
 'Nay, that's the Blackbird's note, the sweet Night's knell.  
 Behold, Beloved, the penance you would brave!  
 'Curs'd when it comes, the bitter thing we crave!  
 Thou leav'st me now, like to the moon at dawn,  
 A little, vacuous world alone in air.  
 I will not care!  
 When dark comes back my dark shall be withdrawn!  
 Go free;  
 For 'tis with me  
 As when the cup the Child scoops in the sand  
 Fills, and is part and parcel of the Sea.  
 I'll say it to myself and understand.  
 Farewell!  
 Go as thou wilt and come! Lover divine,  
 Thou still art jealously and wholly mine;  
 And this thy kiss  
 A separate secret by none other scann'd;  
 Though well I wis  
 The whole of life is womanhood to thee,  
 Momently wedded with enormous bliss.  
 Rainbow, that hast my heaven sudden spann'd,  
 I am the apple of thy glorious gaze,  
 Each else life cent'ring to a different blaze;  
 And, nothing though I be  
 But now a no more void capacity for thee,  
 'Tis all to know there's not in air or land  
 Another for thy Darling quite like me!  
 My arms no more thy restless plumes compel!  
 Farewell!  
 Whilst thou art gone, I'll search the weary meads  
 To deck my bed with lilies of fair deeds!  
 And, if thou choose to come this eventide,  
 A touch, my Love, will set my casement wide.  
 Farewell, farewell!  
 Be my dull days  
 Music, at least, with thy remember'd praise!  
 'Bitter, sweet, few and veil'd let be  
 Your songs of me.  
 Preserving bitter, very sweet,  
 Few, that so all may be discreet,  
 And veil'd, that seeing, none may see.'

Chapter Two  
An Analysis of Patmore's Poem  
of Mystical Love "Eros and Psyche"

Coventry Patmore's ode, "Eros and Psyche," is from Book II of the author's poetic collection, The Unknown Eros, published in 1877. The poem's lofty subject and emotional language, its irregular rhyme schemes and capriciously varied line and paragraph form, suggest a long poetic tradition beginning with the tightly structured odes of Pindar, continuing through the Pindaric imitations of Pierre de Ronsard, and later, of Milton, Dryden, Gray, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Tennyson.

What we have in the Unknown Eros odes, in short, is a unique blend of subtly varied pause and stress, producing an effect of proportion, but given unity and shape by the use of rhyme and alliteration. In its freedom, as well as in its carefully calculated music, The Unknown Eros looks forward to Hopkins... The form of the poems in The Unknown Eros is an intensely personal one, owing something to the great writers of English irregular odes who preceded Patmore, but essentially his variant of the tradition in which they wrote.<sup>31</sup>

The poem's subject, Christian mystical union, is presented as a dialogue between the human soul and God, following the basic three-point spiritual ascent of the soul to God: the purgation of the soul's selfish desires and her surrender to God's will; illumination, whereby the soul is granted certain universal knowledge by God to sustain and continue her growth in sanctity; and the union of the soul with God, when the Divine, of His own choice, reveals to the soul intimate knowledge of His love for her.<sup>32</sup>

The soul, at the beginning of the poem, recalls her own willful attempt to lure God to herself:

Long did I muse what service or what charms

Might lure thee, blissful Bird, into mine arms;  
(ll. 6-7)

This is followed by her entrance into the purgative "state of passivity and surrender to the will of God."<sup>33</sup>

At last, of endless failure much afraid,  
To-night I would do nothing but lie still,  
And promise, wert thou once within my window-sill,  
Thine unknown will.  
(ll. 10-13)

The analogy of the king and the Gypsy maid, in the eighth paragraph, repeats this purgation-surrender theme with the motif of nothingness, reminiscent of St. John of the Cross' nada: "some voidness of herself," "her nothingness." The eleventh paragraph is the soul's boldest declaration of her complete surrender to God: "In all I thee obey!" "do with me as thou wilt," and, the thirteenth paragraph, a reiteration of the nada motif: "And, nothing though I be..."

The illumination of the soul by God is presented as a recall, and is referred to implicitly in Psyche and Eros' opening lines. It is directly referred to in the king-Gypsy maid analogy in the idea of an evolving knowledge through the actions of the Divine:

Some power, by all but him unguess'd,  
Of growing king-like were she king-caress'd;  
(ll. 94-95)

The God-soul union is the spiritual step most celebrated throughout the poem, again and again emerging in glorious proclamation. Already, the poem's first line: "Love, I heard tell of thee so oft!" creates an exciting, ecstatic mood. The soul, inflamed with God's love, recalls her past experience, her growing knowledge of Divine Love's reality. This ecstasy is even more strongly expressed in the words of God, immediately following:

Ah, Psyche, guess'd you nought  
I craved but to be caught?  
Wanton, it was not you,

But I that did so passionately sue;  
(ll. 20-23)

St. John of the Cross writes of God's love for the soul: "It must be remembered above all that if a soul is seeking after God, the Beloved is seeking it much more."<sup>34</sup> Indeed, this turbulent dialogue of love energizes the dynamic movement of the poem:

Can I endure  
This flame, yet live for what thou lov'st me, pure?  
'Himself the God let blame  
If all about him bursts to quenchless flame!  
(ll. 67-70)

'O, too much joy; O, touch of airy fire;  
O, turmoil of content; O, unperturb'd desire,  
(ll. 118-119)

So clasp your childish arms again around my heart:  
(l. 137)

Thy love has conquer'd me; do with me as thou wilt,  
(l. 157)

The poem maintains a rapturic rapport, almost frustrating in its repetition of the same love vocabulary and its limited dramatic abilities, which promises "espousals... More intimate and fruitfuller far," experiences of intimacy beyond verbal power. "Eros departs with an admonition that she delicately observe the intimacy of their relationship, lest it profaned by misunderstanding (ll. 203-207)"<sup>35</sup>--an experience ordained indescribable.

Although, in the odes, he had largely passed beyond the clichés of the popular religious vocabulary, he was not able wholly to dissociate himself from conventional epithets of other kinds, which lend a touch of literary vulgarity to some of the odes. One is tempted to attribute this element to the state of the poetic vocabulary in the mid-Victorian times. Patmore was not the only one among writers of power and outstanding ability to fall foul of the 'vocabulary of the heart'.<sup>36</sup>

Patmore's diction and punctuation is characteristic of his time, nineteenth-century England and its pre-occupation with its past, as evi-

denced in literature in the revival of the literary ballad, the romance, the saga, the epic, and a neo-Spenserian syntax and vocabulary, all ensconced in an aesthetic craving for Gothic art and architecture's shadowy castles and cathedrals. Thee's, thou's, thy's, and thine's abound, along with a battery of archaic words, readily apparent in the first paragraph alone: oft, yea, thrice, delicatest, wert, art. Antique phrasal inversions: "Long did I muse," "And nets I made," "Finch-like we seem'd," and the frequent use of the apostrophe, in imitation of its ancient use as a syllabic eliminator: flush'd, seem'd, might'st, ta'en, mad'st, demonstrate the Victorians' compulsion to age and historize that which had no age or history, to give to the imitations of their own time that certain august exaltation they had experienced in ancient artifacts. Along with this nostalgic fervor, there was, for the poet and his contemporaries, a desire for the dramatic. Out of the poem's eighty or so elaborate sentences, thirty-five are finalized by an exclamation point, and eleven by a question mark. For Patmore, there is an additional significant element, the influence of Christian mysticism and its literature.

The Psyche odes reflect Patmore's reading of Catholic mystics, and employ ideas which belong in the main tradition of orthodox mystical writing. The weaving into these poems of so much of the contemplative experience of the saints, expressed with such passion indicates that he felt himself akin, at least poetically, to the mystics...<sup>37</sup>

His frequent use of dramatic punctuation is therefore heavily influenced by the equally dramatic language of the mystics.

Of the poem's two-hundred lines, one half are pure iambic pentameter, while the remainder range from an alexandrine to a single iambic foot. The lines are arranged as either rhymed couplets, reminiscent of the self-contained heroic couplets of the Augustine period or of the neat, firm,

independent Shakespearean sonnet line, or as freely alternating rhymed lines like those of Wordsworth and some of Shelley's odes.

To sustain its music requires much sensitivity and technical skill, so that, save in the rarest cases, a line does not end or a rhyme fall in any but a sense-emphatic place. In the main, the measure is solemn, taking its character from the longer, weighted lines... to this varied use of the ode form, Patmore brings a sureness in handling the rhetoric of sentence-structure, and so leading the sense of his periods through the emphases of the form as to bind the odes together into organic units... he achieved an organic poetry in which the form fluctuates, ebbs and flows according to variations in the thought and feeling.<sup>38</sup>

One would imagine that such poems were irregular Pindaric (numerus lege solutus), but Patmore had very different ideas on the form. The odes, he asserted, depended upon pause, and in its true interpretation all the lines were of the same length from the 'long-drawn sigh of two syllables to the passionate cataract of sixteen'. He described the measure as iambic tetrameter with unlimited catalexis, which is commonly called "irregular" ode, though it is really as "regular" as any other English metre...<sup>39</sup>

A body of rich, sensual vocabulary and imagery, much of it borrowed from the poetic and mystic traditions of the past, envelopes the poem with fiery life. Employing as the central metaphor the Eros-Psyche love myth (the lovesick god visits his mortal love under the shadows of night so that she may never behold his true countenance), Patmore couples images of physical union, fire, Godly omnipotence, and fluttering birds, with those of virginity, human frailty and nothingness.

The most frequent imagery is that of physical union, represented in almost every paragraph, and implied in all through the constant love vocabulary, from body terminology to affectionate pet-names. The most memorable analogies of physical union are the cocoon-butterfly metaphor:

Kiss me again, and clasp me round the heart  
Till fill'd with thee am I  
As the cocoon is with the butterfly.<sup>40</sup>

(ll. 38-40)

and the king-Gypsy maid metaphor (para. 8), both clearly emphasizing the poet's identification of married love as a fitting representation of mystical love.<sup>41</sup>

The physical union imagery is bound to the poem's imagery of fire.<sup>42</sup> An aura of heat and passion predominates from the first lines: "Yea, thrice my face and bosom flush'd with heat." It is maintained in the references to the fires of hell, in the images of physical pain, through the descriptions of God as "quenchless flame," "the integrity of fire," and specially so in the line recalling Teresa of Avila's pained heart pierced with an angel's dart:<sup>43</sup>

Sheathe in my heart sharp pain up to the hilt,  
(l. 160)

The moment of closest union between the love and the fire imagery is manifested in Psyche's cry:

'O, too much joy; O, touch of airy fire;  
O, turmoil of content; O, unperturb'd desire,  
(ll. 118-119)

God, as a deeply intimate, personal being, is represented in the imagery of physical union and fire. Also though, there is the deific imagery which expresses both the trinitarian nature of God: thrice-solitary, "Love's mighty kingdoms three," and his sovereign divinity and omnipotence: immortal, mighty, "the greatest of the Powers." This Godly eminence is most keenly presented in the king-Gypsy maid analogy, where royal magnificence is contrasted with peasant poverty.

Human frailty and nothingness is transfigured through union with God:

What dim, waste tracts of life shine sudden, like moonbeams  
On windless ocean shaken by sweet dreams!  
(ll. 32-33)

Whate'er you are, Sweet, I require.  
(l. 74)

A God to make me, nothing, needful to his bliss,  
(l. 81)

Rainbow, that hast my heaven sudden spann'd,  
(l. 187)

The imagery of darkness accentuates the state of human nothingness, as is most vividly experienced in the 'dark night.' This recalls both the Greek myth and the Christian mystical tradition's maintenance of a divine being who visits the world only "veil'd, that, seeing, none may see," under the cover of darkness:

And lie still there,  
Till the dawn, threat'ning to declare  
My beauty, which you cannot bear,  
Bid me depart.  
(ll. 140-143)

Patmore's major natural image of God as a bird relates, as well, the hovering, cloud-covered Greek god to the dove-swift Christian God. The same analogy can be found in the Greek myth, in the biblical "Canticle of Canticles," and in Christian mystical writings.

Finally, and in contrast to the imagery of physical union, there is the language of virginity, the reminder that this exalted relationship with God is the purest of relationships, indeed, the ultimate, transcending all physical and psychic barriers.<sup>44</sup> This motif therefore unites all in the notion of God's purity, simplicity, perfection.

Patmore's imagery is enriched with much rhyme and alliteration. Eloquent couplets are interspersed with random rhyme schemes as erratic as lines 150-166 (ABBAACCDEFDFDBEEB) or as simple and self-contained as the poem's final five lines. Examples of fine alliteration and consonance are abundant:

Nor pluck pure pleasure with profane delight?  
(l. 42)

... legions of liege deity  
(1. 83)

I am too base to trill so blest a tone!  
(1. 114)

More pleasant 'tis to please thee than be pleased.  
(1. 156)

'Bitter, sweet, few and veil'd let be  
Your songs of me.  
Preserving bitter, very sweet,  
Few, that so all may be discreet,  
And veil'd, that, seeing, none may see.'

It is difficult to separate sense from sound, form from content, in this poem. Each gives life to the other. The exalted theme is reinforced by a dynamic sentence structure, brilliant, fiery vocabulary and imagery, and much musical rhyme and alliteration.

As he very literally and actually held the members of the body to be divine, so may it be said that he saw in poetry also the incarnate word; the metre, the diction, the pause, the rhyme, the phrase were not accidental but essential. Hence his extraordinary mastery of style.<sup>45</sup>

Though there are the conventional nineteenth-century English archaisms and dramatic devices, the poem can be said to be the imitation of no other poet's work.

The Unknown Eros odes cannot be bound to any theory, not even Patmore's. Their form is certainly not external and mechanical. The poems breathe and move with a life of their own. They achieve, as do all living things, a unique compromise between freedom and law, and so exemplify in their shape that principle of life which Patmore celebrates in the poems themselves.<sup>46</sup>

That principle of life is man's experience of spiritual transcendence toward and union with the Lifegiver Himself. Patmore, as does the Church's greatest teachers and writers, emphasizes the person-to-person nature of this encounter, describing it with the language of man's most intimate unitive ability, the union of man and woman, spiritually and physically, in married love. "Eros and Psyche," thematically and metaphorically, is

alive, bursting also with linguistic energy's audial and conceptual excitement. Ultimately, self-contained, complementary interdependence of content and form is created, a unity of unities, the goal of all real art.

Those who are braced to the highest levels of the art, where the flowers are few and fugitive, where Nature and Humanity, to adapt a saying of Patmore's, are beautified and developed instead of being withered up by religious thought, will find in the best of the Odes a fund of inspired poetry for which they would willingly sacrifice the whole baggage of the Victorian legacy in general.<sup>47</sup>

Patmore, though succumbing to Victorian literary devices, easily transcended such weaknesses, softening and blending their triteness into an inseparable unity of content and form. Literary limitations are made subservient to real ideological and artistic goals, and thus, a true work of art is constructed.

### Conclusion

Coventry Patmore, in much of his writing, specifically in the poem, "Eros and Psyche," promoted and discussed the Christian idea of love in the context of marriage, human and mystical. This idea developed from his own extensive study of Christian writers and his own personal Christian relationships, and contrasted sharply with the prevailing ideas of love and marriage in his own time. His thought was therefore often misinterpreted or ignored by the moralistic Victorian mind who considered the concepts of spiritual marriage and mystical love, as well as any celebration of physical union in sacred terms, as indigestible and distasteful.<sup>48</sup> Though Patmore wrote metered verse and embellished prose in the accepted vocabulary and syntax, and displayed a marked lyrical gift, his contemporaries' ignorance of his thought obscured the man and his work for many years.<sup>49</sup>

This study of the poet's literary background and analysis of one of his poems was prompted by an interest in knowing God as he truly is, Love, only Love. For Patmore, this pursuit and goal of Love were discussed in poetic verse, and so "it is as a poet that finally he must be judged, as he would have wished to be."<sup>50</sup> The poet made no great strides of literary form and language. It is the subject matter which illuminates his poetry as a whole, transforming common metaphors and archaisms into the interpreters of a world experience beyond any common sense-experience, and certainly beyond the thought of the majority of his contemporaries. The purpose of this analysis was to present this subject matter's origins and its actual use in one of the poet's works. The analysis concludes that Patmore can

be appreciated as a true artist, an exemplar of form-content unity, only if his ideas are truly comprehended and accepted. These are the soundest of Christian theological ideas, as viewed by an actual Christian. Patmore, therefore, demands of his reader an appreciation, an understanding, even an embracement of basic Christian Truth. Only then does the true merit of his work becomes apparent.<sup>51</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Ifor Evans, English Poetry in the Nineteenth Century, p. 450.
- <sup>2</sup>M. C. D'Arcy, The Mind and Heart of Love, p. 60.
- <sup>3</sup>D'Arcy, p. 61.
- <sup>4</sup>D'Arcy, p. 62.
- <sup>5</sup>J. C. Reid, The Mind and Art of Coventry Patmore, p. 101.
- <sup>6</sup>Reid, pp. 90-91.
- <sup>7</sup>Reid, p. 87.
- <sup>8</sup>Reid, p. 89.
- <sup>9</sup>Reid, p. 95.
- <sup>10</sup>Reid, p. 100.
- <sup>11</sup>Reid, p. 60.
- <sup>12</sup>Reid, p. 62.
- <sup>13</sup>Reid, p. 66.
- <sup>14</sup>Reid, p. 69.
- <sup>15</sup>Reid, p. 74.
- <sup>16</sup>Reid, p. 71.
- <sup>17</sup>Reid, p. 75.
- <sup>18</sup>Reid, p. 81.
- <sup>19</sup>Reid, p. 75.
- <sup>20</sup>Reid, p. 53.
- <sup>21</sup>Reid, p. 58.
- <sup>22</sup>Reid, p. 104.
- <sup>23</sup>Reid, p. 107.
- <sup>24</sup>Reid, p. 107.
- <sup>25</sup>This is the researcher's personal reflection-summary. For additional information see: Gertrude Himmelfarb, Victorian Minds, pp. 275-278; 303-305.

<sup>26</sup>Reid, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup>Reid, p. 20.

<sup>28</sup>Reid, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup>Reid, p. 36.

<sup>30</sup>Reid, pp. 167-168.

<sup>31</sup>Reid, p. 279.

<sup>32</sup>R. Garrigou-LaGrange, Christian Perfection and Contemplation, pp. 170-175.

<sup>33</sup>Reid, p. 97.

<sup>34</sup>C. H., The Mystical Doctrine of St. John of the Cross, p. 151.

<sup>35</sup>Reid, p. 297.

<sup>36</sup>Reid, p. 305.

<sup>37</sup>Reid, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup>Reid, pp. 279-280.

<sup>39</sup>Evans, pp. 167-168. See also: Herbert Read, Collected Essays in Literary Criticism, pp. 322-323.

<sup>40</sup>Reid, p. 98.

<sup>41</sup>Reid, p. 164.

<sup>42</sup>Reid, p. 92.

<sup>43</sup>Reid, p. 96.

<sup>44</sup>Reid, pp. 35-36.

<sup>45</sup>Alice Meynell, Prose and Poetry, p. 136.

<sup>46</sup>Reid, p. 280. See also p. 307.

<sup>47</sup>Read, p. 330.

<sup>48</sup>Reid, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup>Reid, pp. 4-7.

<sup>50</sup>Reid, p. 308.

<sup>51</sup>Reid, p. 325.

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