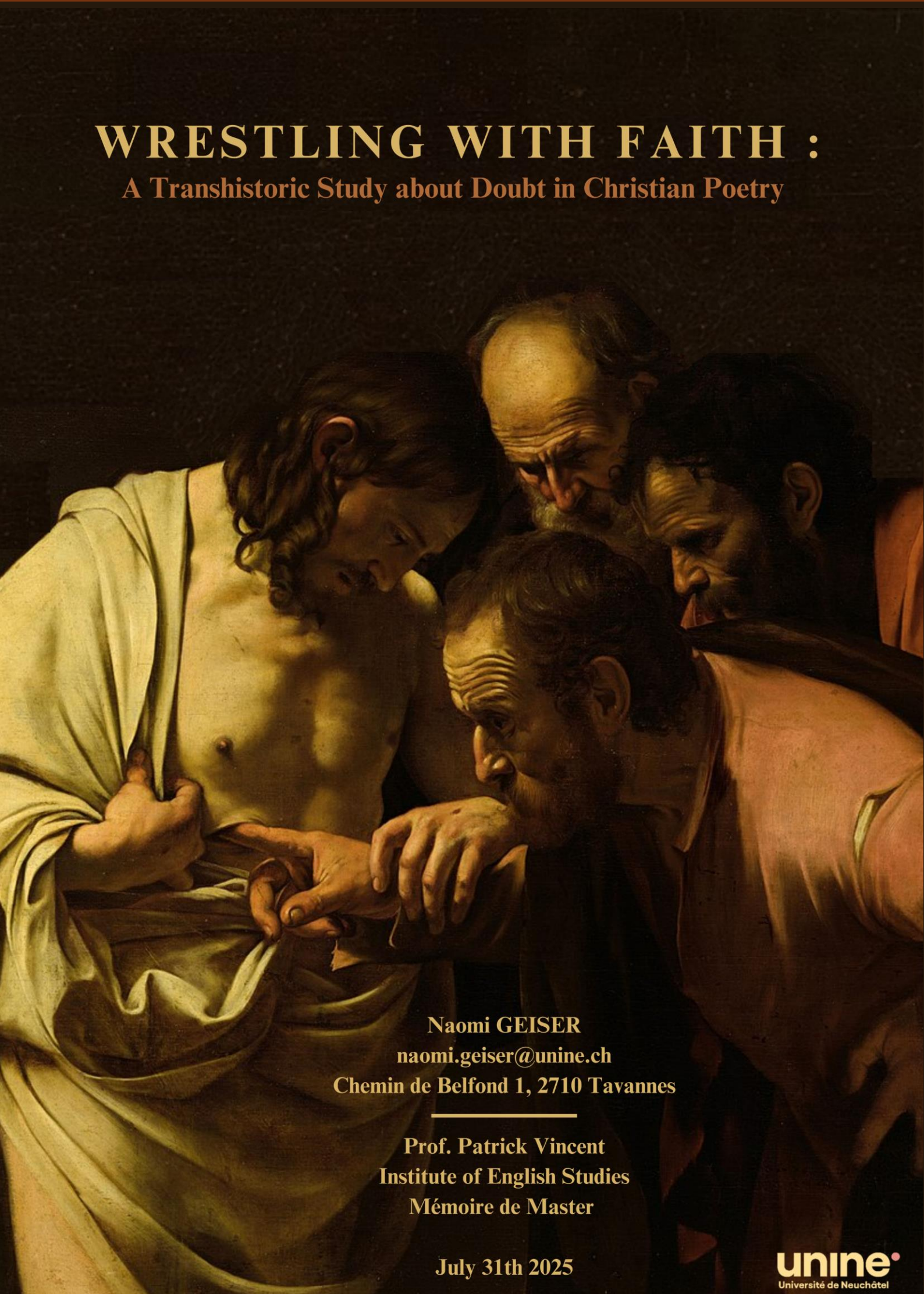
WRESTLING WITH FAITH :

A Transhistoric Study about Doubt in Christian Poetry



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To all who humbly wander between faith and doubt,

To those who believe and still question,

and to those who doubt and still seek.

Cover illustration: Caravaggio. (1602). *The incredulity of Saint Thomas* [Oil on canvas]. Sanssouci Picture Gallery, Potsdam, Germany.

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how he must adore us skeptics,
stretching out his carpenter's hands
to let St. Thomas probe the nail holes,
stick his finger deep in the bleeding gash,
feel the spiky bones and fly through
that little space to faith. Two thousand years
bereft of Jesus' body, I need a sign, although I wonder,
could any sign nail down for good
how a God-man walked this curving earth?

— Jeanne Murray Walker, "The Sign"

Introduction

The theme of doubt in Christian poetry captures a profound tension – the comfort of faith contrasted with the unsettling forces that challenge it. Faith, often a source of hope, meaning, and stability, can be deeply shaken by doubt, forcing believers to confront their convictions. While this process may inspire intellectual growth and rethinking, it is essential to acknowledge its potentially distressing and destabilizing effects. Indeed, Paul Tillich underlines that "many Christians, as well as members of other religious groups, feel anxiety, guilt and despair about what they call 'loss of faith'" (22). He eloquently articulates this tension, describing faith as "the greatest risk that man can run" (18). Because he warns that if faith proves unworthy, "the meaning of one's life breaks down," leading to the surrender of "oneself, including truth and justice, to something which is not worth it" (17). This intrinsic risk highlights the fragile yet profound nature of faith and its inextricable relationship with doubt.

C.S. Lewis echoes this dynamic in *God in the Dock: Essays*, stating "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and, if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important" (Lewis 101). His assertion highlights the existential weight of faith—its all-or-nothing character—and reinforces Tillich's view that faith demands an ultimate commitment, a state of "ultimate concern" in which doubt is neither an obstacle nor a "negation of faith" but a sign of the seriousness of belief (Tillich 22). The act of faith, therefore, is not a passive submission to dogma but an engagement that requires, in Tillich's words, "the courageous standing of uncertainty" (16). While certain crises of faith may be

temporal and linked to specific situations (such as illness, pain and grief), Tillich emphasizes that doubt "is always present as an element of the structure of faith" (22) because doubt "is a consequence of the risk of faith" (18).

The Interplay Between Faith and Doubt: A Philosophical Lens

While Tillich describes doubt and faith as "poles of the same reality" (22), they are often oversimplified and presented as opposing forces. In this respect, it is interesting to note the historical fluctuation in the understanding of the term *skepticism*. Indeed, it has undergone significant shifts in meaning across centuries. As Charles B. Schmitt observes, skepticism is a concept that resists simple definition, having been used in multiple, often contradictory ways (5). Schmitt warns against the tendency of some historians to equate skepticism with irreligion, particularly in the modern era. He notes that skepticism has often been viewed through a pejorative lens, especially after the seventeenth century, when it became a convenient accusation wielded in theological and philosophical disputes (5). This conflation has led to an oversimplified opposition between skepticism and belief, obscuring the fact that skepticism, in its original philosophical sense, was not inherently hostile to faith. Rather, Schmitt emphasizes that it challenged dogmatism, by encouraging a reflective stance that can coexist with faith (7).

The distinction between skepticism and atheism is thus crucial for understanding the role of doubt in religious thought. However, not all approaches to faith share the same view on rational inquiry. While some traditions embrace reason as an essential component of belief, others regard it with suspicion, seeing it as a threat to genuine faith. The difference arises from the specific epistemological framework linked to different models of faith. In an evidentialist perspective for instance, faith must be grounded in sufficient evidence to be considered rational. This view assumes that religious faith must adhere to the same evidentiary standards as other justified beliefs. (Bishop and McKaughan, "Faith and Reason: The Epistemology of Faith"). In contrast, fideism holds that belief in God necessarily requires a doxastic venture—a

commitment that goes beyond what the available evidence can support. As Bishop and McKaughan describe, this model of faith suggests that trust in God is similar to interpersonal trust, requiring an existential step beyond empirical verification. (Bishop and McKaughan, "Faith as Doxastic Venture"). This difference in how faith is understood highlights a deeper conflict between reason and belief—one that takes different forms depending on how faith is defined.

In this regard, Frédéric Rognon offers a useful framework by identifying four paradigms of faith and doubt. He calls the first category *faith as a leap* ("la foi comme saut dans l'inconnu"). This conception is deeply influenced by the thought of Søren Kierkegaard, for whom faith is an act of radical trust that stands independently of rational justification (Rognon 23–28). Within this framework, faith is defined by its very absurdity, which, by definition, denies reason. There is thus an inherent opposition between faith and doubt: they are antithetical approaches, mutually exclusive (25). In fact, in this view faith really is a *challenge to reason* (26). However, according to this conception of faith, if one finds oneself confronted with doubt—one should not engage with doubt rationally but overcome it through an act of will (25). Faith, in this perspective, does not draw sustenance from doubt. However, the rigid opposition between faith and reason in this paradigm inadvertently provokes it. Indeed, Rognon notes that the exaltation of blind faith can drive observers toward an equally radical stance: *the skeptical doubt*, which is the refusal of any certainty (26), a total, absolute, and definitive questioning of all beliefs (27). In this way, *faith as a leap* and *skeptical doubt*, though seemingly opposed, ultimately mirror each other in their extremes.

Rognon's second paradigm, *faith as certitude*, envisions faith as an acquired truth. Doubts, in this model, are reframed as a test that ultimately confirms faith (29). Indeed, Rognon speaks of a "process of subversion" because this type of faith "integrates, digests and

instrumentalizes [doubts] for its own benefit" (29, my translation from French[1]). Rognon explains that this mechanism is driven by the very powerful "desire to believe" (29). However, this attempt to objectify belief—to turn faith into absolute certainty—comes at a cost. It seems to hinder honest questioning (29). Indeed, we can imagine that believers facing doubt within this framework cannot openly wrestle with uncertainty because they will want to either suppress it or reinterpret it as proof that legitimizes their faith. According to Rognon, this impulse reflects *methodical doubt*—the rational process Descartes introduced to test knowledge. However, while Descartes' method aims to discover truth, faith as certitude seeks reassurance. Despite this difference, both approaches share the same goal: eliminating uncertainty (31). Yet, in doing so, this paradigm risks turning faith into something rigid, more about control than genuine spiritual engagement (34).

The third paradigm, *faith as belief* embraces a more dynamic relationship with doubt. In this model, faith is not absolute knowledge but a conviction strong enough to be held as true even if questions remain (34). Unlike the previous paradigms, which either exclude doubt or subvert it, this conception allows doubt to serve a constructive purpose. Here, doubt is an instrument that purges faith of its excesses and illusions (36). This process, which Rognon terms *cathartic doubt*, challenges belief to strip away false certainties and deepen faith (38). When confronted with uncertainty, believers in this framework engage with it, allowing it to reshape and purify their faith (38). This perspective acknowledges that faith is never static but must evolve through critical reflection. However, its limits lie in the fact that *cathartic doubt*, if pushed too far, can become an endless cycle of deconstruction, leaving belief in a state of perpetual instability. While this paradigm values intellectual honesty, it risks turning faith into something that is never fully embraced—always under revision. Besides, Rognon identifies another, more theologically oriented issue with models of *faith as certainty* and *belief*—namely,

[1] All quotations from Rognon's work are originally in French; the English translations are my own.

that in seeking to secure or reinforce itself, faith risks becoming a kind of *work* ("oeuvre"), something acquired or strengthened through "meritorious efforts" (29-30; 39-40). Yet, in biblical tradition, faith and works are fundamentally distinct: faith is understood as a response to divine grace rather than something achieved through human effort [2].

Finally, Rognon's fourth paradigm, *faith as a journey*, echoes the dialectical understanding of faith and doubt outlined earlier through Paul Tillich's thought. This model understands belief as a process—one that unfolds over time and is shaped by both conviction and uncertainty. Unlike the previous paradigms, which either reject doubt or attempt to control it, this perspective acknowledges that doubt is not an obstacle to faith but an inherent part of it. Faith is not static but constantly shifting, adapting to the believer's life experiences (41). Like a journey, it moves through phases of confidence and questioning, growth and struggle. The believer may experience moments of spiritual certainty but also encounter doubts that touch the very core of their faith—doubts about revelation, the existence and love of God, or the presence of Christ (41). Unlike *methodical* or *cathartic doubt*, *existential doubt* "is not sought, nor provoked, nor cultivated. It comes through the force of circumstances, through the trials of life, through the confrontation with death, and no one escapes it" (Rognon 45). This doubt is not a simple intellectual challenge but a profound anxiety (45). However, rather than being something to suppress, *existential doubt* must be confronted and lived through. As Rognon suggests, acknowledging and facing doubt is not only a matter of honesty but a means of allowing faith to grow deeper (45). He shows that this struggle is illustrated in the Gospel of Mark, where a father, desperate for his child's healing, cries out to Jesus: "I believe; help my unbelief!" (*KJV* [3]*,* John 1:29) (45–47)). His plea captures the paradox of this paradigm—faith

[2] This remark echoes a long theological debate and raises an important question: if faith is framed in rational or merit-based terms, does it not risk minimizing divine iintervention and excluding those who cannot reason or strive their way to belief? While important, this question lies beyond the scope of this study.
[3] All biblical quotations in this work are taken from the *King James Version* (KJV). To avoid repetition, the version is not specified with each citation

and doubt are not opposites but are intertwined. Doubt can provoke a renewed trust, leading the believer to a deeper, more honest engagement with God.

This intricate relationship between faith and doubt is not merely a philosophical abstraction but a lived experience—one that has shaped religious thought, personal belief, and artistic expression for centuries. Rognon's paradigms will thus offer a useful interpretive grid for the poetic works discussed in this thesis.

Faith and Doubt in Biblical Tradition

To understand how Christian poetry grapples with faith and doubt, it is essential to first consider their roots in the biblical tradition, which not only anticipates but also illustrates many of the philosophical tensions outlined above. Beyond theological concepts, the Bible provides foundational narratives, images, and language that have shaped poetic expressions of belief across centuries. In Scripture, doubt is not the absence of faith but a dynamic force within it—a tension that poets have continually revisited and reimagined. This tension is woven throughout both the Old and New Testaments, appearing in different contexts and taking on different meanings. In many cases, it does not deny God's existence but questions His actions, intentions, or reliability. For example, Sarah laughs at the idea of bearing a child in her old age, doubting the plausibility of God's promise (Gen. 18:1–15). Moses, despite witnessing God's power firsthand, hesitates to embrace his role as Israel's leader, questioning both his own abilities and God's choice of him (Exod. 4:1–17). Later, in the wilderness, Moses experiences another crisis, doubting God's sufficiency (Num. 11:4–23). The psalmists also voice such struggles—Psalm 10 laments God's apparent absence in times of trouble, yet prayer remains a means of engagement with the divine.

This dynamic of questioning continues into the New Testament. Despite the presence of Jesus, who is presented as God incarnate[4]— the divine made visible and tangible, doubt

[4] See John 1:1, 14 ; John 10:30; John 14:9 ; Colossians 2:9; Matthew 1:23; Titus 2:13 for example.

remains a central theme in the lives of His followers. Jesus frequently admonishes His disciples for their *little faith* when they fear storms (Matt. 8:26), worry about provision (Matt. 6:30), or falter when walking on water (Matt. 14:30). At times, doubt takes on an even deeper existential weight. John the Baptist, whose mission was to prepare the people for the coming of Christ, finds himself questioning from the confines of a prison cell. Having once boldly proclaimed Jesus as the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29), he then sends his disciples to ask, "Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3). This moment highlights how personal suffering, and unmet expectations can destabilize even the strongest convictions. Jesus responds not with a rebuke but with evidence, pointing to the visible signs of His ministry (Matt. 11:5). In Mark 6:1–6, doubt emerges not from distance but from familiarity. When Jesus returns to His hometown, those who watched Him grow up struggle to understand how the familiar figure they knew could now perform miracles and teach with such wisdom. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" they ask, and their skepticism prevents them from accepting His authority (Mark 6:3).

Among the many biblical figures who wrestle with doubt, Thomas stands out as a particularly significant case. When the other disciples claim to have seen the risen Christ, Thomas responds with a demand for tangible proof: "Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). Often remembered as "Doubting Thomas," his story is in fact far more than an episode of skepticism. In Thomas's case, his doubt is not rooted in a rejection of Jesus but in his inability to reconcile the miraculous claim of resurrection with the undeniable reality of Jesus' death. Yet, as Rognon notes, Thomas is often oversimplified as a symbol of incredulity, whether interpreted as a representation of weak faith or praised for his refusal to accept unproven claims (36). He asserts that Thomas's role in the Gospel narrative is far more complex. First, Rognon highlights that his request for proof was not unreasonable—he only

asked for what the other disciples had already received: a direct apparition of the risen Christ (36). Moreover, he argues that Thomas embodies a journey toward a deeper faith (36). Indeed, his declaration— "My LORD and my God!" (John 20:28)—surpasses the confessions of the other disciples. In this way, Thomas, who is often labelled as the archetypal doubter, paradoxically becomes the first to explicitly recognize and articulate the full divinity of Jesus (Zumstein 291, 293).

This complex portrayal of doubt in the biblical tradition—ranging from uncertainty about God's actions to outright questioning of His nature—establishes a foundational framework for understanding how this tension plays out in Christian poetry. Just as biblical figures wrestled with faith, poets throughout history have turned to verse as a means of exploring and expressing the complex relationship between belief and confusion. In doing so, they have inherited and reinterpreted these biblical themes, transforming the struggles of biblical figures into personal reflections on faith. Indeed, the poets' works are profound engagements with the same questions that have persisted throughout Christian tradition: How does one navigate doubt without losing faith? How does doubt shape or deepen belief? These questions are at the heart of Christian poetry, where the interplay of faith and doubt continues to be a vital force in the search for spiritual truth.

Christian Poetry: A Space of Tension and Exploration

While the label *Christian poetry* suggests a body of literature unified by belief, in practice, this tradition resists easy categorization. As Micah Mattix argues, "in terms of technique and form, there is no such thing as Christian Literature" (11). He draws on the words of C.S. Lewis to support his assertion:

> The rules for writing a good passion play or a good devotional lyric are simply the rules for writing tragedy or lyric in general: success in sacred literature depends on the same qualities of structure, suspense, variety, diction, and the like which secure success in secular literature (Lewis, "Christianity and Literature" 173)

John Donne's poetry exemplifies this fluidity between sacred and secular verse. As Robert Young observes, Donne's religious poetry employs "the same kind of images and conceits" (218) that we find in his love poems. In fact, he notes that "it is in his religious sonnets that this ironic convergence of sacred and profane is most accurate" (218). This convergence highlights how Christian poetry often blurs the boundary between the earthly and the divine, intertwining spiritual and human experience.

However, if Christian poetry does not follow a separate set of artistic principles, what, then, distinguishes it from other poetry? Is a poem *Christian* because of its subject matter, its theological engagement, its use of biblical references and religious language, or the faith of its author? This last attempt of distinction becomes even more complex when doubt is involved. Does it matter if a poem is written by a believer who doubts—or a doubter who believes? Andrew Hudgins, a contemporary poet whose work appears in Christian poetry anthologies, illustrates this paradox. Reflecting on his own struggles with faith, he writes "Though I have been called a Christian poet and may even, once or twice, have called myself one, (…) I'm reluctant to call myself a Christian" (*Paradoxes of Christian Poetry* 156). Yet, paradoxically, he finds that faith remains an inescapable presence in his poetry: "No matter what I started out to write, I ended up pondering whether God exists, and if so, what he is, and what I am supposed to do about it" (156). His experience underlines that Christian poetry is not merely an expression of conviction but also a medium for questioning, searching, and wrestling with uncertainty.

Indeed, many poems found in Christian poetry anthologies do not simply affirm belief; rather, they challenge religious structures, critique rigid rituals, or voice the painful silence of God. As Hudgins argues, poetry must always contain an element of tension; "some form of conflict in form or subject that disturbs stasis and pulls the reader into the work of the poem" (159). Indeed, unlike (theological) treatises, which tend to prioritize clarity and doctrinal consistency, poetry can accommodate ambiguity and contradiction.

However, for him, this is especially true in Christian poetry because "there is always tension in religious search" (159). In this view, the most compelling Christian works do not simply affirm conviction but engage in an ongoing struggle, one that Hudgins describes as "the struggle for the faith beyond faith"—a struggle, he suggests, that "will last forever" (160).

Christian poetry can, then, be understood as a space where tension is explored—where faith is not merely expressed but tested, where certainty and questioning exist in dynamic opposition. This tension allows this tradition of literature to resonate beyond religious communities, inviting broader discussions about faith, critical thinking, meaning, and the human search for transcendence. It reflects what Paul Tillich identifies as "the greatness and the pain of being human"; the condition of "standing between one's finitude and one's potential infinity" (18). It is precisely this paradox—the pull between the known and the infinite—that makes Christian poetry a compelling subject of study within the humanities.

In this thesis, I explore how Christian poetry across different historical periods articulates the tension between faith and doubt. Adopting a transhistorical approach, I examine poets from three distinct eras, each shaped by shifting theological and intellectual concerns. I begin with John Donne, George Herbert, and Anne Bradstreet, who write during the Early Modern Period (16th–17th century)—a time of religious upheaval, where personal devotion and doctrinal conflict intensified spiritual introspection. I then turn to Emily Dickinson and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who grapple with doubt in the 19th century, an era when scientific advances increasingly challenged traditional belief. Finally, I examine modern and contemporary poets, focusing on C.S. Lewis and Jeanne Murray Walker. Writing in the 20th and 21st centuries, they explore faith in a secular and pluralistic world, where doubt is no longer viewed as a crisis but as an integral part of spiritual experience.

By tracing these poets' explorations of faith and doubt across centuries, I aim to show how shifting cultural and historical contexts have shaped the way believers experience doubt.

Besides, in a contemporary world that often reduces faith to either unquestioning certainty or blind comfort—and increasingly views it as a purely individual matter of personal truth—this study seeks to restore its universal dimension and intellectual legitimacy. By examining how doubt functions not as a failure of belief but as a space for inquiry and transformation, this thesis highlights faith as an ongoing, dynamic engagement with both uncertainty and meaning.

Chapter I: Faith and Doubt in the Poetry of the Early Modern Period

Introduction

In England, the Early Modern Period was marked by profound spiritual and ideological upheaval. Following the English Reformation, particularly under Elizabeth I, the Church of England was established as a compromise between traditional Catholic practices and Protestant reform. While the Elizabethan Settlement enforced apparent unity and conformity through the *Book of Common Prayer*, it deliberately avoided theological rigidity to appease both Catholic-leaning subjects and moderate Protestants. However, many believers remained dissatisfied because "the Elizabethan church seemed to have sacrificed truth to political expediency" (Reidhead and Johnson 659). Puritans—Calvinist Protestants—rejected ritualism, which they associated with idolatry, and called for a more thorough reformation, while Catholics on the other end of the spectrum, sought to restore ties with Rome.

These broad divisions concealed further tensions between traditions of faith, which differed not only in liturgical practice but in their core theological conceptions such as salvation. Catholic teaching emphasized the necessity of both faith and works in the process of salvation, stressing participation in the sacraments and the Church. Puritans, by contrast, believed that salvation depended entirely on divine grace granted to the elect, and that human effort could neither earn nor influence it. Another group called *Armenianism* proposed a middle path, insisting that individuals could choose to accept or resist God's grace. These were only some of the many competing theological currents that characterized the period. Such divergent

beliefs, along with disputes over church governance, contributed to growing religious conflict and drove many dissenters—especially Puritans—to seek refuge abroad, most notably in New England (662).

This climate of confessional conflict unfolded alongside a period of scientific disruption. Discoveries by figures like Galileo, who confirmed the heliocentric model through telescope observations, and William Harvey, who demonstrated the circulation of blood, overturned long-standing views of the cosmos and the body (664). As the traditional harmony between theology, natural philosophy, and cosmology came under strain, many began to question not only the structure of the universe but also their place within it. What had once appeared as a stable and divinely ordered creation now seemed uncertain and shifting, unsettling the frameworks through which people had long understood both the world and their faith.

While the doctrinal fragmentation and shifting intellectual paradigms created visible ruptures in institutional faith, they also intensified the inner lives of believers, confronting them with the tension between public conformity and private conviction. As Erica Morton-Starner notes, the Reformation era was "fraught with the anxieties that accompany rapid and disorienting change," forcing individuals to either adopt unfamiliar religious norms or abandon long-held practices (34). It is within this landscape of competing religious ideologies, growing intellectual questioning and their impact on personal faith that this chapter considers the works of John Donne, George Herbert, and Anne Bradstreet—three poets who approached Christian belief from distinct positions.

Donne was born into a devout Catholic family at a time when Catholics in Protestant England faced legal restrictions, social prejudice, and financial penalties. Unable to receive a university degree or pursue a public career, he left Oxford and studied law. After travels abroad and years of theological reflection, he converted to the Church of England in the 1590s (Reidhead and Johnson 684). Despite his later success as an Anglican clergyman, Donne's

writings often reveal the inner tension of a man shaped by conflicting religious allegiances and spiritual uncertainty (684–85). In contrast, Herbert was raised within the Anglican church and remained committed to its doctrines throughout his life. In 1630 he became a priest in the rural village of Bemerton, where he served until his death three years later. His poetic legacy, *The Temple*, offers what he called "a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul" (Reidhead and Johnson 749). Though rooted in institutional faith, these poems trace a deeply personal journey marked by anxiety and "distress over the vacillations, and regression in [his] relationship" with God (750). Bradstreet's voice, emerging from the Puritan settlements of colonial New England, adds yet another layer to the multifaceted expression of early modern faith. Born in 1612 in England, she emigrated in America in 1630 with a group seeking relief from religious persecution under Charles I (Owens 1–2). Though she ultimately submitted to the Puritan church in Boston, her private writings—especially the manuscript addressed to her children—reveal a more conflicted spirituality shaped by illness, suffering, and persistent questioning (McElrath and Robb xvi-xvii). Eloise S. Owens describes her as a "questioning Puritan".

I.I. Trembling Steps: The Fragile Journey of Faith

In all three poets, we find a devotional mode that embraces contradiction: a movement toward affirmation that does not erase tensions but works through them. Indeed, Kirstie Blair notes that they belong to a tradition whose works "express the poet's doubts and fears before coming, in their conclusions, to a renewed sense of faith" (420). A crucial model for this dynamic can be found in the Psalms. As Walter Brueggemann observes, these biblical poems give voice to moments of disorientation—pain, alienation, doubt—while still guiding the speaker toward the affirming structures of "faith speech" that resolve in praise (19). Bradstreet perfectly exemplifies this dynamic. "For Deliverance from a Fever", for instance, opens with a

twofold crisis. First, Bradstreet expresses doubt born from physical suffering, where pain itself becomes a sign of divine abandonment:

> When Sorrowes had begyrt me round,
> And paines within and out
> When in my flesh no part was found,
> Then didst Thou rid me out. (ll. 1–4)

This bodily collapse sets the stage for a deeper spiritual anxiety shaped by her Puritan preoccupation about salvation. She confesses: "Nor could I read my Evidence / Which oft I read before" (ll. 11–12), revealing her fear that she may not belong to the elect. Yet the poem pivots when the speaker turns to God: "Hide not Thy face from me!" (l. 14), "O heal my soul" (l. 16). This plea gives way to a final movement of worship:

> Thou heard'st, Thy rod Thou didst remove
> And spared my body frail
> Thou show'st to me Thy tender love,
> My heart no more might quail.
> O, praises to my mighty God,
> Praise to my Lord, I say,
> Who hath redeemed my soul from pit,
> Praises to Him for aye. (ll. 21-28)

This spiritual progression "from anguish to supplication to consolation" (Wess 31) —and the idea of reaffirmed faith after doubt is reminiscent of Rognon's paradigm of *faith as a journey*, discussed in the introduction, in which faith is seen as variable, shaped by the believer's experiences and circumstances.

Donne's works echo this conception of faith as well. As Molly Murray notes, "much of [his] poetry registers his own changeability," a reflection of his biographical and confessional fluidity, having belonged to both Catholicism and Anglicanism (69). In the Holy sonnets in particular, themes of "change in devotion, infidelity, and idolatry" dominate (Coles 917), reinforcing "the instability of the soul's condition" and the anxiety that it provokes (904, 920). This is particularly clear in the last Holy Sonnet, "[XIX]" ("Oh, to vex me"), which opens with a paradox: his spiritual "inconstancy" (l. 2) ironically creates a "constant habit," (l. 3)

underscoring the persistent fluctuation of faith. The continuous use of oppositions ("cold and hott," (l. 7) "praying" and "mute," "infinite" and "none" (l. 8)) highlights how faith oscillates daily between the extremes of indifference and feigned fervor: "I durst not view heaven yesterday; and to day / In prayers and flattering speeches I court God" (ll. 9-10). However, the central tension in this poem may be less between indifference and fervor than between insincerity and authenticity. Donne explicitly contrasts superficial devotion—"flattering speeches" and attempts "to court God" (l. 10), words implying insincerity and manipulation for personal benefit—with a sincere angst characterized by the phrase "true feare of his rod" (l. 11). While this expression traditionally suggests penitential awe before God's justice, in the context of Donne's fluctuating spiritual condition, it also points toward a deeper existential vulnerability. The trembling he describes is not merely fear of punishment, but fear grounded in uncertainty—about the authenticity of his faith, the sincerity of his devotion, and perhaps, implicitly, the security of his salvation as well.

By juxtaposing this calculated, self-serving devotion with genuine existential fear, Donne underlines that sincere anxiety is, paradoxically, an indicator of authentic spiritual engagement. Indeed, Donne claims that his "best dayes" occur precisely when he "shake[s] with feare" (ll.13-14). This aligns with Rognon's view of *existential doubt* as a path toward authentic faith. For him, indeed, such doubt is a form of grace, "a precious equipment to nourish faith" (45). He suggests that, rather than denying or suppressing it, believers can face existential doubt honestly, embracing its power to reconsider their path, reorient themselves, and earnestly seek divine assistance, thereby returning to greater fidelity to themselves and to God (45). Moreover, Rognon argues that *existential doubt* prevents theological rigidity and habitual, superficial spiritual practices, including formulaic "speeches," (l. 8) from dominating one's faith (47). Given Donne's professional role as a preacher—where persuasive speech before congregations could easily become performative—maintaining authentic introspection and

genuine humility seems crucial. As Young insightfully notes, reflective believers find comfort and encouragement when a prominent clergyman openly acknowledges his internal spiritual struggles (Young 232). Similarly, Starner talks about "spiritual utility" when she argues that Herbert's poetry—in acknowledging crisis within faith—is helping his readers in their own spiritual development (27-28)[5].

In "Satire III", fear once again emerges as the essential companion to the soul's spiritual journey. Donne explicitly identifies it not as weakness but as "great courage and high valour" (l. 16). As Richard Strier notes, Donne shifts the focus from passive acceptance to the brave exercise of critical discernment—rejecting "easie ways" (l. 14) in favor of the perilous pursuit of truth (290). In this sense, Donne anticipates Tillich's notion of *existential doubt*, which does not negate faith but becomes its most authentic form: a "courageous standing of uncertainty" in the face of ultimate concern (Tillich 16) — "To stand inquiring right is not to stray / To sleep, or run wrong, is." (l. 74-75). Donne reinforces this point through a powerful metaphor: "On a huge hill / Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will / Reach her, about must, and about must go" (ll. 75–77). With this image, he argues that "honest doubting search is better than the facile acceptance of any religious tradition" (Reidhead and Johnson 684). Truth is not acquired through blind obedience; its pursuit requires patience, detours, and the willingness to struggle uphill.

The metaphor of the ascent perfectly embodies Rognon's conception of *faith as a journey*—a path marked by uncertainty, change, and movement through time (41). For him, the strength of this image lies in its "deeply concrete" rendering of spiritual life, which emphasizes "the questions that assail [the believer] rather than the answers they receive" (41). Crucially,

[5] The importance of the Psalmic model for 17th-century devotional poetry lies notably in its ability to hold together personal anguish and communal belief. As Kirsten Stirling notes, the Psalms are "paradigmatic" devotional texts, simultaneously personal and liturgical, "both voicing the experiences of a first-person speaker and endlessly applicable to the experience of the congregation" (Oxford John Donne, 234–35). Their varied themes mirror the different "seasons of religious life" that believers may encounter across time and circumstance (Starner 39).

this metaphor can be read not only as a reflection of the believer's personal experience, but also as a symbol of the broader evolution of faith in history. At the time, Christianity itself was undergoing a kind of collective pilgrimage. Traditional certainties, such as the assurance of salvation or the authority of established doctrine, were destabilized. Faith, both personal and communal, had to navigate a new terrain of doubt and division. Donne's steep hill thus becomes more than a private trial; it stands for a historical moment in which the pursuit of truth required perseverance, courage, and the willingness to endure uncertainty.

While Donne exposes the anxiety and instability underlying his spiritual life, Herbert presents a more measured but no less poignant portrait of belief in crisis. Although most of his poetry concludes according to the "expectation of the Christian reader"—which means "resolution of belief" (Starner 39)—Starner cautions against generalizing such readings too rigidly, warning that this risks "undervaluing the experience of doubt, fear, and ambivalence" (39). Compared to Bradstreet, Herbert's "Deniall" offers a more fragile and unresolved response to a spiritual crisis. While her poem follows a clear trajectory from suffering to supplication to resolution, Herbert's ends in suspension. The speaker laments that his prayers meet only "silent ears," (l. 2) and his verse—like his faith—fractures: "Then was my heart broken, as was my verse." (l. 3). Echoing the despair of Psalm 88 (Starner 43), which portrays a God who "rejects" the speaker and hides His face (v. 14), "Deniall" captures not disbelief, but a faith shaken by absence. The silence of God gives rise to spiritual disarray— "My breast was full of fears / And disorder" (l. 4-5)—and emotional fragmentation, where "bent thoughts, like a brittle bow, / Did fly asunder." (6-7) . Though the poem closes with a petition—"That [thy favors] and my mind may chime, / And mend my rhyme" (l. 29)—there is no assurance that this harmony will be granted. The conditional grammar of the final stanza ("that… may…") defers resolution, leaving the restoration of faith suspended in possibility. As Starner observes, the rhyme is performatively "mended" through sound, yet the poem circles

back to the very "denial" it names. The formal closure does not erase the existential disorientation it stages (48-49). Instead, Herbert suggests that the silence of God may endure—and with it, the doubts that such silence inevitably provokes.

I.II. Leaping into Silence: The Urge to Suppress Doubt and Submit

One might wonder if it is precisely the fear of facing divine silence that leads some poems to shift from doubt to praise within just a few lines, leaving no space between the cry for divine help and the act of worship—a fear, perhaps, of ultimately losing faith. Indeed, such resolutions reflect a broader desire to control and frame spiritual experience in reassuring terms, offering closure when tension remains. This impulse can be understood in the wider context of early modern epistemological instability, where faith was increasingly troubled by the collapse of intellectual certainties. Donne captures this disorientation in his verse:

> And new philosophy calls all in doubt;
> The element of fire is quite put out;
> The sun is lost, and the earth, and no man's wit
> Can well direct him where to look for it. (Donne, "First Anniversarie", 205-208)

His lament reflects the epistemological anxiety that, as Schmitt notes, raised the question "whether man can have true and certain knowledge about the world" (8). This destabilization is present even before the poem begins: in the preface to *An Anatomy of the World: The First Anniversary*, Donne presents the elegy as a meditation on "the frailty and the decay of this whole world," following "the untimely death of Mistress Elizabeth Drury" (*Complete English Poems* 325). Alongside the era's intellectual uncertainty, Donne identifies death as a source of profound disorientation. Personal grief becomes inseparable from doubt, as the loss of one life reflects a deeper sense of existential uncertainty.

In this respect, Bradstreet offers a particularly compelling example. As previously discussed, in many of her poems, she gives voice to spiritual doubt while continuing to engage in a dialogue with the divine. However, in "The Death of Simon Bradstreet Who dyed on 16.

Novemb. 1669. being but a moneth, and one day old," she retreats from this dialogical mode. Here, she abandons the voice of inquiry altogether. The speaker opens by naming the brevity of the child's life — "No sooner come, but gone" (l. 1)— only to immediately redirect the emotional weight toward a conventional spiritual resolution: "yet is He good." (l. 4). The sudden turn from affective response to theological affirmation appears to be less a move of worship than as a reflex of doctrinal obligation. Bradstreet's silence ("With dreadful awe before him let's be mute" (l. 5)) is not the serene muteness of peace, but one of unease.

The poet was no stranger to death—she lost parents, a daughter-in-law, and multiple grandchildren. In early elegies, she struggles to reconcile loss with faith, often voicing her questions directly to God. But as death struck closer and more often, that voice began to fade. Owens observes that over time, "the gentle supplication of the poet for understanding turned to an insistent pleading," and eventually to silence—a silence that reveals the collapse of "conventional theology, pious doctrine, and safe platitudes as consolation" (28). The poem's central claim, "Such was His will, but why, let's not dispute," (l. 6) reveals a Kierkegaardian faith that leaves no space for questioning because "before God, we are always in the wrong; we can only bow in the silence of faith" (Rognon 25). The line "Let's say He's merciful as well as just" (l. 8) is particularly telling: "Let's say" implies uncertainty, a forced affirmation rather than heartfelt belief.

In Puritan faith, death served as a reminder of God's justice and the hope of salvation. But Bradstreet's experience complicates that promise. The death of a child directly conflicts with the idea of a just and good God. Yet instead of confronting this, Bradstreet falls silent. As Rognon explains, within Kierkegaard's view of faith, believers must overlook the contradictions that experiences pose to belief; doubt must be renounced through an act of will rather than resolved intellectually (25). This theological rigidity, however, does not resolve the poet's pain — it displaces it. The elegiac closure of the poem, in which the infant is bid farewell

to “rest with Sisters twain,” (l. 11) reinscribes Puritan consolations of heavenly reunion, but as Owens argues, it does so “unoffensively,” offering not conviction but conformity (Owens 22). The pastoral calm of the closing lines cannot mask the anguish silenced in the middle. The voice that once wrestled with the divine, as in earlier poems, now disappears into a rhetoric of passive endurance. Thus, “The Death of Simon Bradstreet” offers a stark portrayal of the emotional and intellectual costs of doctrinal submission. It is a poem in which doubt has been exiled but not exorcised.

The reference to *exorcism* is intentional. In many devotional poems, doubt is portrayed as a spiritual threat to be cast out. In Bradstreet’s private Letter *To my dear children*, she openly admits having been shaken by “Atheisme” (*Complete Works* 217) throughout her life. Although she offers a rational explanation to her questioning and reassurance about “whether there was a God,” she also frames her experience in spiritual terms, attributing the source of her doubt to external temptation: “Many times hath Satan troubled me concerning the verity of the scriptures” (217). This invocation of the devil reframes the nature of doubt as a spiritual assault—shifting the doubter from an active seeker of truth to a passive victim of evil influence, and in doing so, subtly diminishing her agency.

This attack, in Herbert’s *Affliction (IV)* and Donne’s “Holy Sonnet XIV” (“Batter my heart”), takes on a violent intensity as both poets use militaristic and violent imagery—presenting the soul as a battlefield. In Herbert’s poem, the speaker is “broken in pieces all asunder” (l. 1), hunted like prey (l. 2), and “tortur’d” (l. 5). His mind becomes a weapon against him—“a case of knives” (l. 7)—and his thoughts “wound and prick [his] soul” (l. 12). Ultimately, the speaker fears a plot that could “kill” both himself and God (l. 20–21). In the Holy Sonnet, the speaker pleads with God to “batter [his] heart” (l. 1), replacing gentle repair with violent conquest. The verbs “o’erthrow,” “break, blow, burn” (l. 3–4) present divine grace as a force of destruction and reconstruction.

The conflict in both works is spiritual. In *Affliction (IV)*, the battle is waged "betwixt this world and that of grace" (l. 7–8). Though the Devil is not named, the struggle appears rooted in the flesh: his inner faculties are in disarray (l. 13) and even the body itself seems to rebel (l. 17). In the Holy Sonnet, the opposants are God and "[his] enemy" – a direct allusion to Satan or Sin. The speaker's soul is described as "an usurp'd town" (l. 5), a city under occupation, and the speaker admits to being "betroth'd unto [God's] enemy" (l. 10). Even Reason, "[God's] viceroy in [him]," fails in its divine duty and is "captiv'd" (l. 7–8), indicating that the speaker's inner governor has already been overthrown. This verse is particularly relevant for our analysis. Unlike Kierkegaard, who dismisses reason entirely, Donne presents it as a divine delegate. Yet, its failure here suggests that it is no longer sufficient. Both speakers adopt a posture of near-total passivity.

In *Affliction (IV)*, the speaker is like a prey (l. 2) who has no choice but to cry out: "Oh help, my God!" (l. 19). Similarly, Donne's speaker in "Holy Sonnet 14" goes even further: "Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end" (l. 6) signals the failure of will and effort. The paradox of the final lines is striking: "Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free," (ll. 12–13). With this extreme conceit, the speaker is practically asking God to force him to believe. This challenges any notion of faith as a gradual journey. Free will—often seen as central to a reflective understanding of belief (Rognon 42)—is here eclipsed by a vision of *faith as a leap*, one that can only happen through the domination of the self. Like Bradstreet's elegy, these poems dramatize doubt not as a phase of seeking, but as a spiritual crisis that demands surrender over understanding.

I.III. Suspending Belief: Deconstructing Faith to Strengthen it

In an age of religious upheaval, faith was anything but an indisputable truth. As previously discussed, none of the three poets studied here embrace belief without tension. Yet amidst this climate of fragmentation, the yearning for firm conviction becomes even more

pressing. Doubt, far from being merely a sign of weakness, becomes a means of navigating the crisis of knowledge characteristic of the age. It acts both as a symptom of spiritual unrest and, paradoxically, as a means of addressing it—providing a structured, even therapeutic, response to the disorientation of the era (Sherman 227).

While faith in this period seems more closely aligned with the paradigm of belief—defined by the acknowledgment of all that cannot be known (Rognon 34)—some texts reflect an underlying desire to move beyond uncertainty. In this section, we explore one such response: a pattern of inquiry that resonates with Descartes's methodical doubt. Like *cathartic doubt*, it recognizes the value of uncertainty and treats questioning as a necessary step in the development of faith. However, the two diverge in both purpose and approach. *Cathartic doubt* is a spiritual process aimed at deepening a humble, personal relationship with the divine (Rognon 40). *Methodical doubt*, by contrast, seeks clarity through rational examination and functions as a provisional tool: it suspends judgment, tests received convictions, and retains only what withstands critical scrutiny. Its goal is not humility, but certainty—an ideal of faith approaching knowledge (Rognon 31-33). At times, poets gesture toward this kind of conviction, but rarely is it sustained. Bradstreet, for example, in her poem "What God Is Like To Him I Serve" expresses a form of certainty within faith—"I find his Love, I know his Pow'r" (l. 15), yet this declaration is unsettled by what her broader body of work reveals. Besides, in her private letter *To My Dear Children*, she voices a series of unresolved questions: how to know that God is as Christians believe, how to discern true revelation, and whether the Protestant faith is indeed the right one. Even after affirming that Scripture must be divinely inspired, she wonders, "why may not the Popish Religion bee the right?" Her belief is carefully reasoned yet still troubled by the possibility of being mistaken (218).

This same tension between conviction and questioning shapes "Satire III", where the longing for certainty meets a rigorous process of rational deconstruction. Indeed, the poem

momentarily affirms the possibility of human access to truth: “hard knowledge too / The mind's endeavours reach” (ll. 86–87), suggesting that divine knowledge may overwhelm, but it is not concealed. This simile implicitly pushes back against religious obscurantism—the idea that truth is hidden, elitist, or beyond human reach. Instead, the speaker encourages the seeker to “keep the truth which [they have] found” (l. 87), affirming that, despite confusion, truth remains visible—and worth pursuing. Donne’s speaker urges the reader to “Seek true religion ” (l. 43), a direct and desperate call for theological clarity in a post-Reformation world “where Christian sects abound” (Sherman 227). The urgency intensifies as he insists that one must “allow / And the right” (ll. 70–71), signaling the uncomfortable necessity of choosing a single path. Phrygius, one of the speaker’s exemplars in the poem, is paralyzed by the fear of choosing wrongly (ll, 62-64). He refrains from any religious or romantic commitment, fearing the consequences of misplacing trust. This hesitation mirrors the first stage of *methodical doubt*: a deliberate withholding of belief while the mind tests what can truly be known. Phrygius is not depicted as a cynic or dogmatic unbeliever, but as someone aware that some paths may be true, though he cannot yet discern which (Strier 296). His inaction is not a blind rejection but an epistemological paralysis: a desire for certainty that keeps him from committing himself prematurely.

This bidding to “seek true religion”, in the historical context of Donne, is deeply unconventional. Indeed, religion, then, was typically inherited, not sought; it was assumed rather than questioned. The speaker’s call to inquiry is thus radical, requiring an intellectual detachment from the structures into which one was born (Strier 291). Donne’s own biography underscores this position. Raised in the Catholic tradition, Donne did not immediately adopt Anglicanism but entered a prolonged period of religious uncertainty. As Strier explains, he considered abandoning the faith of his upbringing to think freely and examine competing

doctrines critically (284). “Satire III”, written at the height of this indecision (the mid-1590s), reflects that posture of restraint.

The speaker’s portrayal of Mirreus—who clings to Roman Catholicism simply because “she was there a thousand years ago” (l. 46)—serves as a critique of those who follow tradition blindly. Mirreus “loves her rags” (l. 47), a sharp image that exposes the absurdity of revering outdated forms for their antiquity alone. This same impulse to question received ideas is also visible in Donne’s unsettling suggestion that “blind philosophers” may be found in heaven because “their merit / Of strict life may be imputed faith” (ll. 12–13). The line playfully inverts the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, imagining instead that moral action could be taken as belief. As Reidhead and Johnson point out, this formulation “turns on its head” one of Reformed theology’s most central claims (705). The poem, then, does not present doubt as a failure of belief, but as a necessary pause that allows space for critical thought. According to Strier, the poem’s “ultimate import is to stand as a defense of such suspension” (285), not as aimless hesitation, but as a conscious refusal to accept untested convictions.

Closely tied to this rejection of tradition is Donne’s broader critique of the various powers that shape religious allegiance. This manipulation of belief is vividly illustrated in the case of Graius, who remains passive—he “stays still at home here” (l. 55)—and accepts the dominant religion not through personal conviction, but because “some preachers, vile ambitious bawds, and laws, / Still new like fashions, bid him think that she / Which dwells with us is only perfect” (ll. 61-63). Here, Donne critiques not only religious leaders but also the broader systems—ecclesiastical, social, and legal—that shape belief through pressure and novelty rather than truth. This blind submission to authority recalls what Descartes sought to dismantle in his own method (Rognon 31).

Donne’s deconstruction of religious certainty in “Satire III” also takes shape through his use of metaphysical wit—bold, often unsettling conceits and provocative images that turn

theological reflection into poetic "thought-experiment" (Sherman 228). One of the most striking conceits in the poem is the comparison of the true church with the figure of a woman, turning the act of spiritual discernment into a kind of erotic pursuit. This conceit draws on biblical metaphors—the Church as Christ's bride (Eph. 5:22-33) for instance—but Donne pushes it further by blending sacred imagery with language associated with lust, deception, and indecision.

A similar conceit appears in "Holy Sonnet [XVIII]" ("Show me deare Christ, thy Spouse"), where the true church is startlingly imagined as the most promiscuous bride—the one who, in showing love to the greatest number, best fulfills the will of her "kind husband" (l. 11). As Young notes, this erotic metaphor is disturbing because it inverts ideals of spiritual exclusivism, offering a vision in which openness becomes the mark of true fidelity (231–32). In doing so, Donne's aim is to probe the boundaries of belief. As Sherman explains, his poetry "gives his mind free rein and permits himself to pursue a line of inquiry to its outermost limit" (229). Like Descartes—who sought to reach truth by doubting everything that could not be rationally secured—Donne uses poetic conceits to test theological assumptions, pushing them to extremes to see what, if anything, remains intact.

I.IV. Shedding Illusions: The Vulnerable Rise of Faith

Faith, in Donne's "Satire III", is not grounded in certainty but in belief—a conviction held despite the absence of proof. As Rognon puts it, "to believe is not to be absolutely sure, but to have enough conviction to hold what one believes to be true" (34). This distinction is echoed in the poem's shifting tone: after affirming that "hard knowledge too / The mind's endeavours reach," Donne adds, through enjambment, "and mysteries / Are like the sun, dazzling, yet plain to all eyes" (ll. 86–88). The sudden reference to "mysteries" unsettles the preceding confidence, moving the verse from rational ambition to the limits of human understanding. As Strier argues, the enjambment creates an ambiguity—momentarily

suggesting that reason might access mysteries, only to immediately undercut that notion. These truths, like the sun, are visible but blinding: present, but never fully graspable (Strier 304). In this light, faith becomes a response to what cannot be fully known—a moral and spiritual act of belief rather than an achievement of knowledge.

The conceit in "Satire III" comparing different church traditions to potential lovers does more than critique institutional power or inherited belief—it also dramatizes the deeply personal and often disorienting experience of religious searching. Beneath its irony and eroticism lies a genuine spiritual tension: the difficulty of distinguishing purity from seduction, truth from illusion. In this way, Donne's poetic inquiry also resonates with what Rognon identifies as *cathartic doubt*—a form of questioning that does not seek control or certainty but instead aims to dismantle human projections in order to make space for divine truth.

Unlike *methodical doubt*, which strives for rational evidence, *cathartic doubt* reflects a humble posture of receptivity: "it seeks to undermine the foundations of our own religious constructions in order to humbly receive the truth that comes from Another" (Rognon 40). This is particularly clear in Donne's warning against the seductive power of authority itself. He challenges the believer who would "let [their] soul be tied / To man's laws, by which she shall not be tried / At the last day" (ll. 93–95), highlighting the absurdity of submitting to external in a matter as personal and vital as faith. Donne's rebuke is not merely political; as Strier notes (307), his concern lies with the individual's temptation to surrender conscience to inherited names— "a Philip, or a Gregory, / A Harry, or a Martin" (ll. 96–97)—rather than trust in God alone (l. 110). The metaphor of power as a stream that sweeps souls away (ll. 103–108) serves as a warning: when faith is based on man-made claims rather than divine disclosure, it becomes dangerously unrooted. Ultimately, Donne reveals spiritual vulnerability as an opportunity to strip away false securities and deepen one's reliance on the divine (Rognon 38).

This idea finds a powerful echo in George Herbert's shape poem "Easter Wings". Visually, the poem takes the form of two wings, each narrowing toward the middle before expanding again. Each stanza begins with a state of loss: humanity's fall from divine "wealth and store" (l. 1) and the speaker's own sorrowful youth (l. 11), followed by further descent—"Till he became / Most poore" (l. 5), "Most thinne" (l. 15). This descent can be read as a form of spiritual purification. As the lines shrink, the soul is stripped of pride, comfort, and self-sufficiency. What remains is a state of exposed vulnerability—a necessary condition for *cathartic doubt*, in which faith is refined rather than destroyed. At the center of each stanza lies a turning point: "With thee" (ll. 6;16) "O let me rise" and "Let me combine" (l. 17). From that moment, the lines grow again, enacting a movement from affliction to restoration. The spiritual benefit of weakness is made explicit in the mirrored declarations: "Then shall the fall further the flight in me" (l. 10) and "Affliction shall advance the flight in me" (l. 20).

The image of the wing, central to the poem's form, takes on particular depth in the line "For, if I imp my wing on thine" (l. 19). The verb "imp," drawn from falconry and early horticultural practice, refers to the grafting of one element onto another—whether to repair, strengthen, or promote new growth. Herbert thus imagines the soul not as something that lifts itself, but as something renewed and made capable of flight through union with God. The grafting image evokes not only healing but re-rooting and transformation of lives where human weakness is bound to divine vitality. This stands in sharp contrast to Donne's *Satire III*, where the soul that trusts human authority over divine truth is "driven / Through mills, and rocks... / and in the sea are lost" (ll. 106–108). Donne warns that abandoning God in times of confusion leads to uprooting, disorientation, and ultimately, spiritual ruin. Herbert, by contrast, offers the quiet hope that even in weakness, trust in God re-establishes stability and enables flight. In both poems, the soul's destiny hinges on where it places its trust: in human certainty, or in divine

grace. “Easter Wings” suggests that it is precisely through purification and dependence that faith, though tested, is made to rise.

Conclusion

The poets explored in this chapter demonstrate that in the Early Modern period, faith was rarely an untroubled certainty. Rather, it was often a conflicted experience, shaped by doctrinal divisions, scientific upheavals, and the fragility of the human condition. Through their poems, Donne, Herbert, and Bradstreet reveal belief to be an unstable endeavor. Their poems chart not a single path but a series of negotiations: the trembling steps of existential unease, the suppression of doubt in moments of crisis, the deliberate suspension of belief to test its foundations, and the shedding of illusion through vulnerability. Doubt is not treated uniformly. At times, it threatens to shake the soul, demanding surrender; at others, it becomes a refining force—burning away false securities to make room for grace. In each case, faith is not protected from doubt, but forged in its presence. As we move forward into the nineteenth century, we will see how this struggle to reconcile faith and uncertainty found new expression amid shifting intellectual horizons and deepening spiritual tensions.

Chapter II: Faith and Doubt in the Poetry of the 19th c.

Introduction

While the seventeenth century was marked by fierce theological divisions, the nineteenth century inherited these tensions in a new form. The clash between confessions gave way to a more personal and pervasive spiritual crisis, shaped by modernity and scientific disruption. This did not mean, however, that denominational diversity disappeared—on the contrary, it intensified. In England, a series of political reforms, including the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and the Catholic Relief Act in 1829, signaled a growing recognition of religious pluralism in British society (Scheinberg 161–62). By the middle of the century, the Anglican Church had divided into several branches—Broad, High, and Low

Church—and Nonconformist movements were growing more than ever before (Scheinberg 162–63). Yet even as choices multiplied, deeper anxiety emerged: what if none of these paths could adequately respond to the growing body of scientific knowledge that undermined the authority of Scripture itself? Indeed, the Victorian period is often described as the quintessential "age of doubt," as traditional beliefs began to crumble under the weight of Darwinism, historical criticism of the Bible, and the rapid expansion of scientific knowledge (Blair 413). As Daniel Brown notes, mid-Victorian intellectual life was dominated by "doctrines of positivism," which held that knowledge gained through empirical observation was the only reliable form of understanding. As a result, science was increasingly viewed as incompatible with religious belief and emerged as its rival (138). Philip Davis observes that "perhaps the most powerful religious phenomenon of the age was religious doubt," as people confronted the possibility that the biblical creation story was no longer reconcilable with geological timescales or natural extinction (Davis 101). For many, this intellectual disorientation was made worse by the inability of the Anglican Church to offer a clear and unified response. As David Settle notes, the Church was no longer "the bedrock establishment" capable of addressing the cultural and intellectual upheavals of the time (5). For many, the question shifted from *which* faith was true to *whether* faith itself could still offer meaning in such a context.

This crisis was not confined to England. In America, Darwinian theory challenged traditional beliefs, while the influence of Puritanism remained a powerful undercurrent. As Jan C. Dawson notes, the Puritan conscience did not disappear but resurfaced as an internalized moral pressure—part of a broader "rediscovery" of Puritan values, marked by a revival of moral seriousness often detached from theological certainty (514). This revival, however, "did not occur without intellectual and psychic pain," as Americans struggled to reconcile inherited moral structures with the disorienting effects of scientific progress and philosophical pluralism

(509). In this context, faith became less a shared affirmation than an individual, often solitary, struggle with uncertainty.

Two poets—Alfred Lord Tennyson and Emily Dickinson—stand at the crossroads of this nineteenth-century crisis of belief. Both were raised in religious households and inherited strong theological frameworks, yet neither accepted them passively. Tennyson, the son of an Anglican clergyman and deeply influenced by his mother's intense evangelical piety, had "religious impressions from the beginning" and never ceased to wrestle with them (Willey 55). His years at Cambridge, especially within the Apostles society [6], exposed him to contemporary debates on metaphysics and morality, ranging from the problem of evil to the personality of God (Willey 61). His religious thought was shaped not only by Scripture, but also by philosophical inquiry and scientific discovery. In *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by His Son*, Hallam Tennyson recalls that his father viewed poetry as a way of expressing his "most passionate desire [...] to have a clearer and fuller vision of God" (319–20). For Tennyson, verse became a medium through which to explore "inmost conflicts", "half certainties", and "hopes" that defined the inner life of Victorian faith (Willey 53). His lifelong engagement with faith remained sincere, but never unquestioning.

Dickinson, in contrast, lived in the twilight of the Puritan culture that Bradstreet's people had once transplanted to New England (Owens 2). Born in Amherst in 1830, she remained rooted in a community shaped by Calvinist theology, though she increasingly felt "out of sync" with its spiritual climate (Barker 79). Her relationship to religion was more openly fraught: while she shared Tennyson's spiritual curiosity, she rejected dogmatic certainty. Her poetry became a space of "painful conflicts" (Wolosky 138). Critics have described her work as a "Double Estate"—affirming and denying faith in the same breath (132). Her poems "say and

[6] A select society of twelve students, founded by John Sterling and F. D. Maurice, who gathered to deliberate on the critical ideas of their time.

unsay, claim and disclaim, desire and decline, offer and retract, assert and deny, gain and lose, define and circumvent definition" revealing an "agonistic voice" caught between conflicting visions, unwilling to resolve their contradictions yet unable to let them go (132–33).

II.I. Rejecting Easy Answers: The Limits of Certainty

What both Dickinson and Tennyson carried from their religious upbringing was not unquestioning belief, but a deep and persistent yearning for it. As Owens writes, although Dickinson never formally joined the church, "the influence of traditional Puritanism [...] reinforced her life-long desire to believe" (13–14). This longing emerges in poem 1397[7]: "How firm Eternity must look / To crumbling men like me" (ll. 1-2). The speaker turns to the idea of Eternity as a source of imagined comfort. Eternity appears as "The only Adamant Estate / In all Identity," (ll. 2-3) the one unshakable presence in a world of flux. The image of its "Physiognomy" (l. 6) being "mighty to the insecure" (l. 5) underscores the deep relief such belief could offer: coherence, shelter, and peace. Even if she cannot fully access it, the yearning remains.

Tennyson's *In Memoriam A.H.H.* (1850) was written after the sudden death of his closest friend, Arthur Hallam. More than an elegy, the poem is a prolonged meditation on faith, on grief and on the doubts the latter provokes. At its core lies a desperate question: if love and consciousness truly end with death, what remains to make life worth living? This dilemma is made explicit in Canto 34, where Tennyson imagines a universe where life is reduced to "dust and ashes" (l. 4) and the soul is drawn toward the peace of annihilation (l. 13-16). Faced with such emptiness, the prospect of faith is not just comforting, it offers a vital form of consolation, a way to resist the collapse of meaning. Indeed, in Canto 26, the speaker says: "I long to prove / No lapse of moons can canker Love, / Whatever fickle tongues may say" (ll. 2-4). Here, the deep yearning for spiritual grounding resembles an emotional necessity. This echoes what

[7] In this work, we use the R. W. Franklin chronology of Dickinson's poems (edition of 1998).

Rognon calls *faith as certainty*—whose assurance "lies in the strength of the desire to believe" (29). Yet this model also involves the rejection of doubt, "the denial of our own finitude" (34). Moreover, its doubt counterpart—*methodical doubt*—is a provisional doubt, a doubt capable of fully eliminating doubt (31).

This is precisely what we do *not* find in the works of these authors. On the contrary, both poets fully recognize the limits of human knowledge. What defines their poetry is not the rejection of doubt, but the realization that the divine remains irreducible to human categories. Tennyson explores this tension through a poetic experiment that borrows the structure of scientific inquiry, only to reveal its inadequacy in matters of faith. Indeed, *In Memoriam* mimics the different stages of scientific research. The conditional structure of Canto 43— "If Sleep and Death be truly one" (l. 1)— mirrors scientific speculation: a hypothesis is formulated and its consequences projected, awaiting verification. Tennyson basically proposes the following thesis: *Death is like a nap before the awakening of life after death*. He imagines that if the soul "slumber[s] on" in a "long trance" (l. 4), unconscious but intact, then there is "nothing lost to man" (l. 9). Therefore, Love, too, endures (ll. 13–14) and will be restored "at the spiritual prime" (l. 15). Having posited this idea, the speaker seeks confirmation. He hopes that some "traces" (l. 7) of Hallam's soul, "A little flash, [or] a mystic hint" (44, l. 8) will emerge. He asks his friend to "resolve the doubt" (l. 14) by reappearing in recognizable form (91, ll. 5–6). These attempts reflect a spiritualized version of empirical testing: if the soul persists, it should be perceivable in some way. This desire to communicate directly with the dead raises theological concerns. In Deuteronomy 18:10–12, the practice of seeking contact with the dead is explicitly condemned. Yet within Tennyson's cultural moment, such gestures would not have been perceived simply as heretical. The rise of the Spiritualist movement in mid-Victorian England offered a new framework—one that, as Brown explains, "fulfilled the positivist criterion for knowledge by offering observable evidence of an immaterial human spirit" (138).

Yet Tennyson ultimately retreats from this logic. In Canto 92, he acknowledges that even a vision could be dismissed as a "canker of the brain" (l. 3)—a hallucination born of grief. Canto 95 presents what appears to be a genuine moment of contact, but one that resists verification. The speaker experiences a powerful trance in which "the living soul was flash'd" (l. 36) on him, and he is swept into "empyreal heights of thought" (l. 38). But this experience cannot yield lasting certainty: "At length my trance / Was cancell'd, stricken thro' with doubt" (ll. 43-44). The insight dissolves under the pressure of method. "Vague words!" he exclaims, "but ah, how hard to frame / In matter-moulded forms of speech" (ll. 45-46). Language itself fails to contain what he briefly glimpsed. Tennyson's effort to approach metaphysical truth through quasi-scientific procedure ultimately falters—not because the longing is misguided, but because the method is unsuited to its object

Dickinson, on the other hand, starts from this very premise: not only is the scientific method incompatible to spiritual matters, but our entire framework for understanding our world—our scales and measures—is irrelevant to the divine. She conveys this through striking metaphors of disproportionate measurement:

> They leave us with the Infinite.
> But He—is not a man—
> His fingers are the size of fists—
> His fists, the size of men— (Fr350, ll. 1–4)

This echoes 2 Peter 3:8: "one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day". These comparative images underscore the fundamental gap between human perception and divine reality—the impossibility of grasping God with human concepts. This theme reappears in poem 767, where she asks, "Why Floods be served to Us—in Bowls—" (l. 22). The metaphor is absurd—something immense, even overwhelming, offered in a vessel far too small to contain it. In "I reason: Earth is short" (Fr403), Dickinson suggests that while some truths are within our grasp, reason remains powerless to resolve their consequences. The opening line bluntly states a fact reason can apprehend—life is brief, suffering is real, and decay

is inevitable. Reason observes, categorizes, concludes—and yet, as Dickinson repeats, "But, what of that?" (ll. 4, 8, 12). This refrain exposes a deeper problem: knowing these truths does not ease the burden of mortality. Reason may define the limits of human experience, but it cannot transcend them.

From Dickinson and Tennyson's shared awareness of human limitation arises opposite responses. Dickinson, confronted with the unknowability of the divine, turns away from all forms of theological certainty. Faced with what cannot be known, she chooses not to pursue answers: "So larger to my Eyes / That I stopped gauging—satisfied—" (Fr767, l. 2-3), and later concludes, "I speculate no more—" (l. 20). The verb "gauging" reinforces the poem's core theme: attempts to measure or calculate the divine—whether through logic, theology, or metaphor—are abandoned. Similarly, in the last stanza of "I reason: Earth is short.", the speaker imagines a future moment—"in Heaven—", when "somehow, it will be even," and "some new Equation" will be "given" (ll. 9–11). The word *Equation* is especially rich here. It evokes not only logic or structure, but also the idea of equality. Where other poems emphasize the disproportion between human understanding and divine scale, this poem entertains the hope that a new kind of measure might someday be revealed, one that could reconcile the human and the divine, the finite and the infinite. And yet, the poem does not end in faith. Instead, it returns once more to the refrain: "But, what of that?" (l. 12). The gesture is striking—any hope of divine justice is immediately questioned, folded back into uncertainty. The speaker cannot know this *new Equation*, cannot access the logic it promises. Her posture is therefore one of *skeptical doubt*, grounded in the recognition that mystery cannot be resolved, only accepted.

For Tennyson, the failure of reason does not negate faith but redefines it. In Canto 97, he writes, "I cannot understand: I love" (l. 34). Instincts and feelings become a form of insight when knowledge reaches its limit. For Tennyson, love endures where explanation fails. Though it has no place in the mechanisms of natural selection, it remains, for him, the most powerful

human truth. His poetry thus embraces a form of *cathartic doubt*, in which finitude becomes the very ground for a faith rooted not in proof, but in a certain kind of revelation. He exposes the boundary between what can be known and what must be felt—a recognition that behind nature's apparent indifference, "there is a system of Mercy and Grace" that escapes the grasp of reason (Willey 88).

II.II. Refusing the Leap: Dickinson's Poetics of Skeptical Doubt

In both England and New England, many dominant religious traditions in the nineteenth century tended to respond to emerging intellectual challenges with rigid certainty. The Anglican Church, as Settle notes, was "slow and reluctant to adapt" to the evolving needs of its congregations, often refusing to engage with discoveries that reshaped humanity's understanding of the world (2, 6). Across the Atlantic, the Puritan legacy promoted a theology that left little room for questioning. As Pearce explains, the Puritan typically did not seek to weigh evidence, but to confirm a truth already presumed: "to show how it supported an answer available already in the Word of God" (40). Yet, rather than reinforcing faith, certainty in the face of disruption, fostered spiritual dissonance for many intellectuals (Blair 418). As Rognon explains, such dissonance may inadvertently provoke "a mode of doubt just as radical: *skeptical doubt*" (26). It is within such a cultural and religious climate that Dickinson's persistent resistance to traditional faith may find at least part of its origin.

Dickinson's skepticism aligns closely with the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. As Fred D. White notes, both view life as finite, and defined by suffering—yet this, for them, is what makes existence authentic (94). Their shared "lyrical sense of the difficulty and absurdity of faith" emerges from a "passionate interest in finite limitation" (Taylor 569). Dickinson, like Kierkegaard, embraces the tension between belief and the constraints of human consciousness. This concern with limitation—physical, mental, and spiritual—appears throughout her poetry, where the impossibility of certainty becomes a central theme.

Two poems in particular highlight this struggle. While “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –” (Fr591) imagines the moment of physical death, “I felt a Funeral in my Brain” (Fr340) stages a metaphorical collapse of the mind—a psychological or existential “death” that unfolds internally. In both poems, however, Dickinson explores the impossibility of sensing the divine at moments of ultimate crisis. In 591, the speaker awaits revelation: “the King” is expected to be “witnessed” (l. 8), suggesting a hoped-for divine presence at death. But this vision never arrives. Instead, “there interposed a Fly” (l. 12)—a banal, earthly detail that disrupts transcendence. The divine is obscured through failed perception: the fly appears “Between the light—and me—” (l. 14), and finally, “the Windows failed – and then / I could not see to see – ” (ll. 15–16). Sight collapses entirely and the repetition of the verb “to see” marks the breakdown of perception itself—the speaker can no longer see, nor even comprehend what it means to see.

It is interesting to note the stark contrast in sensory emphasis between the two poems. “I heard a Fly buzz” unfolds in a space of quiet tension—“the stillness in the Room” mirrors the stillness “in the Air / Between the Heaves of Storm—” (ll. 2–4)—suggesting an almost suspended anticipation of revelation. The poem is structured around sight, with the ultimate collapse marked by failure to see. Yet, it is ultimately sound that destabilizes the moment of death: a “Blue—uncertain—stumbling Buzz” (l. 13). This synesthetic phrase—blending color and sound—intensifies the sensory confusion, reinforcing the impossibility of clarity. In contrast, “I felt a Funeral in my Brain” is overwhelmingly auditory. From the opening line, the speaker is subjected to pounding sound: the mourners “treading – treading” (l. 2), the “Service, like a Drum – / Kept beating – beating” (ll. 6–7), and the “Boots of Lead” (l. 10).

In the context of this cross analysis, we could say that the first poem builds toward a vision that never arrives and that the other is engulfed by a crescendo of sound that overrides comprehension. Indeed, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” (l. 1) dramatizes the disintegration of

reason. The speaker's consciousness is gradually overwhelmed until "a Plank in Reason, broke" (l. 17), and the self falls endlessly through a series of destabilized "World[s]" (l. 19). Like 591, the poem ends not with enlightenment but with epistemological collapse: "And Finished knowing – then –" (l. 20). In both cases, Dickinson presents the failure of perception—whether through sight, sound, or thought itself—and denies any clear encounter with the divine. The structure of both poems enacts this uncertainty. As Elliott observes, Dickinson's heavy use of dashes and syntactical fragments reflects a mind reaching for truth it cannot fully grasp (85). These formal ruptures mirror the cognitive ones. Just as the speaker in 591 cannot "see to see," and the speaker in 340 "finished knowing," Dickinson's skeptical doubt is both thematic and stylistic. Her poetry does not resolve—it fractures. Her speakers do not transcend—they descend, unfinished and unreconciled.

Dickinson's persistent skepticism is particularly visible in her use of irony. As Carol Anne Taylor explains, Dickinson "rarely dwells on any merely passive doubt"; instead, she "adopts a potent form of questioning that reveals ultimate and irredeemable ignorance" (570–71). Her irony functions like Socratic inquiry: it unmasks contradictions in religious language and exposes the absurdity of longing for the Absolute within the limits of human understanding.

This position resonates, in part, with Kierkegaard's reflections in *The Concept of Irony*, where he presents irony as a pervasive, yet controlled force in the poet's consciousness. For him, irony is essential to personal life: it "rescues the soul" through a kind of baptism of negation, preparing it to receive faith by first destroying illusions (326)[8]. He also emphasizes that irony plays a crucial developmental role, serving as a necessary phase of negation—one that must remain temporary. The poet must ultimately "be master over the irony" (324), using it to gain perspective, then moving beyond it toward ethical or religious commitment[9]. In this

[8] Although Rognon associates Kierkegaard's philosophy with the model of *faith as a leap* in his paradigms, it is worth noting that Kierkegaard's conception of irony also closely mirrors the dynamic of *cathartic doubt*.
[9] His conception of irony also reflects the dynamic of *faith as a journey*, as it entails a process in which doubt is acknowledged and confronted, ultimately allowing for a potentially deeper and more mature form of faith.

view, irony clears the ground for the leap of faith. Where Kierkegaard sees irony as "the way" to truth (327-328), Dickinson often remains within its impasse.

This refusal to move beyond irony is powerfully expressed in "Heavenly Father – take to thee" (Fr1500), a poem that mimics the structure of a psalm only to subvert it. As Taylor notes, Dickinson "carefully scrutinizes the logic of praising God" and inverts traditional devotional language to expose its contradictions (574). The speaker begins with the familiar formula of prayer— "' 'Heavenly Father'—" (l. 1) and the language of submission: " — 'We are Dust'—"' (l. 6). Both phrases are placed within quotation marks, a typographic choice that distances the speaker from the sentiments themselves and emphasizes their borrowed nature. What appears at first as a reverent address becomes, under ironic pressure, a scornful critique. The speaker questions the justice of a God who created humans weak and sinful, then expects both praise and repentance for their condition. Rather than expressing humility, she blames God for the very flaws of creation: "We apologize to thee / For thine own Duplicity—" (l. 8). Taylor argues that this voice "uses a stunningly rational analysis" to reveal the absurdity of divine praise, redirecting terms like "iniquity" (l. 2), "contraband" (l. 4), and "duplicity" (l. 8) not toward the human speaker but toward the divine addressee (574–75). Irony here functions not as a cleansing stage but as a tool of relentless negation, undermining both theological logic and emotional submission. There is no movement toward faith—only the exposure of its apparent internal incoherence.

A similar use of irony appears in "Back from the cordial Grave I drag thee" (Fr1649), where Dickinson subverts the Puritan ideal of salvation. The phrase "cordial Grave" (l. 1) is a striking oxymoron, suggesting a false comfort—death as something warm and welcoming. Yet the speaker rejects this notion outright. "I drag thee" (l.1) implies active resistance against the idealized view of peaceful rest; rather than surrendering the dead to divine care, the speaker forcefully reclaims them. The comforting image of the afterlife is further denied: "He shall not

take thy Hand / Nor put his spacious Arm around thee" (ll.2-3). As Owens notes, the tone is "not merely ironic, but derisively sarcastic" (26). The divine embrace—central to Christian hope—is rendered empty. The word "spacious" suggests not only divine expansiveness but also a disturbing sense of vacancy or absence.

If in poem 1649 the speaker warns that "He shall not take thy Hand," the very possibility of that gesture is erased in "Those—dying then" (Fr1581): "That Hand is amputated now / And God cannot be found—" (ll. 4-5). Once again, Dickinson critiques the sentimental vision of the afterlife and turns religious vocabulary against itself. The sacred metaphor of "God's Right Hand" (l. 3; and many occurrences in the Bible) is rendered absurd. The irony is sharper still: what was once a symbol of protection and power becomes a dismembered relic. Strikingly, the speaker concedes that "Those – dying then – / Knew where they went" (ll. 1–2), suggesting that the dead once possessed a comforting certainty about the afterlife. But this belief is immediately overturned. In the second stanza, faith itself is reduced to a desperate fiction: "Better an ignis fatuus / Than no illume at all—" (ll. 7–8). As Taylor notes, the speaker prefers a "silly belief in God's beacon light" over the despair of reason—an imaginary construct accepted not for its truth, but because it offers some guidance where nothing else does (573–574).

This raises the question: does Dickinson ever make a Kierkegaardian leap of faith? One poem in particular—"I never saw a Moor" (Fr800)—suggests she might. Though she claims never to have seen God or heaven (ll. 5-6), she asserts a quiet, almost irrational certainty: "Yet certain am I of the spot / As if the checks were given" (ll. 7-8). However, despite occasional glimpses of belief the dominant trajectory of Dickinson's work resists resolution. Her stance toward faith was not only poetic but deeply personal. During her time at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, Elliott explains "Students were regularly queried as to whether they 'professed faith,' had 'hope,' or were resigned to 'no hope'" (85) and Dickinson remained firmly in the last group. She later recalled this with ironic pride, calling herself "one of the lingering bad ones." This

refusal was not despairing, but deliberate—an assertion of her freedom to "pause, and ponder, and ponder" (85). For Dickinson, the barrier to belief lay not just in skepticism, but in her inability to conceive of the afterlife. At fifteen, she confessed to her friend Abiah Root: "I am continually putting off becoming a Christian … Does not Eternity appear dreadful to you. I often get thinking of it and it seems so dark to me that I almost wish there was no Eternity…" (*Letters* 46).

Ultimately, from what we know, Dickinson does not take the Kierkegaardian leap. While her work reveals a deep awareness of the limits of reason and a longing for transcendence, she stops short of surrendering to belief. Where Kierkegaard calls for a decisive leap into paradox, Dickinson remains poised at its edge—refusing closure, resisting consolation. Her commitment is not to faith, but to the rigor of uncertainty.

II.III. Reconciling Doubt: Tennyson's Poetics of Revelation

While the Church debated geological timelines and sought to protect doctrine from scientific dissent, Tennyson turned elsewhere. His poetry rejects both institutional rigidity and the certainty of empirical reductionism. *In Memoriam* does not dismiss science outright but reveals its moral insufficiency. He observes that nature, governed by laws that are "careful of the type" but "careless of the single life" (55, ll. 7–8), offers no consolation to individual suffering. Evolutionary violence, "red in tooth and claw" (56, l. 15), seems to mock the creed of divine love. Tennyson, a devoted reader of scientific discoveries, was haunted by this dissonance. As his son recalled:

> [My father] was occasionally much troubled with the intellectual problem of the apparent profusion and waste of life and by the vast amount of sin and suffering throughout the world, for these seemed to militate against the idea of the Omnipotent and All-loving father" (Hallam Tennyson 313)

Yet Tennyson ultimately refuses to let scientific materialism dictate his metaphysical conclusions. He writes, in Canto 120, "Let Science prove we are [only cunning casts in clay],

and then / What matters Science unto men [?]" (ll. 5–7). Brown identifies this as Tennyson's "strongest challenge" to science's authority (141): "I think we are not wholly brain," (l. 2), "I was born to other things" (l. 12), he insists. *In Memoriam* is rich with biblical allusions, and this particular moment recalls Christ's words to Nicodemus in John 3:6: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Just as Jesus speaks of a spiritual rebirth that transcends physical nature, Tennyson affirms a higher destiny for the human soul—one that cannot be reduced to biology or intellect. In both texts, material existence is not denied, but surpassed: the true essence of humanity is found not in what can be measured, but in what longs for meaning, transformation, and divine purpose. Tennyson's conviction that the soul cannot be reduced to material causes led him to view evolutionary theory and the idea of "our animal origin" (Willey 98) as no real threat to faith. As Basil Willey observes, for Tennyson, "the value of an end-product was not affected by knowledge about its beginnings" (98). This perspective explains Tennyson's repeated rejection of natural theology. As Willey notes, Tennyson was among those who "felt (or came to feel) that the whole spectacle of Nature was somehow irrelevant to faith" (85). He voted "No" in a Cambridge debate on whether an intelligible First Cause could be deduced from the universe (Willey 85–86) and later remarked of scientific discovery: "Strange that these wonders [telescopes] should draw some men to God and repel others. No more reason in one than in the other" (Hallam Tennyson, 1833). Tennyson thus stands as a particularly compelling figure in the nineteenth-century crisis of faith. A product of Cambridge intellectual life and deeply engaged with scientific developments, he nevertheless resisted the idea—common in earlier centuries—that nature revealed divine wisdom. In Canto 124, he declares: "I found Him not in world or sun, / Or eagle's wing, or insect's eye" (ll. 5–6). The logic of a divine design visible in nature, so often invoked by earlier apologists, fails to move him, partly because observation cannot answer the questions that grief provokes.

Thus, Tennyson turns inward and gives renewed importance to subjective intuition. In both Cantos 55 and 124, the speaker follows the same emotional arc: destabilized by the absence of divine proof in nature, he admits the fragility of his belief, yet affirms faith—not through reason, but sensation. In Canto 55, even as faith falters before nature's harshness, the speaker "stretch[es] lame hands of faith" (l. 17), reaching toward "what [he] feel[s] is Lord of all / And "faintly trust[s] the larger hope" (ll. 19–20). Canto 124 echoes this pattern. Even as a voice urges him to "Believe no more" (l. 10), an inner warmth "melts the freezing reason's colder part" (ll. 13–14), and the heart responds: "I have felt" (l. 16). In both cantos, the verb *to feel* is central: God is not understood, but sensed.As Settle notes, it is when reason fails that Tennyson becomes "aware of His Lord dwelling within his heart" (37).

Indeed, in *In Memoriam*, poetry does not claim doctrinal authority but gives shape to what reason cannot express. Dreams and reveries play a crucial role in the poem, offering a space where imagined experience challenges rational knowledge. As Brown notes, the dream state—where imagined experiences are felt as real—functions as a subtle critique of the positivist belief that only sense-data can ground knowledge (141). Tennyson's reliance on feeling is inseparable from his role as a poet. As Willey observes, he approached spiritual questions not as a philosopher, scientist, or theologian, but as one who values what is "felt in the blood and felt along the heart" (80).

Canto 37 dramatizes the tension between rational authority and emotional insight through two figures: Urania, the Muse of astronomy, and Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy. Urania speaks with disdain: the poet is out of his depth in matters of faith, which belong to "purer priest[s]" (l. 3) and "abler voice[s]" (l. 4). This is the voice of science dismissing the poet's emotional search for truth. Yet Melpomene, the Muse of tragedy, responds with humility, acknowledging the limits of art—she can only "lull with song an aching heart" (l. 15) and "render human love his dues" (l.16). Yet the speaker insists that mourning and memory are

valid grounds for spiritual meditation. Hallam's reflections on divine things (l. 17) are recalled as sacred, "dear as sacramental wine / To dying lips" (ll. 18-20), and the poet dares to sing them, however imperfectly.

> I murmur'd, as I came along,
> Of comfort clasp'd in truth reveal'd;
> And loiter'd in the master's field,
> And darken'd sanctities with song.' (ll. 21-24)

To fully understand this passage, we must recall the context. Arthur Hallam, Tennyson's closest friend and intellectual peer at Cambridge, was admired not only for his brilliance, but for his confident Christian faith. Canto 109 praises his ability to "seize and throw the doubts of man" (l. 6) while Canto 110 recalls how his presence uplifted others, how even "the feeble soul [...] forgot his weakness in [Hallam's] sight" (ll. 3-4). Tennyson, by contrast, often felt himself outside this spiritual assurance: "Nor mine the sweetness or the skill" (l. 17), he confesses, "but mine the love that will not tire" (l.18). It is this love that motivates his poetry—an imitative will shaped by reverence (ll. 19-20). To sing of Hallam's "sacramental" insight is to approach something luminous, even while acknowledging that the poet's own voice may "darken" what it seeks to express. Still, the song endures—not to clarify, but to console. As the speaker notes in the following canto, "in the songs I love to sing / A doubtful gleam of solace lives" (38, ll. 7–8). These songs do not claim theological authority; rather, they preserve and reflect a truth that has been received.

The "truth reveal'd" (37, l. 22) that offers such comfort, however, is not grounded in Hallam's words nor in poetic intuition. In the previous Canto (36), Tennyson makes clear that language—no matter how refined—is ultimately inadequate to grasp the divine. He writes, "For Wisdom dealt with mortal powers, / Where truth in closest words shall fail" (ll. 5–6). Revelation, then, does not come through abstraction or theory. Instead, it enters through a story—"truth embodied in a tale / Shall enter in at lowly doors" (ll. 7–8). The poet points directly to the Gospel, where divine truth becomes incarnate—made real in the person of Jesus

Christ. Here, Tennyson stages a profound theological paradox: because words cannot carry the full weight of truth, *the* Word must live: "And so the Word had breath" (l. 9). This reflects the very logic of John 1:14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth". In Greek, this "Word" is *Logos*—the same *Logos* that "was with God" and "was God" in John 1:1, echoing Genesis 1 where creation begins through divine speech. Yet while Genesis 1:2 presents a God who hovers invisibly over the formless deep, John's Gospel affirms that the *Logos* becomes tangible.

Extending the incarnational theme, Tennyson makes the case that divine meaning becomes intelligible only in embodied form: in the person of Christ, who "wrought / With human hands the creed of creeds / In loveliness of perfect deeds" (ll. 9–11). For him, Christ's life, not just his words, is the message. His acts of healing, compassion, and sacrifice constitute a visible theology, one "more strong than all poetic thought" (l. 12). In this framework, revelation is not a system to be decoded but a person to be received. And it is open to all: not just scholars or clergy, but reapers, builders, gravediggers, even wanderers at sea (ll. 13–16)—all can "read" (l. 13) this embodied truth through Christ's example. In the context of this research, it is interesting to note that if Dickinson's metaphors of disproportion—discussed earlier—underscore the futility of containing the infinite within finite vessels, Tennyson, by contrast, argues that through Christ, the infinite can paradoxically be received. This idea finds powerful theological resonance in Ephesians 3:16–19, where Paul suggests that if Christ "dwell[s] in [people's] hearts by faith" and if they are "rooted and grounded in love", they "may be able to comprehend [...] the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of Divine love, "which passeth knowledge". This theological framework also clarifies the nature of Tennyson's faith: his portrayal of the incarnate Logos aligns with what Rognon defines as faith-as-belief: "the trusting reception of the Word of God" (38).

Indeed, at the end of his work, Tennyson moves from doubt to faith: trust in a divine presence that sustains love, gives meaning to loss, and guides creation toward purpose (Epilogue, ll. 140-144). In the last Canto (131), he entrusts himself to a "living will" that rises *in* the "spiritual rock" (131.3)—a clear allusion to Christ[10]—and asks that this will "flow through our deeds and make them pure" (131.4). This concern for purity echoes the counterpart to faith-as-belief in Rognon's paradigms: *cathartic doubt*, a discerning force that "sort[s] through what the believer gives credit to" in order to purify belief—retaining only what stems from divine revelation and discarding what belongs merely to religion (Rognon 39; 38).

Such purification does not lead to rigid dogmatism, but to a rediscovery of essential values. It brings Tennyson back to the fundamentals of Christian faith. As Settle observes, he critiques the Victorian Church's fixation on marginal disputes and calls instead for a return to enduring values: "love, faith, humility, service, and a commitment to fulfilling God's will" (Settle 7–8). In a time of confusion, he finds clarity not in doctrine, but in love— "the greatest of these" (I Cor. 13:13). "Love is and was my Lord and King," he declares (Canto 126, l. 1), echoing Christ's greater commandment to love God and neighbor above all (Matt. 22:37–40) (Settle 22-23). Still, this purified faith does not dismiss the diverse ways it may be lived. Though critical of religious institutions, Tennyson does not reject the sincerity of faith expressed through them. In the *Prologue*, he calls human systems "broken lights" (l. 19), mere fragments of a greater truth. Canto 128 laments how these systems often lead to division: "To draw, to sheathe a useless sword" (l. 13); "To cleave a creed in sects and cries, / To change the bearing of a word" (ll. 15–16). Such fragmentation evokes his frustration with theological disputes that obscure the core of faith. Yet in Canto 33, he draws a careful distinction between faith that transcends form and faith that depends on it. Addressing a soul whose belief "has centre everywhere, / Nor cares to fix itself to form" (ll. 3–4), he urges respect for those who find

[10] See 1 Corinthians 10 :4 ; Matthhew 7 : 24-25 ; 1 Peter 2 : 6-8 for biblical examples that portray Jesus as a spiritual rock.

comfort in tradition: “Her faith thro’ form is pure as thine” (l. 9), and reminds the reader that what matters is the living bond between a person and the divine: “Oh, sacred be the flesh and blood / To which she links a truth divine!” (ll. 11–12). Inward connection remains essential: “See thou, that countess reason ripe / In holding by the law within” (ll. 13–14). As Settle notes, Tennyson recognizes that “people have different spiritual needs” (Settle 4). His poetry thus affirms that, even amid sectarian division, genuine devotion can take many forms—so long as it reflects a sincere love for the divine and for others.

II.IV. Navigating Doubt: The Soul’s Pilgrimage in Tennyson and Dickinson

Few poetic works illustrate Rognon’s fourth paradigm—*faith as a journey* and *existential doubt*—as clearly as *In Memoriam*. Written over the course of seventeen years, the elegies evolved into something more than a tribute to a lost friend. As Willey observes, they became a “resource,” ultimately taking on “the character of a poetical journal or intimate record of [Tennyson’s] own spiritual pilgrimage” (64). *In Memoriam* was not only a means of remembrance but also a personal healing process—a medium for confronting the conflicting forces of doubt and belief within Tennyson’s mind. As Erik Gray notes, the poet even considered titling his work *The Way of the Soul* (xiii). The motif of pilgrimage is deeply woven into the poem’s imagery. Life is figured as a “track” (25; l. 1), and as the speaker moves through loss, this path becomes a “dreary way” that continues to “wind” onward (26; l. 1), its twists and uncertainties evoking both emotional and spiritual disorientation. Even when the speaker confesses that he “falter[s] where [he] firmly trod,” he envisions himself falling “upon the great world’s altar-stairs / That slope thro’ darkness up to God” (55; ll. 13–16). The ascent is steep yet it remains oriented toward God. Faith, in this pilgrimage, is not the resolution of doubt but the choice to move forward within it. Dickinson’s poetry, by contrast, does not offer this kind of progression. As Wolosky notes, her poems maintain a “continuous metaphysical pressure,”

yet show “no clear evolution” towards faith (132). However, this resistance to resolution does not exclude her from Rognon’s framework.

Indeed, both poets know intimately the distress associated with *existential doubt*: that moment when “the ground seems to give way beneath our feet,” and we “lose track of our path” (Rognon 45). For both, this experience is most clearly provoked by death. While *In Memoriam* wrestles with scientific thought and the limits of knowledge, the loss of Hallam also turns the poem into a sustained reflection on theodicy—on how faith in a just God can survive the reality of suffering and death. This loss is introduced as “the shock, so harshly given” (16; l. 11), which leaves the speaker “confused” (l. 11) and “stunn’d […] from [his] power to think” (l. 15). As the poem unfolds, grief progressively undermines the speaker’s certainties. In Canto 49, even the accumulated wisdom of “art,” “nature,” and “the schools” (l. 1) proves powerless to console; instead, “the sorrow deepens down, / Whose muffled motions blindly drown / The bases of [his] life in tears” (ll. 14-16). Knowledge and belief alike are engulfed in mourning. Similarly, in Canto 41, an “inner trouble” (l. 18) surfaces as the speaker contemplates the loss of his friend: a “spectral doubt” arises, making him cold (l. 19) at the thought that he shall be his “mate no more” (l. 20).

For Dickinson too, loss initiates a spiral in which faith is tested. As Thomas Ford notes, in his work, “doubts concerning traditionally held religious beliefs focused her attention on death,” and death, in turn, intensified those doubts in a self-reinforcing cycle (20). In “The Last Night that She Lived” (Fr1100), the stillness that follows the moment of death leaves the survivors confronted with an existential void: “an awful leisure […] / Belief to regulate” (ll. 27–28). As Owens explains, this is a moment where “either the faith will be regulated back into its former position, or it will be erased” (24). In “Death’s Waylaying not the sharpest” (Fr1315), written after her father’s death, it is not death itself but the silence that follows which proves most unbearable. The line “[silence] supplants the Balm” (l. 8) evokes the unsettling

replacement of faith with an unanswerable void. Owens observes that this emptiness is too profound to be eased by religious consolation, amounting to what she calls "a heartfelt betrayal by God" (23–24). In both poets, death destabilizes the ground of faith, exposing its vulnerability to *existential doubt*.

Such doubt is not purely intellectual; in both poets, it produces deep anguish. In Dickinson's work, the anxiety provoked by divine silence recurs with insistent force. If poem 1315 has shown how this silence can displace the consolations of faith, poem 305 explores the deeper existential dread it engenders. The speaker begins with an affirmation of faith—"I know that He exists" (l. 1)—but immediately qualifies it: "Somewhere – in silence –" (l. 2). This silence destabilizes the assertion, introducing doubt at its core. As White observes, the poem's voice "startles us by how rapidly her faith in God's existence degrades to bitter skepticism and anguish" (101). What begins as belief soon turns into an image of a cruel cosmic game: "'Tis a fond Ambush," (l. 6) the speaker suggests, as if God hides himself deliberately. Yet this playful metaphor cannot withstand the confrontation with death. In the final stanza, a sense of dread unfolds:

> But – should the play
> Prove piercing earnest –
> Should the glee – glaze –
> In Death's – stiff – stare – (ll. 9–12).

Here, the speaker is gripped by the haunting possibility that the entire framework of hope may collapse. Her desperate questions—whether "the jest / [has] crawled too far" (ll. 15–16), whether the "fun" might prove "too expensive" (ll. 13–14)—expose the raw emotional cost of facing such uncertainty. The fear is not only that God may be absent, but that life itself may be revealed as meaningless—a cruel jest played in the void of divine silence. The shift from playful language to brutal finality conveys the speaker's deepening existential anxiety: she teeters on the edge of despair, caught between the yearning for faith and the terrifying suspicion that no answer will come.

Like Dickinson, Tennyson captures the torment of a mind suspended between hope and silence—a soul reaching for belief while dreading its possible emptiness. This tension finds one of its most vulnerable expressions in Canto 54. After a hesitant affirmation of cosmic order—"we trust that somehow good / Will be the final end of ill" (l. 1-2)—the speaker abruptly confesses the frailty behind this hope: "Behold, we know not anything" (l. 13). Stripped of theological certainties, he compares himself to "An infant crying in the night" (l.18), a powerful image of helplessness. The child's instinctive cry—devoid of reason or language (l. 20)—embodies the poet's existential anguish: faced with inscrutable darkness, faith is no more than a longing cry for light (l. 19). Such moments reveal how grief can reopen the most primal fears, shaking even the deepest layers of belief.

However, as we saw in the previous section, Tennyson's vulnerability ultimately leads him toward a deeper trust and a renewed openness to divine help. This progression can also be read through the model of *faith as a journey*—one sustained through *existential doubt*. As Rognon observes, in such experiences of disorientation:

> the best course of action is often to retrace our steps, reconsider our recent moves, reorient ourselves, and possibly call for help. On an existential level, this is an opportunity to return to greater faithfulness to ourselves—not by relying solely on our own strength, but by crying out to God who calls us and helps us to be more true to ourselves (45).

This process is dramatized in *In Memoriam*, where the poet's cry in Canto 53 finds its counterpart in Canto 124. There, he openly holds together "dearest faith" and "ghastliest doubt" (l. 2), perfectly illustrating Tillich's insight that "faith and doubt are two poles of the same reality" (22). Tennyson's "blind clamour" (l. 10) is not a mark of failure but an act of faith. The poet becomes "as a child that cries, / But crying, knows his father near" (ll. 12–13). What emerges here is not exactly a purified belief, as in *cathartic doubt*, but a *movement*: a trust sustained in the very act of depending on divine grace.

Crucially, this cry elicits a response that contrasts sharply with Dickinson's tragic vision of divine absence. Where her poetry mourns the amputated hand of God, Tennyson affirms that the divine still acts: "out of darkness came the hands / That reach thro' nature, moulding men" (ll. 23-24). The image of the hands—evoking the biblical symbol of Christ's transformative action—signals that the journey of faith continues not by resolving uncertainty but remaining open to divine intervention. These dynamics shape the entire movement of *In Memoriam*, which is structurally Christocentric: the poem is marked by the recurrence of three Christmases that punctuate the arc of mourning and healing, recalling the birth of a Savior and renewing the hope of redemption (Gray xxi). This pattern is retrospectively framed in the Prologue—written last—which opens the work with a proclamation of trust. After years of wrestling with grief and doubt, the poet professes Christ as the "Strong Son of God, immortal Love" (l. 1). He no longer seeks certainty, but affirms a trust sustained through dependence: he believes "where we cannot prove" (l. 4) and acknowledges that "We have but faith: we cannot know" (l. 21). Yet this affirmation does not erase the struggle that preceded it. The poet explicitly asks forgiveness for his "wild and wandering cries" (l. 41), acknowledging the instability and disorientation of his earlier path. At the same time, he turns to God for help: "And in thy wisdom make me wise" (l. 44)—a plea to be strengthened and taught to walk forward in faith. This movement resembles precisely the Gospel account of the possessed child's father—who cries "I believe; help thou my unbelief" (Mark 9: 24). According to Rognon, it is the sense of *existential doubt* that leads the believer to call for divine help, recognizing that faith cannot be sustained by human strength alone (45–47). The poet's apology thus does not reject doubt but integrates it within a deeper dependence on grace. This is articulated explicitly in Canto 96, where Tennyson rebukes those who view doubt as inherently sinful or "Devil-born" (l. 4). Against this simplistic view, the poet affirms that "There lives more faith in honest doubt, / [...] than in half the creeds" (ll. 11–12), and further insists that the very struggle with doubt can lead to spiritual growth: "He fought

his doubts and gather'd strength [...] / To find a stronger faith his own" (ll. 13, 17). In this light, *In Memoriam* does not close the experience of doubt, but enacts its most profound dynamic: a path where trust is continually renewed through the cry for divine aid.

Even if Dickinson's poetry ultimately offers no renewed faith in God, it still reflects key elements of the paradigm of *faith as a journey*—most notably, the sense of individual responsibility and commitment to the search itself. As Rognon writes, *existential doubt* can mark the beginning of "a path of freedom and responsibility," one that excludes both "pride linked to faith" and "guilt linked to doubt" (48). Dickinson's speakers never resolve their uncertainties, but they rarely evade them either. Her poems confront metaphysical anguish with intellectual rigor, suggesting that, in the absence of divine assurance, one must take full responsibility for navigating life's limits. As White argues, Dickinson's worldview is existential in nature: her speakers "regard the individual self, and not any divine agency, as solely responsible for the events that shape their lives," and value "the journey over the destination, the creative process over its finished products" (91). Indeed, Dickinson's poetry—though it never resolves into faith—remains deeply engaged with religious questions. This tension is evident in Poem 1279, where the hope of "The Heaven, in which we hoped to pause" (l. 9) is held alongside the admission that it is "Untenable to Logic / But possibly the one" (ll. 11-12). This echoes Tillich's idea that faith, at the level of "ultimate concern" (22) holds *existential doubt* within itself—not as a failure, but as a sign of the seriousness of belief (22). Dickinson is not a religious poet in the traditional sense, yet her sustained confrontation with doubt an honest engagement with ultimate questions, even when no certainty is granted.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century confronted belief with new challenges—scientific discoveries and an increasing awareness of human limitation. Yet as we have seen, both Tennyson and Dickinson transformed these pressures into powerful poetic explorations of belief and uncertainty. For

Tennyson, the journey of doubt ultimately leads to a reaffirmation of love and grace; for Dickinson, it results in a courageous confrontation with mystery that resists closure. Together, their voices enrich the tradition of religious poetry by showing that faith need not be the opposite of doubt—but can instead be its most honest companion. In the final chapter, we will examine how this dialectic between belief and questioning continues to resonate in the poetry of our own skeptical age.

Chapter III: Faith and Doubt in Modern and Contemporary Voices

Introduction

By the twentieth century, religious doubt had moved beyond the circles of intellectual elites to become a defining feature of Western culture. What the nineteenth century introduced through the questioning of biblical authority—by scientists, theologians, and poets—evolved into a broader reconfiguration of belief itself. Faith was no longer culturally assumed but became a personal stance, subject to reflection and choice. As Charles Taylor explains, we have undergone "a titanic change": from a world in which belief was "the default option"—assumed even by those familiar with doubt—to one in which unbelief now occupies that position for many. No longer living "naively within a theistic construal," we find ourselves in a context where "unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones" (12, 14). Indeed, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, belief in God could no longer be taken for granted. This transition, which Taylor calls the birth of a truly secular age, marked a profound transformation of spiritual life. If in earlier periods churches held institutional authority and Christianity shaped both private convictions and public norms, by the twentieth century this framework had eroded. Religion was gradually displaced from public institutions, and faith had become, in Taylor's words, "largely a private matter" (1). Individuals were left to navigate existential questions alone, seeking meaning in a world where religious truth was no longer self-evident or passively inherited. The loss of a common structure meant that one had to ask

not only *what* to believe, but *why*—and whether religious belief could still offer coherence and purpose in a modern age.

As explored in earlier chapters, the rise of scientific thought played a major role in gradually destabilizing traditional religious narrative. By the twentieth century, this process had extended beyond science to shape the broader cultural worldview. Notably, Max Weber described the result as the "disenchantment of the world"—a transformation through which the cosmos, once filled with divine presence and spiritual meaning, came to be understood as a closed, intelligible system governed by impersonal laws (125). What marks the modern condition is not just the impact of scientific discovery, but the dominance of rationalism as the primary mode of orientation across all spheres of life (Taylor 2). In a disenchanted world, individuals no longer receive meaning from a transcendent source but must construct it themselves. Therefore, Weber describes the modern intellectual as one who "seeks (...) to endow his life with a pervasive sense of meaning," yet must do so in a world where events "simply are and happen, without signifying anything" (125). Taylor calls this the "malaise of immanence"—a pervasive unease rooted in the sense that "all order, all meaning comes from us," and that "we encounter no echo outside" (376). This fragility of meaning is a modern phenomenon. As Taylor notes, earlier epochs—such as Luther's age—were shaped not by a lack of meaning but by an "excess" of it (302, 308). The Puritans, for instance, lived under the overwhelming weight of spiritual significance: the fear of damnation, and the desperate search for signs of election. Today, by contrast, it is the very threat of meaninglessness that defines the spiritual atmosphere (302).

Such a shift in belief inevitably touches the modern understanding of the self. If all meaning must come from within, it is no surprise that modern individuals are increasingly defined by what Taylor calls a "buffered, anthropocentric identity"—a self imagined as autonomous, self-sufficient, and protected from anything beyond the human world (300). This

identity emerged alongside what he describes as a "culture of authenticity," in which individuals are encouraged "to find their own way, discover their own fulfillment, "do their own thing'" (299). According to Taylor, modernity marks the first time in history when a purely self-sufficient humanism—one that requires no reference to God or transcendence—has become imaginable (18). Interestingly, this redefinition of self has unfolded within a broader cultural landscape marked by unprecedented spiritual diversity. Indeed, one of the most distinctive features of the secular age is its pluralism: belief in God is no longer a given, but "one option among others, and frequently, not the easiest to embrace" (3). Since the late twentieth century, Western societies have witnessed what Taylor calls a "spiritual super-nova"—a proliferation of religious and non-religious worldviews (299–300). In this context, individuals are constantly aware that "intelligent, reasonably undeluded people" can and do hold divergent views, which makes any one perspective feel fragile and provisional (11). We no longer inhabit a unified moral order but must navigate between competing standpoints, often shifting between engagement and detachment (12).

This chapter focuses on two poets whose work reflects those spiritual tensions: C.S. Lewis and Jeanne Murray Walker. Born in 1898 in Ireland, Lewis is widely known today as a Christian author and apologist, yet his intellectual and literary life was strikingly diverse. He was also an Oxford don, literary critic, writer of children's fiction—and, significantly, a poet. Although often overlooked, poetry was Lewis's earliest and most cherished form of expression: "At that time if you thought of Lewis you automatically thought of poetry" (King 1). His writings from the 1920s displayed firm atheism, sharply critical of religion (McGrath, chap. 6, par. 355)[11]. His eventual conversion to Christianity[12]—described in *Surprised by Joy* as that of

[11] All references to this work are based on the e-book edition (Tolino Webreader), which does not display page numbers. Citations refer to chapters and paragraph numbers.

[12] In *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis dates his conversion to belief in God to 1929—a timeline traditionally accepted by most biographers. However, Alister McGrath has recently reexamined the primary sources and suggests it more likely occurred between March and June 1930 (McGrath, chap. 6, pars. 387–89)

"the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England" (266)—did not resolve all inner conflict. Indeed, while his prose seeks to justify faith through reason, his verse often reveals a deeper struggle to reconcile belief with doubt. Across genres, Lewis's central drive is—what King calls a "redemptive reintegration of reason and imagination" (3).

Born in 1944, Jeanne Murray Walker grew up immersed in a fundamentalist Baptist community, later joining a more liturgical church (Walker, *Poetry Chose Me*). A poet, playwright, and professor, she explores time, mortality, and the "incongruous self" in relation to eternity, grace, and death (Tippens et al. 489). Called a "postmodern heir to the English metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century", she shares Herbert's love of paradox but writes in a different climate (Mattix 34). As Hudgins explains, whereas earlier poets could assume a shared faith, contemporary writers must first make belief intelligible before exploring its complexities. "In our skeptical age," he writes, "religious poetry that doesn't at least acknowledge skepticism is not credible" (159). Both Walker and Lewis take up this double task—affirming faith while responding to the modern pressure to doubt and the demand for justification.

III. I. Taming the Infinite: Reason's Collapse and the Reclaiming of Mystery

Although Lewis predates her chronologically, Walker's engagement with modern epistemological anxieties makes her work a natural starting point following the historical introduction of modernity. Like Tennyson and Dickinson before her, Walker confronts the limits of human knowledge and explores the tension between revelation and skepticism. Throughout her work, she meditates on what Rognon describes as the impulse to eliminate the incomprehensible in the paradigm of *faith as certainty* and *methodical doubt*— "a refusal to allow space for mystery, the irrational, or the unknown" (34). In her triptych "A Bestiary for the Birth of Christ", she stages this enduring epistemological tension through the voices of three

animals—a Frog, a Cow, and a Raven—each situated in a distinct temporal register: the mythic, the historical, and the modern.

The Frog embodies innocence in a prelapsarian moment in Eden. She describes a vibrant world she cannot fully comprehend (ll. 7; 9–10). Her approach is intuitive and synesthetic: she listens as fruit swells (l. 6) and hears color in the air (l. 15). She even calls the apples "gold" because she does not know "what apples mean" (ll. 4; 9; 18)—a sensory enchantment that suggests significance but offers no true knowledge. In Genesis, it is precisely this lack that Adam and Eve reject. Tempted by the snake, they eat from the forbidden tree of knowledge, and "the eyes of them both were opened" (Gen. 3:7). Only, the Frog suggests that this illumination is devastating: "The light lies on us all like doom" (l. 17). In response to this rupture (ll. 18-22), the Frog echoes the biblical narrative, announcing the need for salvation through Incarnation: "God becomes a man" (l. 24). With the break in harmony, "time pours its minutes" (l. 19), marking the end of mythic timelessness. Indeed, the Incarnation here signals the entry into historical time—the beginning of a new chronology in which the divine unfolds within linear temporality.

The Cow picks up where the Frog leaves off—but her voice is marked not by wonder, but by weariness. Indeed, once time has begun to move, enchantment gives way to erosion, and experience replaces innocence. The Cow witnessed the birth of Christ (l. 11)—yet her understanding of it remains secondhand: "they tell me he was the Son of God" (l. 12). Besides, over time, the immediacy of nativity has faded. The poem traces a slow collapse—wind licking her bones (l. 1), her body dimming in moonlight (ll. 2-3), the landscape turning to "eternal, sound-swallowing sand" (l. 6). The imagery evokes an hourglass: time presses downward, sand accumulates, until the Cow becomes a hollow vessel (l. 14). That pressure is made clear in the line: "Now time buzzes through my bridge" (l. 13). Her skull, once a container for knowledge and memory, can no longer hold them. "I go down to drowning with my knowledge" (l. 9):

what once seemed sacred now disintegrates. The passage of time, and the difficulty of her life have worn faith away and led her to despair. In the end, she no longer hopes for salvation: "There is no heaven for cattle" (l. 13).

The Raven embodies the culmination of time's progression: a modern, disenchanted voice. He introduces himself with scientific classification: "I am the most highly developed of birds, order Passeras, / family *Corvidae*" (ll. 1–2). Though he mentions mythic figures like Noah and Flokki (ll. 5–6), these references do not carry meaning but function more like cultural name-drops—signs of erudition, not belief. He remains detached, armed with a "well-tailored sense of irony" (l. 4), and distances himself from all inherited narratives. This is reinforced by his literary allusion to Poe's *Raven* (1845), a figure that famously denies all hope with the refrain "Nevermore" (l. 7). Moreover, he expresses his superiority as he observes time from above: "From my modern height I have surveyed the frog and the cow" (l. 8). He dismisses the Frog's tale of the Fall as biased— "natural enemy of the snake," she has, in his view, shaped the myth to fit her own instincts (ll. 9–10). And the Cow, he says, merely repeats what she was told. Lacking direct evidence, he trusts neither. If his voice seems more credible; the poem gradually reveals its fragility as well. His claim to "know eternity" (l. 16)—which, by definition, eludes comprehension—betrays not certainty but a desire for control. This becomes explicit when he asserts: "Time is the meat in the stubble / between hedgerow and wire fence" (ll. 18–19). Here, time is no longer mysterious but reduced to something fenced, measured, and consumable. Later, he concludes that

> if the most capable of all birds
> cannot pick God out of the air,
> we must learn to be satisfied with meat (ll. 20-22)

Spirituality—symbolized by air—, searched for and not found, is abandoned in favor of the tangible. This perfectly reflects Charles Taylor's concept of the *immanent frame*. However, the Raven's composure falters. "The wise, frail eyes of the fieldmouse disturb me," he admits, "and

sometimes I grow dizzy" (ll. 23–26). The strength of the image lies in its irony: the Raven, who feeds on carcasses, is unsettled by the innocence of his living prey. In all his calculation, he has oversimplified reality, overlooked that behind the "meat" there is life. The mouse introduces no counter-argument—only presence. Her gaze destabilizes what reason alone could not. His elevated perspective allows him to see everything, yet it also disconnects him. Like a form of height vertigo, his distance creates a mismatch between sight and experience: he sees more, but somehow his vision is blurry.

Walker's interest in the limits of rational control reappears in another poem called "The Creation". In it, she presents yet another animal, the giraffe, who resists logic through exuberant strangeness. Her sudden appearance disrupts a neatly ordered world (l. 1-2). Introduced as a potential "gaffe" (ll.4-5) and a last-minute surprise—she "spr[ings] up like Wow, / an exclamation point on legs" (l. 3-4). Alongside her calf, she is described as "improbable riffraff / of the imagination" (ll. 10-11), emphasizing their awkward, almost absurd construction. The poem thus reframes creation not as the result of calculation, but as an act of overflowing creativity. Their "hang gliding / off the cliff of reason" (ll. 11–12) evokes a world where not everything must be accounted for. The closing apostrophe expresses this even more directly:

> Oh giraffes,
> wear your head lamps, gather around, remind me,
> when all seems dark and sane,
> of mystery. (ll. 13-15)

The line's paradox— "dark and sane"—encapsulates the spiritual atmosphere of modernity. "Sane" evokes reason and control; yet paired with "dark," it suggests a world that is comprehensible but spiritually opaque. In such a world, everything makes sense, yet nothing resonates. Walker does not reject rationality but exposes the crisis of meaning that emerges when it is severed from imagination and mystery. As in "The Raven", vision without connection leads to disorientation. The speaker's plea is a humble one: to be reminded that not all truth is empirical. The giraffes, improbable and luminous, become guides against the flattening force

of explanation. This plea moves into warning in her poem titled "In the Beginning Was the Word," where creation begins with divine speech but ends with human language— "dangerous, ordinary words" (l. 14). The shift from *the Word* to ours, crystallizes the tension running through her work. Indeed, as Mattix notes, Walker's poetry "reflect[s] the quest to articulate something true that exists beyond the capacity of language to express" (34). Where earlier poems explored this tension through animals, this final image turns it back onto us: "Soon people, bursting into language. / Creation thinking about itself" (ll.12-13). But even our most precise words, the poem suggests, must sometimes yield to what they cannot contain.

This same very tension lies at the heart of "The Apologist's Evening Prayer" by C.S. Lewis. Known for defending Christianity through argument and reason, Lewis ends the day with a plea to be freed from that very impulse. The paradox is profound—Lewis the apologist asks to be delivered from apologetics.

> From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf
> At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh;
> From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
> Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me (ll. 3–6).

That final line invites deeper reflection. Though Jesus is known for his miracles—signs of his divinity—the Gospels also recount moments when he refuses to perform them. Two distinct patterns emerge. First, Jesus rejects and hides signs when they are demanded in a spirit of hostility or manipulation. In Matthew 12, the Pharisees witness a healing miracle—but rather than believe, they accuse Jesus of acting through Beelzebub (v. 24) and "[hold] a council (...), how they might destroy him" (v. 14). Aware of their intent, Jesus withdraws from them, heals discreetly, and "charged [the people who followed him] that they should not make him known" (vv. 15–16). The same logic appears in Matthew 4, where the devil tempts him: "If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down" (v. 6), and again at the crucifixion: "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross" (Matt. 27.40). These demands all amount to the same dare: *prove yourself*. But Jesus does not yield. The second pattern is subtler but equally revealing: Jesus

refuses to give signs when the desire for proof becomes compulsive—when no sign is ever enough. Still in Matthew 12, the Pharisees, after witnessing the miracle they critiqued, asked for another sign (v. 38). Their demand hides a refusal to accept what they have already seen. Jesus answers with only the veiled "sign of the prophet Jonas" (v.39)—an allusion to his death and resurrection, requiring faith, not certainty. John 6 echoes this logic. After the multiplication of loaves, the crowd returns asking, "What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee?" (v. 30). Like the Pharisees, they do not lack evidence, but the willingness to accept it. In the text, their focus remains on material provision, but Jesus redirects them from their fixation on evidence and physical food to a deeper spiritual reality: "I am the bread of life" (v. 35). It seems that, in these episodes, the issue is not the request itself, but the refusal to let trust grow where proof ends. Indeed, when signs are reduced to tests, trust is replaced by control—and faith becomes impossible.

It is from this restlessness for certainty that Lewis asks for deliverance. "Thoughts are but coins"—a striking image that likens reason to currency (l. 7). Just as coins bear the image of a king without containing his presence, he suggests that thoughts—even about God—can become substitutes for real encounter. The mind, like wealth, offers control, but Lewis sees this mental richness as a spiritual danger. This is why he prays, drawing on the imagery of Matthew 7.14 and 19.24 : "Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye, / Take from me all my trumpery lest I die" (ll. 9–10). In these verses, Jesus notably says that "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God". While he warns that material wealth can hinder spiritual openness, Lewis seems to transpose this teaching into the realm of intellect. For him, riches—whether material or intellectual—can become barriers to revelation. As a scholar and an apologist, Lewis possesses such riches: arguments, insights, rhetorical skill. But here he sees them as "trumpery"—showy but worthless. His prayer reflects another biblical teaching: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

(Matt. 5.3). The poem ends not in speech but in surrender: “From all my thoughts, even from my thoughts of Thee, / O thou fair Silence, fall, and set me free” (ll. 7–8). Like Walker’s giraffe, who reminds the speaker of mystery beyond reason, Lewis longs for a silence that frees him from mastery—a silence that makes space for trust.

This movement—from pursuit to surrender—culminates in Lewis’s “Yes, You Are Always Everywhere,” a poem that encapsulates the failure of intellectual striving to grasp the divine. It opens with the striking image of God as prey:

> Yes, you are always everywhere. But I,
> Hunting in such immeasurable forests,
> Could never bring the noble Hart to bay.
> The scent was too perplexing for my hounds;
> Nowhere sometimes, then again everywhere (ll. 1-5).

It is interesting to note that in the Bible, the metaphor of the hart is known to describe the believer’s peaceful longing for God— “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God” (Ps. 42:1). Lewis inverts the image: the hart is no longer the trusting soul in search of God, but God himself—hunted. Like Walker’s Raven, the Pharisees, and even the apologist, this speaker attempts to pin God down—to trap what is, by nature, free. However, as seen throughout the biblical episodes referenced earlier, such attempts to master the divine lead only to absence. Eventually, the speaker gives up:

> Therefore I turn my back on the unapproachable
> Stars and horizons and all musical sounds,
> Poetry itself, and the winding stair of thought.
> Leaving the forests where you are pursued in vain,
> I turn instead
> To the appointed place where you pursue (ll. 7-12).

The reversal is complete. No longer the hunter, he becomes the one pursued. And God, no longer everywhere and nowhere, becomes Someone: “a Particular Man, with a date, so tall, weighing / So much, talking Aramaic”, having learned a trade (l. 15-16). The God he once sought in vast abstractions is now found in specificity—in Incarnation. Here, Lewis’s turn mirrors Tennyson’s insight that “the Word had breath.” Like him, he recognizes that the divine

cannot remain a diffuse presence. It must take flesh. And so he moves from "all bread" (l. 16) to "this wine, this bread" (ll. 18)—a direct reference to the Last Supper, where Christ offers himself in concrete, sacramental form. John 14, which recounts the events of that evening, underscores that in Christ, the invisible God becomes tangible. In response to the disciples' longing, Jesus declares, "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (v. 9).

Like Tennyson, who viewed the Gospels as "truth embodied in a tale," Lewis articulates a closely related conviction. As a literary scholar, Lewis was deeply drawn to myths, which he saw as a privileged mode of access to mystery, meaning and truth in an age dominated by rationalism. In *God in the Dock*, he writes, "myth is the isthmus which connects the peninsular world of thought with that vast continent we really belong to"; it is "not, like truth, abstract; nor is it, like direct experience, bound to the particular" (66). Myths, for Lewis, give form to what we intuitively sense to be true but cannot prove. His close friend J.R.R. Tolkien shared this view. As McGrath explains, Tolkien believed that "the best myths are not deliberately constructed falsehoods but are rather tales woven by people to capture the echoes of deeper truths" (chap. 6, par. 409). It was him who first suggested to Lewis that the Gospels might retained the imaginative power of myth while also being true. This idea would become a decisive turning point in Lewis's spiritual journey. On September 19th, 1931, during a long walk with Tolkien and Hugo Dyson, he began to see the story of Christ not merely as symbolic, but as "a true myth" (McGrath, chap. 6, par. 407). "The heart of Christianity," he writes, "is a myth which is also a fact" (*God in the Dock* 67). It is this union—of meaning and historical grounding, imagination and reality—that made belief possible for Lewis.

Both he and Walker thus dramatize a shift from the desire to grasp God to the willingness to receive Him. Yet this surrender is not naïve. It begins with the acknowledgment of one's "littleness" (l.17) and disillusionment—the painful shedding of mistaken certainties. Lewis evokes this through the failure of the hounds, whose pursuit falters not from absence of

scent, but from misrecognition: “other scents, too, seemed to them almost the same” (l. 6). The danger lies not in silence, but in the abundance of near-truths—false leads that mimic the real enough to deceive. As the next section will explore, such confusion marks not the collapse of faith, but the unraveling of illusion that must precede it.

III. II. Sifting the Light: The Risk of Illusion in Spiritual Experience

If Walker and Lewis embrace the collapse of rational mastery, they do not, for all that, advocate credulity. In fact, both treat the risk of spiritual deception with extreme seriousness. Their poems suggest that mystery, while an essential component of faith, does not exempt believers from discernment. The fear of being misled is not a sign of weak belief, but part of what makes faith authentic: it signals a desire for truth rather than emotional reassurance. If some of their poems invite spiritual receptivity, that openness must contend with the modern condition of profound plurality. Within this landscape, Walker and Lewis both ask—implicitely and explicitely—how to tell the difference between true vision and false projection.

Lewis’s “These Faint Wavering Far-travell’d Gleams”—published in other editions as “Sweet Desire” articulates the anguish of this very question. The speaker is caught between longing and suspicion, drawn by a “scent” (l.2), a “sweet stabbing” (l. 3) that fills him “with care” (l. 2). Strikingly, as in “Yes, You Are Always Everywhere,” this poem evokes the search for God through smell—an intuitive pursuit prone to misrecognition. This distant impression of divine presence seems “too like” “another air” he has breathed before, familiar enough to arouse recognition, but “unlike as well” (ll. 4–5), suggesting something beyond. This tension—between resemblance and transcendence—unsettles him deeply, leaving him “dazed with doubt” (l. 6). His hesitation is not theoretical but rooted in memory: “I was tricked before” (l. 15). He evokes his spiritual wound through the image of a prisoner “who has heard the hinge on the hook turning / Often” (ll. 7-8). Each time the door opened before, it brought “new tormentors in” (l. 8). So now, even when the door opens “outward, offering free way” (l.10) he

withdraws “into the dark’s corner” (l. 13), afraid that what seems salvific may again be a trap. Smith suggests that this “door” alludes to Christ himself (see John 10:9 and Revelation 3:20). Moreover, he sees the light/darkness imagery of the poem as an echo to John 8:12 (18): Jesus as the light of the world.

The poem reveals a deep anxiety: the cruelty of false hope, the risk of placing trust in something that turns out to be a mirage. Yet the poet does not remain in hiding. Suspicion, however justified, cannot indefinitely postpone the response: “But what’s the use? For yield I must, / Though long delayed, at last must dare” (ll. 23–24). The repetition of *must* reveals that the speaker does not yield easily, but out of spiritual necessity. His decision embodies the risk that defines faith—both as a leap and as a journey. As Rognon explains, Kierkegaard compared faith as a plunge “into the incomprehensible—without a safety net, without security” (23–24). This metaphor captures not only the Kierkegaardian leap but also Tillich’s view that “the risk of faith is the greatest risk which a man can take” (27), because the believer is never free from uncertainty since “existential doubt and faith are poles of the same reality” (22).

Still, the most central risk of the poem appears to be one of the paradigms of *faith as belief* and *cathartic doubt*: “The risk of belief,” Rognon writes, “is to construct a god in the image of man” (38). And this is what the speaker resists. He does not leap hastily but adopts a form of questioning, doubts that “destroys beliefs and credulity in order to reveal faith in its authenticity” (39). Smith suggests that this process echoes a key insight from *A Grief Observed*, where Lewis writes: “Images of the Holy easily become holy images sacrosanct. My idea of God is not a divine idea. It has to be shattered time after time. He shatters it Himself. He is the great iconoclast” (qtd. in Smith 19). The speaker’s final plea— “Oh Lord, let not likeness fool me again” (l. 29)—emphasizes the idea that true faith is only possible after false images are broken. In this poem, doubt is not the enemy of faith but the force that clears space for it to become real. The speaker’s hesitation is not reluctance to believe—it is a refusal to settle for

illusion. Indeed, what haunts the speaker is not the risk of blatant falsehood, but subtle fraud: "All the heraldry of heaven, holy monsters, / With hazardous and dim half-likeness" (ll. 16–18). The "holy monsters" (l. 15) as Smith explains, are "holy" because they "speak of [God]," and yet they are "monsters" in that they are a "distortion of the truth" (19). This fear echoes a key passage in 2 Corinthians 11, where Paul warns of "false apostles, deceitful workers," and affirms that "Satan himself [was] transformed into an angel of light" (vv. 13–14). It is this same spiritual confusion that Lewis evokes when he says "Always evil was an ape" (l. 17), suggesting that the line between revelation and illusion is often dangerously thin.

Thus, the speaker remains cautious— "Slow-paced I come, / Yielding by inches" (ll. 27–28). Faith is not seized with certainty but approached step by step—with caution. This gradual advance is not only hesitant but also requires a kind of softening, a surrender of defenses. Indeed, to move forward, he must "give over, to be eased of [his] iron casing" (l. 25) and melt "as men of snow / In the solar smile" (ll. 26–27). These metaphors powerfully evoke the vulnerability and abandonment required by *cathartic doubt*. The speaker does not seek mastery or final answers—only not to be fooled again.

Walker's "Little Blessing for My Floater" shifts the fear of illusion from the external world to the mechanisms of perception itself: the flaw is not in the object seen, but in the eye that sees. Indeed, the "floater" of the title refers to a minor but persistent defect in vision. While seemingly trivial, this imperfection becomes the focal point of the poem's spiritual meditation. Walker layers a series of metaphors to describe it: a "tiny ruin," a "small / flaw in the fabric," a "little speck / of blood in the egg" (ll. 1–3), evoking decay, imperfection and impurity. Then, Walker turns to metaphors that directly implicate sight: The "deep chip / in the windshield" (ll. 3–4) evokes impaired perception—a blind spot that blocks part of the visual field.

Strikingly, the floater is called a "north star" and "polestar" (ll. 4–5)—names traditionally associated with orientation and fixed cosmic truth. Yet this is immediately

undermined by the line “floater that doesn’t / float” (ll. 5–6), which reveals the contradiction at the heart of the image. The speck mimics constancy: it appears to be stable—but it is not a trustworthy guide. Whatever the speaker looks at, the flaw remains, “a piton that nails every rock / [they] see, no matter if the picture / turns to sand, or sand to sea” (ll. 8–10). This deceptive permanence—something that seems reliable but is in fact obstructive—recalls the danger Lewis fears: “likeness” mistaken for truth. Walker, too, warns that what drives us may conceal part of reality. Her description of the floater as a “piece of absence” (l. 12) reinforces this tension.

And yet, this flaw becomes revelatory, since the speaker affirms that it “reminds [them] what [they] will be, / all dark some day unless God / rescues [them]” (ll. 11–14). The imperfection paradoxically reveals something essential: the speaker’s finitude, her dependence on grace. What was once a nuisance becomes a “blessing,” even a teacher: “oh speck / that might teach me yet to see” (ll. 14–15). This theological paradox—where flaw yields insight—is one Walker shares with Herbert, to whom she alludes explicitly in the subtitle. As Mattix writes, like him, she “meditates continually on the strange mercy of God, which in the crush and cruelty of his creation reveals itself in improbable ways” (34). Also, her use of metaphysical conceits that give rise to “a complex meditation on human frailty and the radical mercy of God” (34), places her in the tradition of Herbert’s devotional poetry, which often turns affliction into spiritual opportunity. Like “Easter Wings”, her poem suggests that recognition of loss and limitation is the condition for ascent. Walker builds upon Matthew 7:3—“the mote in thy brother’s eye”—but unlike the biblical figure, her speaker fully acknowledges the speck in her own. As Mattix observes, this humility transforms the defect “from a site of shame into one of revelation,” where “this blind spot becomes a flashpoint for epiphany” (34). The floater becomes a symbol of *cathartic doubt*—a spiritual absence that clears space for revelation—the humble reception of “the truth that comes from an Other” (Rognon 39).

In this way, Walker, like Lewis, frame faith as an ongoing work of discernment—one that requires vulnerability, vigilance, and above all, humility—where one's limit can become the aperture through which grace is seen. Whether confronting deceptive likenesses or blind spots within, the speakers of both poems seek to sift illusion from truth—step by step, speck by speck.

III.III. Surviving the Valley of Death: the Long Wait and the Sudden Fall

This search for truth and clarity is a process that can be likened to *faith as a journey*. In *The Pilgrim's Regress* (1932), Lewis maps his own intellectual journey to God (McGrath, chap. 6, par. 388). It is a fiction in narrative form following the tradition—rooted in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678–1684)—of casting spiritual transformation as a pilgrimage (chap. 7, par. 458, 466). The story follows a young man, John, whose longing for an elusive Island leads him across a divided landscape. The central road is flanked by two misleading extremes: to the north, the cold certainties of rigid rationalism; to the south, the enticements of emotional intoxication (par. 466–468). These detours do not simply obstruct the journey—they reveal that faith itself unfolds through missteps, detours, and reorientations. As Rognon suggests, faith conceived as a path resists fixity: it is marked by instability, progression, and revision (41). What John gradually discovers is that his desire for the Island was, more deeply, a longing for the Landlord—Lewis's figure for God (McGrath, chap. 7, par. 471). The title *Regress* reflects this transformation: after coming to faith, John walks the same road backwards, now seeing with new eyes what he once misunderstood (par. 472). Sixteen poems are woven into this allegory, including "The Naked Seed," which opens with a striking metaphor for inner desolation.

> My heart is empty. All the fountains that should run
> With longing, are in me
> Dried up. In all my countryside there is not one
> That drips to find the sea (ll. 1–4).

The heart becomes a barren scenery, drained of desire. This imagery of drought stands in stark contrast with John's driving vision: an Island— a land surrounded with water— "a sense of intense yet transitory longing" (McGrath, chap. 7, par.465). Moreover, McGrath underlines the existential depth of John's quest as he wonders "Where does [his longing] come from? What is he yearning for? [...] Why do we long to do right? Where does this sense of obligation come from? What does it signify—if anything?" (McGrath, chap. 7, par. 465). However, these profound questions fade in the poem, where the speaker admits that he "cannot think" (l. 13) and "cannot desire" (l.15) anymore: "I have no care for anything thy love can grant / Except the moment's vain (ll. 6–8). The paradox is striking: whereas in the broader narrative, the narrator thirsts for ultimate meaning, the poem reveals a soul reduced to immediate relief, its spiritual thirst replaced by apathy.

Yet the poem casts spiritual aridity not as failure but as a season, part of a natural cycle, just as the different phases of *faith as a journey* (Rognon 42). The closing image of "the insensible dropp'd seed which grows / Through winter ripe for birth" (ll. 17–18)—suggests that this winter of the soul is preparatory. As Smith argues, "just as the seed is left 'deep-buried' through the winter but shows signs of life in spring, so his 'soul's interior Form' [(l. 15)] will eventually burgeon forth into life," not by his own effort, but through "God's care and grace" (22). The heaven that "remembers" when the soul forgets (l. 19) is emblematic of divine constancy amid human wavering. This interplay between human weakness and divine initiative is central to the poem. Indeed, the speaker calls upon a God "that dost neither sleep / Nor slumber" (ll. 9–10), a direct allusion to Psalm 121:4. This divine vigilance is what sustains the believer "till [he] wake[s]" (l. 12). The image echoes another well-known biblical metaphor: that of God as a shepherd in Psalm 23, who leads His sheep "beside the still waters" (v. 2) and

through "the valley of the shadow of death" (v. 4)[13]. In both psalms, the believer is not static but moves—through darkness, dryness, or danger—under divine protection. This same sense of divine presence pervades Lewis's poem: though the speaker admits spiritual weariness, he remains guided and ultimately safe. What we find here is not a crisis that places faith itself in jeopardy, but a quieter unease—a loss of desire, a numbness of the soul. It reflects a kind of doubt that many believers experience: not wondering whether God exists, but why they no longer feel drawn to Him. While this winter of the heart is real, the soul is tired, not terrified. As such, the poem aligns with the seasonal logic of *faith as a journey* but does not convey the visceral dread that marks Rognon's last paradigm: *existential doubt*.

In contrast, Jeanne Murray Walker's "Keeping the Plane Up" immerses the reader in precisely that dread—a moment where the self is suspended between the imminence of death and the possibility of grace. The poem opens with stark finality, in the mind of a speaker aboard a plane that is on fire, breaking apart mid-air, and about to crash: "This time no one can save me" (l. 1). Unlike the quietly growing winter seed of Lewis, here the speaker is "somersaulting towards the winter landscape" (ll. 15–16), in freefall. The descent is chaotic, filled with ruptured images of safety and order— like "the sheltering walls of the plane / fly[ing] apart like kindling" (ll.3-4), "the durable seat drop[ing] down" (l. 5) and the "calendar flapping like a sparrow" (l. 7) "in the air above [the speaker]" (l.9). Yet amid this terror, a fragile gesture of faith emerges: "I try to steady myself / in the eye of God" (ll. 18–19). Faith, here, is the desperate effort to orient oneself in the face of annihilation. It takes the form of a trembling, barely perceptible rhythm—"like the quiver of an engine keeping / a plane up" (ll. 17–18). The speaker feels this presence not abstractly, but physically: "a sound that catches, / stalls, then vibrates in [her] throat / and pelvis" (ll. 23–25). She even sees signs of stabilization: "the plane's wings

[13] If the metaphor of faith as a journey is so widespread in common thought, it is perhaps precisely because of these biblical roots. In this regard, Rognon reveals an interesting detail: "in the time of the early Church, the first Christians, before they were specifically called 'Christians,' were referred to—and referred to themselves—as 'followers of the Way': τοὺς τῆς ὁδοῦ ὄντας" (Rognon 42).

level / over the thorny trees" (ll. 27–28). And yet—even despite these sensory confirmations—doubt persists. The final gesture is poignant: "I spread my hands above me / like parachutes, just in case" (ll. 29–30). In asking "Could this be / what it feels like, being saved?" (ll. 19–20), the parallel with faith is made clear. The speaker's uncertainty endures not because there is no sign of salvation, but because no sign is ever enough to guarantee it. This captures the existential ambiguity of faith—the ever-present possibility of grace and the simultaneous fear of its absence. In this way, Walker's poem enacts Tillich's insight that faith and doubt are inextricable because faith represent "the state of being ultimately concerned," which "content matters infinitely for the life of the believer" (4).

III. IV. Debating endlessly: the Difficulty of Making a Definite Leap

It is perhaps this very pressure—the infinite weight of what is at stake—that renders faith so precarious. As we saw in Lewis's "These Faint Wavering Far-travell'd Gleams," choosing to trust or to refuse belief takes more than a simple step. Along the way, one may find oneself in seemingly opposite positions—affirming and denying. In this final subchapter, we turn first to a poem by Walker, where the speaker appears to refuse belief, and then to one by Lewis, where faith is confessed. Yet both voices reveal that the leap, whether toward belief or away from it, remains a fragile conclusion subject to doubt.

Walker's "Staying Power "opens with an expression of exhaustion—a desire to reach a final resolution on the question of faith. The speaker confesses a "longing to have the fight settled, thinking / I can't go on like this," (l. 3-4). The metaphor of a fight not only captures the inner weariness of living in suspense but also the resolution of getting rid of the possibility of faith once and for all. Her doubts are "like Gorky['s]" (l. 1), the poem's dedication confirms it—"In appreciation of Maxim Gorky at the International Convention of Atheists, 1929". This man is a prominent figure in the Soviet atheist movement, who framed irreligion as a cultural mission. In the speech he gave at that event, he also used militaristic vocabulary and spoke of

the need “to uproot something that has become implanted over 20 centuries” and to get “people forget about the church” (“Millenarian Atheism”). But unlike Gorky’s confident rhetoric, the speaker’s declaration remains hesitant: “all right, it is improbable, all right, there / is no God” (ll. 5–6). Rather than a firm leap into disbelief, the repetition of “all right” suggests the difficulty of making a final decision.

Moreover, what follows reveals the stubborn persistence of belief. As soon as the speaker utters “there is no God,” she describes an involuntary reaction: “as if I’m focusing / a magnifying glass on dry leaves, God blazes up” (ll. 6–7). She stresses the difficulty of suddenly abandoning the idea of God by comparing it to “a forest fire” (l. 9) which she tries to extinguish all “afternoon dragging / the hose” (ll. 10–11). The “smoldering” (l. 11) evokes a deep-seated instinct, something the speaker cannot fully control or erase. Walker insists on the impossibility to reject belief altogether with another metaphor, noting that “we have only so many words to think with” (l. 21). If God is not fire, then “say God’s / a phone, maybe” (ll. 22–23) —an object the speaker tries to unplug and destroy “till it bleeds springs and coils” (l. 27), yet it still rings (l. 28). She also offers a more concrete example: even on an ordinary day when a friend calls” (l. 12) with news of a cancer diagnosis (l. 13), she cries to God right away: “I say God / God, I say” (ll. 14-15). This chiasmic repetition mirrors the reversal motion of “[her] heart turn[ing] inside out” (l. 15). Despite the effort to sever belief, she shows that in a moment of crisis, faith resurfaces like an emotional reflex. She even suggests that language itself cannot detach itself from God.

> Pick up any language by the scruff of its neck,
> wipe its face, set it down on the lawn,
> and I bet it will toddle right into the godfire again (ll. 16–18).

Although the term “godfire” may at first seem ironic and show emotional distance, the speaker quickly underscores the gravity of the subject: the godfire “which—though they say it doesn’t / exist—can send you straight to the burn unit” (ll. 19–20). If, in “Keeping the plane up”, Walker

stressed the incredible relief of salvation, these lines reflects the terror of damnation. What makes her leap into atheism so difficult is, again, partly due to the ultimate importance of what is at stake. This captures the heart of the poem: even if God is declared nonexistent, the force of the idea—its emotional, existential, and moral gravity—cannot be denied.

Lewis's "Legion" responds to the same existential tension (l. 14), but from the opposite perspective. It reveals how hard it is to hold on to faith. The speaker addresses God with apparent conviction— "Lord, hear my voice," (l. 1)—but immediately undercuts it by acknowledging his own instability: "my present voice I mean / Not that which may be speaking an hour hence" (ll. 1-2). He knows that at any moment, he may be prompted to doubt again. Having already denied God in the past and aware he may do so again, he anxiously wonders how God will judge him. The stakes are weighty: if salvation depends on belief like John 3:16 suggests, then which "voice" will be counted among his inner cacophony? Moreover, the title and the third line—"(For I am Legion)"—abruptly transforms the speaker's inner conflict into something more disturbing. It is a clear allusion to the possessed man in Mark 5 and Luke 8—who declares "I am Legion, for we are many", which suggests that the speaker is not just divided but overrun, haunted by contradictory selves. As Smith observes, the reference "conveys the poet's conviction that he needs to be delivered from the many 'selves' and 'voices' within his being, just as the man in the story was delivered from the unclean spirits" (24).

The plea to be "delivered" from these contradictory selves echoes the logic at work in Donne and Herbert. In Chapter 1, we saw how both poets portray doubt not merely as intellectual questioning but as an invasive force—sometimes demonic—that destabilizes the soul. Moreover, just as Donne's speaker describes his soul as an "usurp'd town" Lewis imagines the self as a disordered kingdom, in which "multiple factions" (l. 5) "will continue to exist without reaching consensus" (Smith 24). While the early metaphysical poets cast doubt as a clear spiritual assault in some poems we analyzed, "Legion" retains a very down-to-earth

quality. Even though Lewis believes that a dark spiritual realm is at work to lead people away from God[14], this does not appear to be the subject of the poem here. On the one hand, this biblical reference is placed in parentheses, and on the other, the poem quickly shifts to a rather pragmatic, bureaucratic register. The political and legal lexicon ("defense" (l. 7), "parliament" (l. 8), "legal fictions" (l. 12), …) reframes the spiritual crisis in procedural terms. The self is not a battlefield but a disorderly state, paralyzed by debate. Interestingly however, he asks that "the democratic practice" of a "show of hands" (l. 4) "should not be used to decide his fate" (Smith 24), or else he is headed for certain loss (l.14).

Instead, he asks God to "Hold [him] to this" voice, for his present choice of faith to be given "unfair weight" (l. 11). He insists by begging him to "strain / A point – use legal fiction" (ll. 11-12). He is asking him to bend the rules, to make accommodation for his unstable self—to pretend that the voice speaking in this moment is representative of his whole self. (ll. 6-7). This request for God to override the speaker's wavering will recalls the plea at the heart of Donne's "Batter my heart, three-person'd God". There too the speaker rejects the idea that the soul can remain faithful on its own: "Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, /Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me." (ll. 13-14). Both poems, in place of gentle correction, call for a powerful, redemptive intervention, whether trough violence and captivity or legal force.

Yet, Lewis differs from Donne in that he accepts a theological limit: God, having once granted free will, will not revoke it—even at our request (ll. 9-10). This line does not cancel the plea—it sharpens its urgency. The speaker knows that God will not revoke human freedom, and yet he pleads for a divine accommodation within it. As Smith explains, these lines reflect "the speaker's acceptance of the doctrine of humankind's responsibility before God" (Smith 24). The drama of the poem thus rests in this unresolved tension: the speaker cannot be forced, but

[14] This idea is central to his fictional narrative *The Screwtape Letters*, which follows a demon apprentice who receives advice from his uncle, a senior demon, on how to lead a man away from the "Enemy"—God—and thus ensure the loss of his soul.

he cannot stand on his own. He is not asking to be overpowered, but to be sustained—to have his moment of genuine belief counted for more than it deserves.

In the end, "Legion" portrays faith as a leap the self cannot make alone. The speaker's desperate plea—"Dissolve my parliament and intervene" (l. 8)—captures this precisely. He asks God to silence the conflicting voices of the everlasting debate on doubt and faith, and to act where he cannot. This is the cry of one who has reached the limits of rational deliberation. This reflects, what Kierkegaard suggest, that "faith begins precisely where reason ends" (Cited in Rognon 24). By invoking legal fiction and begging for divine intervention, the speaker renounces his own autonomy to be rescued from indecision.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how Lewis and Walker, while echoing earlier figures like Donne and Herbert, are confronted with a new kind of difficulty: they write in a secular, disenchanted world that seeks to explain everything and leave no room for mystery. Yet this impulse to make sense of all things risks producing a certain "malaise", oversimplifying complex realities and narrowing the space where faith might emerge. Indeed, how can one receive what lies beyond reason, if reason is the only faculty one trusts? Both poets navigate this tension—between openness to mystery and the fear of deception—with humility. This balance is all the more hard to sustain in a world shaped by a plurality of intelligent yet conflicting worldviews. As Smith notes of Lewis, we sense a desire to cultivate "an intellectually robust faith" that resists "easy believism" (16). Their poetry does not offer easy answers but bears witness to the deep hope, dread, and longing that define the human condition before these questions about the divine—what Tillich, as mentioned in the introduction, called "the greatness and the pain of being human," the experience of standing between one's finitude and one's potential infinity (18).

Conclusion

Christian poetry, far from presenting faith as a static or unquestionable state, consistently engages with doubt as an essential component of belief. Indeed, this transhistoric study has shown that across centuries, doubt emerges not as a denial of faith but rather as a marker of the poet's earnest engagement with the intellectual, spiritual, and emotional aspects that faith entails. Despite the historical and the denominational differences that separate Donne, Herbert, Bradstreet, Dickinson, Tennyson, Lewis, and Walker, all of their works show how faith must often pass through confusion, irony, distress, or silence before reaching a potential (re)affirmation of faith. Whether grappling with theological divisions in the Early Modern Period, the rise of scientific methods and biblical criticism in the 19th century, or the pluralism and secularity of contemporary culture—not to mention universal human experiences such as pain, grief or fear— poets have turned to poetry as a space where the tensions of belief could be explored. Through the lens of Frédéric Rognon's four paradigms of faith and doubt, this study has identified epistemological uncertainty, rational inquiry, the concern of distinguishing the essential core of faith from inherited forms and traditions, and existential anguish not as threats to belief, but as recurring modes through which it is interrogated and reshaped.

Naturally, this thesis comes with limitations. The selection of poets and poems—though varied in period and style—could only represent a fraction of the rich and complex tradition of Christian poetry. Many other voices and works could offer additional perspectives on how doubt and faith interact. Moreover, except for Dickinson, the poets examined here ultimately affirm belief. This focus is consistent with the boundaries of this study, which centers on Christian poetry, but it also points to potential directions for further research—particularly in comparing these dynamics with secular poetry or texts from other faith traditions. Also, even within the scope of Christian literature, it would be worthwhile to explore how doubt is articulated across different genres. Several of the poets studied—such as Donne, Herbert, or

Lewis—were also preachers or theologians, and their sermons or religious prose often contrast sharply with the personal and conflicted tone of their poetry. Comparing these public and private expressions of belief could offer valuable insight into how genre shapes the way doubt is voiced.

While Rognon's four paradigms have provided a valuable structure for mapping recurring modes of faith and doubt, the model also has conceptual limitations. The boundaries between the paradigms are not always clearly distinct. For instance, the element of risk—central to the leap of faith paradigm—is also present in *faith as a journey*, where uncertainty and commitment coexist. Similarly, *faith as belief* and *faith as a journey* both acknowledge a fragile, evolving relationship with truth, often marked by inner shifts and reorientations. The overlap is also visible between *methodical doubt*, which tests rational coherence, and *cathartic doubt*, which purifies spiritual assumptions—both functioning as tools of discernment. Even the opposition between *faith as certitude* and *faith as a leap,* breaks down when one considers that both reject doubt, albeit on radically different grounds: one through reason, the other despite of it. In many respects, *faith as a journey* functions less as a distinct category than as a flexible framework that encompasses elements of the other paradigms (moments of certitude, skeptical doubt, or cathartic questioning). Rather than marking a single position, it traces the movement between them. While some poems aligned clearly with a specific paradigm, others revealed multiple tensions simultaneously, requiring an interpretive emphasis on one aspect over another. Indeed, the richness of the poetry often exceeded the boundaries of a single framework. This is why future research could benefit from complementing Rognon's model with additional theoretical perspectives. Thinkers like John Henry Newman, for instance, offer alternative ways of reflecting on the experience of belief and the role of doubt in its development—approaches that could nuance or expand the analysis proposed here.

Additionally, while the study focuses on close readings of selected texts, it does not consider how these poems were received in their time. It would be particularly interesting to explore whether such texts intensified spiritual questioning, deepened personal belief, or even served as meditative or devotional objects.

Finally, this study was primarily thematic in scope. Although it attended to tone, voice, and rhetorical strategies such as metaphor or paradox, it did not engage in a sustained analysis of poetic form or generic convention. A closer attention to meter, syntax, or structure could offer a richer understanding of how doubt and faith are not only expressed in content, but embodied and shaped by the poetic form itself.

Despite its limitations, this study ultimately affirms the enduring relevance of Christian poetry as a space where uncertainty and belief coexist in creative tension. By analyzing faith and doubt as interconnected forces, this study challenges simplistic binaries between skepticism and faith and gives broader significance to the theme of religious questionning in contemporary discourse: its universal dimension and its intellectual legitimacy. First, while faith is often treated today as a private matter—or as something relevant only to those who believe—this study suggests otherwise. When approached through the lens of doubt, questions related to religious beliefs open onto experiences and emotions that are anything but marginal. The fear of death, the ache for meaning, the hope for something greater than oneself—these are not exclusive to any one creed or tradition but are central to the human condition. As Charles Taylor writes, “secularity is a condition in which our experience of and search for fullness occurs; and this is something we all share, believers and unbelievers alike” (Taylor 19).

When poets write about faith in crisis, they give voice to both profound fears and hopes—the depth of what it means to live with uncertainty. Such poetry invites anyone—regardless of conviction—to confront what they fear, what they long for, and what they cannot

fully know. It would be a mistake to overlook their poetic and philosophical depth simply because they appear in a religious frame.

Secondly, this work resists the idea—widespread in intellectual circles—that religious belief is inherently irrational. As Taylor notes, “the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more academic and intellectual life” (13). Religious conviction is easily dismissed through “gross error theories”: that believers are only “afraid of uncertainty, the unknown; they're weak in the head, (…), etc.” and merely find in faith a good coping mechanism (12). Yet the poems studied here complicate such assumptions. They do not treat faith as mere comfort, but as something to be wrestled with—questionned and risked. Indeed, we have seen that doubt can notably destroy inherited certainties or destabilize even the language through which belief is usually expressed—whether in prayer, or theological argument. In either case it breaks with automatic belief and invites deeper reflection. Throughout this thesis, we have seen voices that question doctrine, resist silence, plead for proofs, or dismantle false certainties through incredible metaphors, irony, or paradox. None of the authors examined sustain an unshakable or linear faith. What unites them is not certainty, but the courage to interrogate what they long to trust. This dynamic makes the theme of faith and doubt particularly meaningful within the humanities. These poems do not offer doctrine but raise philosophical question about truth, rationality and meaning. They show that reaching toward something greater, and questioning that reach, remains a vital part of human experience. In this, they ask to be read not with cynicism or blind reverence, but with humility and intellectual honesty.

Ultimately, the hope behind this work is also dialogical. It arises from the observation that two distinct yet deeply engaged spheres—academic literary studies and Christian communities—often share a sustained concern with the question of God. And yet, both spheres may also struggle to hold space for open questioning: if we saw that academic discourse can easily dismiss belief, religious environments as well may too quickly spiritualize or suppress

doubt in the name of faith. Both, in their own way, risk bypassing the humility these questions demand. Perhaps the strength of these poems lies precisely in their refusal to resolve the tension. Instead, they invite conversation—between believers and skeptics, between tradition and modernity, between faith and doubt. If this study contributes, however modestly, to fostering such conversations, then it will have fulfilled its most meaningful aim.

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Appendix: Poems by C. S. Lewis and Jeanne Murray Walker (Chapter III)

To facilitate reference, this appendix contains the poems by C. S. Lewis and Jeanne Murray Walker discussed in Chapter Three, which are not readily accessible.

C.S Lewis

The Apologist's Evening Prayer

From all my lame defeats and oh! much more
From all the victories that I seemed to score;
From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf
At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh;
From all my proofs of Thy divinity,
Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me.

Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead
of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head.
From all my thoughts, even from my thoughts of Thee,
O thou fair Silence, fall, and set me free.
Lord of the narrow gate and the needle's eye,
Take from me all my trumpery lest I die.

Source: Lewis, C. S. "The Apologist's Evening Prayer." *The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition*, edited by Don W. King, The Kent State University Press, 2015, pp. 328–329.

Yes, You Are Always Everywhere

Yes, you are always everywhere. But I,
Hunting in such immeasurable forests,
Could never bring the noble Hart to bay.

The scent was too perplexing for my hounds;
Nowhere sometimes, then again everywhere.
Other scents, too, seemed to them almost the same.

Therefore I turn my back on the unapproachable
Stars and horizons and all musical sounds,
Poetry itself, and the winding stair of thought.

Leaving the forests where you are pursued in vain
—Often a mere white gleam—I turn instead
To the appointed place where you pursue.

Not in Nature, not even in Man, but in one
Particular Man, with a date, so tall, weighing
So much, talking Aramaic, having learned a trade;

Not in all food, not in all bread and wine
(Not, I mean, as my littleness requires)
But this wine, this bread . . . no beauty we could desire.

Source: Lewis, C. S. "Yes, You Are Always Everywhere." *The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition*, edited by Don W. King, The Kent State University Press, 2015, p. 422.

These Faint Wavering Far-travell'd Gleams

These faint wavering far-travell'd gleams
Coming from your country, fill me with care. That scent,
That sweet stabbing, as at the song of thrush,
That leap of the heart—too like they seem
To another air; unlike as well
So that I am dazed with doubt. As a dungeoned man
Who has heard the hinge on the hook turning
Often. Always that opened door
Let new tormentors in. If now at last
It open again, but outward, offering free way,
(His kind one come, with comfort he)
Yet shrinks, in his straw, struggling backward,
From his dear, from his door, into the dark's corner,
Furthest from freedom. So fearing, I
Taste not but with trembling. I was tricked before.
All the heraldry of heaven, holy monsters,
With hazardous and dim half-likeness taunt
Long-haunted men. The like is not the same.
Always evil was an ape. I know.
Who passes to paradise, within that pure border
Finds there, refashioned, all that he fled from here.
And yet . . .
But what's the use? For yield I must,
Though long delayed, at last must dare
To give over, to be eased of my iron casing,
Molten at thy melody, as men of snow
In the solar smile. Slow-paced I come,
Yielding by inches. And yet, oh Lord, and yet,
Oh Lord, let not likeness fool me again.

Source: Lewis, C. S. "These Faint Wavering Far-travell'd Gleams." *The Collected Poems of C. S. Lewis: A Critical Edition*, edited by Don W. King, The Kent State University Press, 2015, p. 419.

The Naked Seed

My heart is empty. All the fountains that should run
With longing, are in me
Dried up. In all my countryside there is not one
That drips to find the sea.
I have no care for anything thy love can grant
Except the moment's vain
And hardly noticed filling of the moment's want
And to be free from pain.
Oh, thou that art unwearying, that dost neither sleep
Nor slumber, who didst take
All care for Lazarus in the careless tomb, oh keep
Watch for me till I wake.
If thou think for me what I cannot think, if thou
Desire for me what I
Cannot desire, my soul's interior Form, though now
Deep-buried, will not die,
– No more than the insensible dropp'd seed which grows
Through winter ripe for birth
Because, while it forgets, the heaven remembering throws
Sweet influence still on earth,
– Because the heaven, moved moth-like by thy beauty, goes
Still turning round the earth.

Source: Lewis, C. S. "The Naked Seed." *Poems*, edited by Walter Hooper, Geoffrey Bles, 1964, p. 117.

Legion

Lord, hear my voice, my present voice I mean,
Not that which may be speaking an hour hence
(For I am Legion) in an opposite sense,
And not by show of hands decide between
The multiple factions which my state has seen
Or will see. Condescend to the pretence
That what speaks now is I; in its defence
Dissolve my parliament and intervene.

Thou wilt not, though we asked it, quite recall
Free will once given. Yet to this moment's choice
Give unfair weight. Hold me to this. Oh strain
A point – use legal fictions; for if all
My quarrelling selves must bear an equal voice,
Farewell, thou hast created me in vain.

Source: Lewis, C. S. "Legion." *Poems*, edited by Walter Hooper, Geoffrey Bles, 1964, p. 119.

Jeanne Murray Walker

The Sign
Give me a sign, I pray, and then I see
For Sale (Price Reduced) and smile
at the Almighty's roguish sense of humor,

thinking how he must adore us skeptics,
stretching out his carpenter's hands
to let St. Thomas probe the nail holes,

stick his finger deep in the bleeding gash,
feel the spiky bones and fly through
that little space to faith. Two thousand years

bereft of Jesus' body, I need a sign,
although I wonder, could any sign nail down for good
how a God-man walked this curving earth?

And anyway, concerning signs, how childlike
my belief in narrative, as if the question's
always first, and then the answer leaps

in perfect sequence. Sequence, which is nothing
but time's lackey! So I give up narrative,
however lovely to look around—but I worry.

Where? Suppose the sign arrived last week,
for instance, that spider threading sunlight by our garage,
that writhing knot of fire? Or last spring

in Carol's row of jewel-like tulips. Suppose
it was that rag of human song blown by
as we wandered Bleeker Street with Charlie,

just back from war. Or the muffled cracking
as my body breaks beneath the press of time.
Not this, not that—I admit,

I'm down to rummaging the world
for nail holes. Maybe to list what's missing
is to begin to understand what's here.

Source: Walker, Jeanne Murray. "The Sign" *Christian Poetry in America Since 1940: An Anthology*, edited by Micah Mattix and Sally Thomas, Paraclete Press, 2022, p. 38

A BESTIARY FOR THE BIRTH OF CHRIST

for E. Daniel Larkin

1 THE FROG

Ferns steam and boil beneath the sun.
The cypress tree lets down its hair.
The summer lull waits to begin
till gold has fallen everywhere.

I sit beneath a leaf's dark toe
and listen to the apples swell.
They ripen to what God must know.
They gaze down on the lowly shell.

I do not know what apples mean
nor what perfume the orchid smells,

nor why the bear's eyes flame with sun,
how young lambs foam upon the hills.
But still the garden fills my ear.
The apple nestles in the air
humming its color, bright, gay, dear,
till silence loses poise and then

The light lies on us all like doom.
The gold cracks. Look. And through that gap
time pours its minutes. In a dream
I close my bottom eyelid up.

The swindle snake slips from his hole.
"Malice, Malice," it is done.

With that word, ferns turn into coal
and God becomes a man.

2 THE COW

The wind strolls and licks my bones
with its rough tongue as I lie dimming
in the moonlight on this desert.

All for me is desert now and I all bone:
a thigh whining like a piccolo
on eternal, sound-swallowing sand.

I am the sand's foundering ship.
It barks its glass shins on my skull.
I go down to drowning with my knowledge.

Five years ago, in the season when locusts
split their skins, I stood lowing in the stall.
They tell me he was the son of God.

Now time buzzes through my bridge.
There is no heaven for cattle.
My collarbone arches, hollow, hollow.

3 THE RAVEN
I am the most highly developed of birds, order Passeras,
family *Corvidae*,
a bird with a wingspan exceeding a yard
and a well-tailored sense of irony.

I flew over the waters for Noah
and helped Flokki locate Iceland,
but since Poe, I have argued "Nevermore."

From my modern height I have surveyed the frog and the cow.
The frog, natural enemy of the snake, has in his own way
related the myth that says malice snapped the branch
of eternity which crashed and over end,
scattering us off our perch into lurid time.

The cow longs for salvation, believing that such exists.
Not having been present in the stable myself,
how can I authorize the reliability of a witness who was?

I, who can fly, know eternity
when my wings slice it.
Time is the meat in the stubble
between hedgerow and wire fence.

If the most capable of all birds
cannot pick God out of the air,
we must learn to be satisfied with meat.

Only occasionally the wise, frail eyes of the
fieldmouse disturb me and
sometimes I grow
dizzy.

Source: Walker, Jeanne Murray. "A Bestiary for the Birth of Christ" *Shadow and Light: Literature and the Life of Faith,* 2nd ed., ed. Darryl Tippens, Jeanne Murray Walker, and Stephen Weathers, Abilene Christian University Press, 2005, pp. 490–492

THE CREATION

was going well. A perfect, rosy sow,
a finch, an elephant. Then a giraffe
at the last minute, springing up like Wow,
an exclamation point on legs. A gaffe,
or maybe not. Her fringy eyelashes.
Her voice, a bleat soft as a low laugh,
a yard-long tongue that blackly licks leaf caches
from the sky. She nuzzles her newborn calf,
still wet, eyes shut, legs splayed and sliding,
the two of them improbable riffraff
of the imagination, hang gliding
off the cliff of reason.

Oh giraffes,
wear your head lamps, gather around, remind me,
when all seems dark and sane, of mystery.

Source: Walker, Jeanne Murray. "The Creation." *Christian Poetry in America Since 1940: An Anthology*, edited by Micah Mattix and Sally Thomas, Paraclete Press, 2022, p. 39

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD

It was your hunch, this world. On the heyday
of creation, you called, Okay, go! and a ball
of white-hot gasses spun its lonely way
for a million years, all spill and dangerous fall
until it settled into orbit. And a tough
neighborhood, it was, too. Irate Mars,
and sexually explicit Venus, the kerfuff
of a moody moon, and self-important stars.

And trees. Think of their endless rummaging
for light, their reckless greening, how flowering
is barely regulated damage. Then birds,
mice, sheep. Soon people, bursting into language.
Creation thinking about itself: our words soaring
like yours through time, dangerous, ordinary words.

Source: Walker, Jeanne Murray. "In The Beginning Was The Word" *Christian Poetry in America Since 1940: An Anthology*, edited by Micah Mattix and Sally Thomas, Paraclete Press, 2022, p. 39

LITTLE BLESSING FOR MY FLOATER
After George Herbert

This tiny ruin in my eye, small
flaw in the fabric, little speck
of blood in the egg, deep chip
in the windshield, north star,
polestar, floater that doesn't
float, spot where my hand is not,
even when I'm looking at my hand,
little piton that nails every rock
I see, no matter if the picture
turns to sand, or sand to sea,
I embrace you, piece of absence
that reminds me what I will be,
all dark some day unless God
rescues me, oh speck
that might teach me yet to see.

Source: Walker, Jeanne Murray. "Little Blessing for my Floater" *Christian Poetry in America Since 1940: An Anthology*, edited by Micah Mattix and Sally Thomas, Paraclete Press, 2022, p. 36

KEEPING THE PLANE UP

Sometimes we fill the holes with putty and paint over them.
Airline mechanic, in TIME

This time no one can save me,
it's real, the roar, the flames,
and then the sheltering walls of the plane
fly apart like kindling,
the durable seat drops down,
my bag leaps open, turning over,
my calendar flapping like a sparrow,
wires of the headset a black scribble
in the air above me. I plummet,
jackknifed, my bottom down, heavy as gold,
toward the tiny trees, toward
the stippled calm brown hills,
suddenly feeling as fond of
this heavy body as of a dying relative
but I am somersaulting towards
the winter landscape — trees/sky/
trees/sky over and over
and I try to steady myself
in the eye of God,
a simple act, almost monotonous,
a sound I can not quite remember,
like the quiver of an engine keeping
a plane up, a sound that catches,
stalls, then vibrates in my throat
and pelvis. Could this be
what it feels like, being saved?
I can see the plane's wings level
over the thorny trees,
but I spread my hands above me
like parachutes, just in case.

Source: Walker, Jeanne Murray. "Keeping the Plane Up." *Poetry*, vol. 162, no. 2, May 1993, p. 70.

Staying Power
In appreciation of Maxim Gorky at the International Convention of Atheists, 1929

Like Gorky, I sometimes follow my doubts
outside to the yard and question the sky,
longing to have the fight settled, thinking
I can't go on like this, and finally I say

all right, it is improbable, all right, there
is no God. And then as if I'm focusing
a magnifying glass on dry leaves, God blazes up.
It's the attention, maybe, to what isn't there

that makes the emptiness flare like a forest fire
until I have to spend the afternoon dragging
the hose to put the smoldering thing out.
Even on an ordinary day when a friend calls,

tells me they've found melanoma,
complains that the hospital is cold, I say God.
God, I say as my heart turns inside out.
Pick up any language by the scruff of its neck,

wipe its face, set it down on the lawn,
and I bet it will toddle right into the godfire
again, which—though they say it doesn't
exist—can send you straight to the burn unit.

Oh, we have only so many words to think with.
Say God's not fire, say anything, say God's
a phone, maybe. You know you didn't order a phone,
but there it is. It rings. You don't know who it could be.

You don't want to talk, so you pull out
the plug. It rings. You smash it with a hammer
till it bleeds springs and coils and clobbery
metal bits. It rings again. You pick it up

and a voice you love whispers hello.

Source: Walker, Jeanne Murray. "Staying Power" *Christian Poetry in America Since 1940: An Anthology*, edited by Micah Mattix and Sally Thomas, Paraclete Press, 2022, p. 37

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