

Sexual Restitution of the Withdrawn God: Religion as a Route to Sensualism in Victorian Culture

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Abstract

Though austere moralism based on Evangelical teachings characterized the bourgeois culture of nineteenth-century England, many Christians of the age actually suffered a disrupted relationship with God. With the fear of “God’s death,” it was believed that the moral universe which He guaranteed was falling apart. Thus the Christians embarked on a restitution of the disappeared God back into where He was supposed to be. However, the Victorians did not realize that the God who ensured such a symbolic construct as the Christian moral discourse should be “dead.” In other words, the Christian moral code works effectively only because God serves as its unreachable point of reference, with only a symbolic, even linguistic, existence. The desperate attempt of some Victorians to invoke God’s living presence only disturbed the placid, symbolic operation of the Christian moral doctrines with intense emotive charge. Psychoanalytically speaking, the psychological excitation or tension usually bursts out in violent sexual acts and, in the present case, takes the religious form. The present essay will start with a Lacanian reinterpretation of the Freudian myth, “the murder of the father in the primal horde,” to explain how the Christian God sublimates Himself from a so-called Imaginary presence to a Symbolic pact. Then it will be argued that the Victorian attempt at His reinstatement only brought Him back to an aggressively sexual relationship with the followers. At last, the essay will describe how this potential for eroticisation in Victorian religious experiences was explored and exploited in both religious and non-religious (especially pornographic) discourses.

Keywords: Christianity, psychoanalysis, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, Victorian pornography

It is almost a commonplace for students of nineteenth-century English culture to claim that Evangelical revivals at the turn of the century contributed to its characteristically austere moralism and that a general acceptance of the rigid Christian doctrines obstructed publicly sanctified approaches to sexuality. When it comes to the role that Christianity played in the making of Victorian sexual attitudes, Eric Trudgill in 1976 could confidently assert that “it was Evangelicalism that did most to establish the anti-pleasure principle”; besides, he believed that denominational differences do not matter in this case because “the whole spectrum of Victorian religion, from the austere Puritanism of Methodism and the Nonconformist sects, through the Established Church, to the moral earnestness of the Oxford Movement, showed a similar asceticism” (13). Revisionist historians would not take such sweeping assertions as Trudgill makes about the nineteenth-century British culture without reexamination. Michael Mason, for example, points out that in the Victorian age “the full human reality of Evangelicalism’s influence is hard to assess”; he even admits that “for a phenomenon referred to so glibly in the history books, it is very poorly understood” (64). The relationship between Christianity and moral austerity of the age, consequently, does not seem so self-evident as usually assumed, either. In his survey of the doctrinal stances of major Christian denominations in the age, Mason suggests that “it does not seem likely that Anglican Evangelicalism gave much of a boost to anti-sensualism (they may even have exerted an opposite influence)” (3). Although the revisionist historians do not really mean to deny the *general* anti-sensual tendency of Christian teachings, Victorian patterns of interaction between religion and sexual morality are actually more complicated than they were assumed to be. Mason’s suggestion of a theologically based pro-sensualism, for example, can be ascertained with some singular attitudes to sexuality which certain Victorian religious figures and sects demonstrated. Their sexual ideas and practices may not have made into the mainstream of Victorian sexual morality (some of them, indeed, manifested themselves in such “lowly” forms as cult rituals and pornographic discourse), but a consideration of these phenomena, from a psychoanalytic perspective, can afford an illuminating glimpse into an obscured phase of the Victorian frame of mind. More than religious hypocrisy or cleric fraud, some religious doctrines and rituals that afforded sensual imagination and enjoyment may have arisen as a desperate response to an excruciating aspect of Victorian religious experience.

Death of God and Rise of Demon: from the Symbolic to the Imaginary

Maybe no single generation of Christians has suffered so much distress for its religious belief than the Victorian bourgeoisie did. Scientific materialism, while

greatly improving the material conditions of the nineteenth-century England, was also shaking from the bottom a major ideological framework in the age: a framework that was founded on the conception of one Almighty God who would favor human beings (especially Christians) over the other creatures and ensure the spiritual significance of the universe. Seemingly undeniable “scientific evidence” against this conception impinged on the Victorian bourgeois consciousness so hard and fast that many in the class fell under a collective psychic trauma. For intellectuals like Charlotte Brontë, an exposition of human being’s evolution from apes (as in Darwin’s *Origin of Species*) or a thesis of the “Physical Basis of Life” on raw matter (the subject of Huxley’s famous essay) could only spell an “unequivocal declaration of disbelief in the existence of a God or a future life” (qtd. in Houghton 68). Although the Victorian intellectuals, also like Brontë, “wished entirely to put aside the sort of instinctive horrors” caused by these theories, their minds were hardly rid of this appalling idea of the death of God. J. A. Symonds may complain from his personal experience that he has “no living God in constant relation to” himself, but W. K. Clifford would profess the prevalence of the spiritual crisis more forcibly: “We have felt with utter loneliness that the Great Companion is dead” (qtd. in Houghton 85). Maybe the most tortured voice of religious doubt in the age comes from Lord Alfred Tennyson. In the famous Sections 55 and 56 of *In Memoriam*, alluding to the pressure the scientific discoveries were bearing on Christian doctrines, the poet asks, “Are God and Nature then at strife,/ That Nature lends such evil dreams?” (55. 4-5). Then he pictures himself groveling “Upon the great world’s altar-stairs/ That slope through darkness up to God” (55. 14-15). When he extends his “lame hands of faith” and calls upon “what [he] feel[s] is Lord of all,” he wonders “what hope of answer, or redress” could come from Him, and the Lord only remains quietly “behind the veil, behind the veil” (55. 17, 19; 56. 26, 27).

In addition to the psychological devastation that scientific materialism wrought on the foundation of Christian faith, a passionate reconception of a tighter connection between God and His believers could also backfire. Reacting against the lethargic state into which the Anglican Church had fallen into, energetic leaders of new Christian denominations—such as William Wilberforce for Evangelicals and John Wesley for Methodists—tried to revive religious fervors across England since the middle of the eighteenth century. Dismissing the facility with which followers of the Anglican Church assumed their Christian faith through mere professed beliefs in its doctrines, the Evangelicals emphasized a true Christian’s thorough re-examination of every aspect of his/her life—from inside out and down to daily minutiae—according to moral precepts supposedly laid down in the Bible (Hunt & Hall, 52). When Evangelical writers like Hannah More began to popularize the models of good Christian men and

women among the reading public of the early nineteenth century, the God-oriented ideological framework through which people recognized and examined the “self” was cultivated and spread—even among non-Evangelicals. However, this sort of cognitive framework involved not only intensive soul searching but also constant invocation of the Holy Spirit in the Christian’s judgment of his/her daily experiences and inner thoughts. The social and political turmoil that shook the English establishment (repercussions of the French Revolution) must have infested many intellectuals with anxiety and confusion, as exemplified by the spiritual crises which Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman, and John Stuart Mill went through. When the ideological framework could not sustain all the outside impacts on the psyche, its disintegration could hardly suggest anything else than the ineffectuality or even absence of its supposed guarantor.

Indeed, as God was considered a unifying center that guaranteed the efficacy of the ideological framework for many Victorian bourgeois, His perceived “death” or disappearance could divest the universe of its moral or spiritual meaning; these people thus were suffering a traumatic disintegration of “sense of reality.” Frederick Robertson describes this state of mind quite directly when he refers to his age as “an awful hour . . . when the grave appears to be the end of all, human goodness nothing but a name, and the sky above this universe a dead expanse, black with the void from which God himself has disappeared” (qtd. in Houghton 73). Charles Kingsley portrays his loss of grasp on the world in more graphic terms: he feels like standing “on a cliff which is crumbling beneath one, and falling piecemeal into the dark sea” (qtd. in Houghton 66). Symonds is also expressing a general sentiment with his vision of “the whole fabric of humanity, within and without, rocking and surging in earthquake throes” (qtd. in Houghton 66). In short, when the fast-changing outer environment brought along much more psychic tension on the Victorian bourgeoisie’s cognitive framework than it could assimilate, the class was afflicted with a collective attack of anxiety, feeling disoriented and confused about its subjective position in relation to the object world.

However, from a psychoanalytic point of view, the greatest irony with the Victorian bourgeoisie’s unsettling fear of God’s death lies in a crucial but obscured truth about Christianity: God *has always been* dead, and it is God’s “death,” so to speak, that ensures the proper functioning of “the whole fabric of humanity.” Aiming to explain the psychical origin and basis of religion in the society (especially monotheism like Christianity), Sigmund Freud extends his own theory of Oedipus complex and proposes an anthropological myth of “the murder of the father” in *Totem and Taboo*. According to the myth¹, back in the primordial times, within a “primal horde” of human animals the “violent and jealous father who [kept] all the females for him-

self was killed with the united effort of his rebellious sons in order to claim their own share of sexual enjoyment” (*SE XIII*: 141). Ironically, out of a deep sense of guilt over the death of the primal father (whose supreme power they had not only craved but admired), the sons “revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute of the father.” Besides, they also “renounced the fruits [of the murder] by resigning their claim to the women [of the same clan].” With the establishment of the primal “incest taboo,” it is clear that “the dead father became stronger than the living one had been” (*SE XIII*: 143). Not only was he remembered to be the One who had never suffered symbolic castration and could really indulge in unbounded sexual enjoyment, the symbol or the name of this father as Prohibition was taken to be the Law itself. Only from this Law were other regulations derived which initiated and controlled all transaction of affairs within and outside the human community. The French psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan comments on this “primitive crime of the primordial law” thus: “[T]his murder is the fruitful moment of debt through which the subject binds himself for life to the Law[;] the symbolic Father is the dead Father insofar as he signifies this Law” (1977: 199). When Freud goes on to claim that “the god of each is formed in the likeness of his father” (*SE XIII*: 147), the myth of the murder of the primordial father then points to what Lacan calls an “atheistic message in Christianity” (1992: 178). For the true establishment of its monotheistic message, a son who aspired to the dead father’s glory needed to re-enact his own murder as a gesture of self-sacrifice to atone for the primal guilt and became Son-God himself, as in the case of Christ (See *SE XIII*: 152-54). The dual positioning of the Son-God (as both human and divine at the same time) seems to ensure a living and meaningful connection between earthly efforts and heavenly responses.

From a structuralist conception of human civilization (which is speculated as organizing itself with a language-like structure), Lacan gives a definite linguistic turn to his reinterpretation of the Freudian murder-of-the-father myth. The substitution of a symbolic totem for the dead father implies that the father becomes no less a symbol, a signifying element in a semiotic relation, a Name. Besides, the totem as an inviolable symbol and the incest taboo as a general agreement affirm the paternal symbol as the Law itself. In the psychic scenario of Oedipal conflict, the prohibitive Name of the Father (*Nom/Non-du-Père*, as Lacan plays on the French homonyms of “name” and “no”)—as “a pure signifier” with “a sort of mathematical property”—imposes itself on the incestuous, mother-child bonding by both designating the relationship and negating its enjoyment (Regnault 67). While purging the psyche of swamping sexual excitation and channeling it into a pattern, the function of the symbolic father is also “the introduction of an order, of a mathematical order,” which evolves into a cognitive framework the subject relies on in his/her interaction with the world. The

order in question, which consists in a network of signifiers that are ultimately related to the Name for their signifying efficacy, is therefore *symbolic* in nature, despite its determinative importance in the world of “human reality.” Christianity as an ideological framework of cognition no doubt reveals this symbolic nature of its Supreme Guarantor and of His relationship with the followers. With the commandment, “Thou shalt not make a carved image of me,” the Judeo-Christian God sublimated Himself from what Lacan calls the *Imaginary* order of vocal/visual existence (as pertaining primarily to “image” or sensory impression).² This principle of symbolization would be generalized into a related injunction, “Thou shalt not make any image at all”—the very “law of speech” according to Lacan, which underlies all transaction of human affairs (1992: 175). In view of this symbolizing move, the Jewish temple of course held no carved idol of God but was only “the cover of what was at its center, of the Ark of union, that is the pure symbol of the pact” (analogous to the pact between the primal clan with its murdered father in the Freudian myth). So, the very “essence” of God lies in what “the Scriptures no doubt call the Word,” through which “Truth [finds] its way” (Lacan 1992: 175, 181). In brief, only when the angry, jealous Jehovah in the Old Testament withdrew from His Imaginary interactions with the followers (featuring violent, oppressive manipulation) would God’s Word of All Benevolence and Bliss be spread among them and dictate their lives. Here lies the greatest paradox of Christianity, with God playing the empty, absentee guarantor of His ethical universe.

Thus the idea of God’s “death” had been properly repressed in the unconscious of many generations of Christians and His existence often invoked only symbolically until the nineteenth century,³ when the Christian framework of cognition, no longer capable of sustaining the tremendous impacts from the raw, non-human, real world, began to shatter. As the spiritual significance of their world evaporated with the breakdown of the cognitive framework, many Victorians suffered such existential horrors as befell Symonds, Kingsley, and Tennyson. No wonder they attempted desperately to re-establish the living, assuring relationship they thought they had enjoyed with the “Great Companion.” Ironically, the attempt may have only brought to the Victorian bourgeois consciousness what they had feared all along—His disappearance from the universe. If the devout members of the class could not bear the thought of their world revolving around a “void,” they would surely embark on a re-invocation of the Lord back to where He should have been enthroned. At this critical moment, when the ethical condition of the whole world seemed to be at stake,⁴ the intended reinstatement should not be as languid or insipid a matter as re-inscription of the Symbolic pact (which seemed to be inadequate in overcoming the turmoil the Christians were facing), but, rather, a forcible Imaginary restitution of God

and Heaven (or of their earthly equivalents). Instead of being symbolically sublimated, the vocal/visual presence of the Supreme Being (and its substitutes) was asserted or realized by *all and any* means. With this Imaginary restitution of Divinity, an intensification of religious discourses and practices was under way, and religious (or quasi-religious) sentiments were invested in as many secular institutions as possible. For example, the Scriptures were literally rendered and constantly quoted as an authority in even non-religious contexts; physical enjoyment derived from such a legitimate source as matrimonial sex was regarded as prefiguring the ultimate bliss in afterlife; small but closely united sects emerged in each of which the leader announced the imminent termination of the present world and posed himself as the Messiah (or his herald). Among the intensely devout of Victorian bourgeoisie, Christian doctrines would offer redemptive values only when they could be materially or physically *realized*—in both senses of the word.

The difference between the Symbolic inscription of the doctrinal pact and the Imaginary restitution of the divine being lies, however, not just in vocal/visual presence. Psychoanalytically speaking, the function of the symbolic father and his pact is to sunder the incestuous, mother/son union and eliminate the surging sexual tensions therein; the pact as a third term dissolves the intense rivalry and aggressiveness that have saturated the so-called “mirror relation” between the original two terms (see Lacan 1993: 39). Back in the primal horde of the Freudian myth, when the primordial father was not yet sublimated into a symbol, the sons aggressively emulated for the father’s monopolizing position while he entered a rivalrous relationship with them for his jealously guarded enjoyment; sexual excitation of a violent sort thus permeated the interaction within the horde. The Imaginary restitution of the Christian doctrines in the Victorian age, therefore, risked a degeneration of the field of religious experiences back to the pre-Symbolic plane, with all the formerly repressed sensations surging back. Without a space opened up by the pact, the “third term,” for symbolic operation, the ideological framework of cognition which some Victorian Christians reconstructed stagnated into what Lacan calls “a nonsensical field of eroticized meanings” (1993: 141). This potential for eroticization that underlay the Victorian religious frame of mind was explored and exploited in various ways—for either reverent or sacrilegious purposes.

However, before the present discussion goes on to these “various ways” of religious eroticization, some qualifying statements should be made here: although one of the ways (a divine sanctification of married sexuality) prevailed to a certain extent among a significant portion of the Victorian bourgeoisie, some other practices were either highly ephemeral or simply specific to certain coteries. In addition, it is out of the question that these “various ways” can exhaust all possible approaches in the age

to the problematic zone where the Christian doctrines intersected with sexuality. As a leading scholar in the field, John Maynard, alerts us in the Introduction to his work *Victorian Discourses on Sexuality and Religion*, we are dealing with a “cosmopolitan discourse”: “one which is made out of a great diversity of contemporary positions—a discourse composed of varied discourses” (34). A cursory comparison between his extensive study and my humble project should offer a clear hint at such “diversity.”⁵ The making of Victorian sexual attitudes, as Mason’s studies reveal, actually draws on more ideological sources than Evangelicalism. Rationalist or socialist discourses, carrying on the Enlightenment projects launched by such eminent figures as Jean Jacques Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, and George Owen, developed a wide spectrum of sexual ethical stances ranging from strict asceticism to utopian free love while remaining either tacitly agnostic or outright atheistic.⁶ Even among the majority of the Victorian bourgeoisie, the acceptance of the Evangelical teachings for sexual austerity was not straightforward or religiously motivated. As Mason points out, “the Evangelical creed was largely stripped of its specifically religious components as it moved into the ascendant position in people’s moral code” (64); their compliance with the code, therefore, arose mostly out of the pressure of Mrs. Grundy and thus probably involved not so much excruciating soul searching or belligerent moral smugness as the “true” Evangelicals. Indeed, many “worldly-wise” bourgeois men evolved a cluster of inconsistent maxims for acceptable sexual behavior, which Mason lumps together under the term “classic moralism” and notes its “conflict with revivalist religion on some of the latter’s sexual beliefs” (49). For one thing, the classical moralists tacitly upheld the notorious “double standard” in sexual ethics (taking men as sexually aggressive while women as naturally frigid) and supported the passing of Contagious Disease Acts in 1860s, which Evangelical charities ferociously opposed (Trudgill 112). The hostility some Victorian bourgeois men harbored against the moralistic Evangelicals could be borne out by the pornographic rendering of the Bible (to be discussed right away)—a vicious travesty of the Evangelical favorite activity. Anyway, I believe, either this sacrilegious or other more reverent approaches to sexuality through the Christian discourses could happen mostly because the God-oriented cognitive framework in question was strained to the point of breakdown.

Pornographic Rendering of the Scriptures

One fundamental aspect of the Victorian religious experience where signs of eroticisation cropped up is the reading, interpreting, and quoting of the Bible. The Scriptures, indeed, were a primary target of the attack that rational materialism launched against Christian doctrines. The introduction of the so-called German High

Criticism and recent scientific discoveries in evolutionary biology and geology seriously challenged the literal veracity of the “Text of Truth”; many Victorians began to take it as a mere “human composition” rather than the word of God (see Houghton 100). However, the discrediting of the Bible did not force it out of the field of Victorian discourse at all. On the contrary, Mason reports that “the biblical texts were commandeered on behalf of many different points of view in nineteenth-century England” (16). This ironic popularity of the Bible is symptomatic of the paradox that characterized the Victorian bourgeoisie’s religious experiences. The class may have strictly observed the rituals and followed the harsh moral code “while they believed only partly or not at all in the key theological doctrines of Evangelicalism” (Mason 64). Kingsley offered an analysis of the psychology behind this discrepancy in contemporary reception of religion: for him, people were “losing most fearfully and rapidly the living spirit of Christianity, and . . . for that very reason, clinging all the more convulsively . . . to the outward letter of it” (qtd. in Houghton 97). The discursive bits of the Bible—or what Thomas Carlyle would call the rags of the “old Hebrew clothes” in his famous philosophy of “re-sewn clothes”—were just grabbed more tightly when people needed to appeal to certain authority. But fragmentation of the Biblical discourse (as the missed Christian “spirit” or “Word” made it impossible to organize the discourse into a meaningful field of symbolic signification) confined the practice of reading and quoting the Scriptures mostly to the Imaginary level. The strictly literal (or nonsensical) meaning of a Biblical passage was stressed at the cost of its symbolic association with the whole discursive field;⁷ violent or obscene acts and feelings in a certain Biblical passage were not suppressed or explained (away, as traditional typological interpretation of such passages used to do), but highlighted for the strong images it could evoke. Thus, despite the popular Victorian practice of invoking the sacred writings, they were freely adopted “without much concern for context or likelihood of interpretation” (Mason 16). What is worse, obscene enjoyment seemed to exude from the holy façade of the Bible and began to smear it.

It is true that the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament part, already contain a lot of sexually explicit descriptions, but the inclination to their literal, obscene interpretation seemed to have been effectively checked until the nineteenth century; even religiously minded censors of the age were seriously considering the possibility of bowdlerizing the passages (see Kendrick 49). The censors’ concern was not a totally unfounded one, a ludicrous over-reaction caused by their own excessive prudishness, as we may think. In a famous pornographic autobiography of the Victorian age, *My Secret Life*, the pseudonymous author Walter reports how he and his male pals, being still boys, “began to look through the Bible and study all the carnal passages; no book ever gave [them] perhaps such prolonged, studious, bawdy [*sic*] amusement; [they]

could not understand much, but guessed a great deal” (43). If these boys’ devotion to Biblical reading would not please the pious elders, they would be even more horrified at the great number of “Biblical exegeses” published in contemporary pornography. In an epistolary story, “Lady Pokingham,” serialized in one pornographic magazine, *The Pearl*, the editor admires the heroine’s sexual adventures in his “Introduction,” which concludes thus: “for God made man in his own image, male and female, created he them; and this was his first commandment, ‘Be faithful and multiply, and replenish the earth’—see Genesis, chap. 1” (14). Although the heroine indeed bears no child in the story, the editor in his quasi-Biblical tone still draws on the doctrinal approval of reproductive act in order to sanction sexual enjoyment, which is only contingent to the act and not noted at all in the Biblical passage in question. Apparently revolting against the moralistic environment which the Christian moral code fostered against indecorous expressions of sexuality, Victorian pornographers reveled in any sort of affinity between the Christian missionary work and their stock in trade. In a story serialized in another porn magazine, *The Boudoir*, there is a scene wherein the heroine, enjoying her life as a demimondaine, receives during her walk in Hyde park a moral tract distributed by an old gentleman to the “fallen women” (a common practice of Evangelical charities aiming at rescue of prostitutes in Victorian London). Taking offense against the diatribes she reads therein against sexual impurities, she challenges the old man: “There’s no filth in the Bible you pretend to love so, is there? . . . But how about Lot, Abraham, David and Bathsheba, Rachel, or Tamar, who played the harlot with Judah, Solomon and all his wives . . . ?” (242) Beside the usual literal approach to sexual passages in the Bible, this challenge may also betray resentment or even jealousy over the “unfair treatment” of both kinds of writings: dealings in pornography constantly suffered police raids instigated by such Evangelical organizations as the Society for the Suppression of Vice while the “Biblical filth” enjoyed wide, undisturbed circulation. As if intending to prove the discursive affinity between pornography and the Bible, *The Boudoir* does publish some studies on the “Biblical filth”—in the very format of sermon. One of them, a “Curious Discourse on the Meaning, Duty, and Happiness of Kissing,” opens with the Biblical quote to be discussed: “‘Jacob kissed Rachel’—Gen. c. 29, v. 11.” Then the “Discourse” goes on:

To prove that he did not incur the least guilt by this delightful act, we have the combined testimonies of the scriptures; and the unanimous opinions of the most learned interpreters of the passage which we have selected for the subject of the following discourse. (35)

While the mocking imitation of elevated tone and ornate style (which are typical of a sermon) trivializes the moral earnestness of Christian teachings, the passage, on the other hand, also implies that the topic of sexual enjoyment deserves no less weighty argumentation than that of spiritual development. Another piece of similar nature, “Antiquity of Harlots,” has a definitely sacrilegious intention to expose the obscene underside of some Biblical accounts when they are no longer figuratively understood. The so-called “essay” refers to the encounter between Judah and Tamar in Genesis, Chapter 38:

[T]he patriarch Judah . . . , who was to be the father of so many generations of the faithful, seeing a comely damsel by the way-side, and the spirit moving within his fleshly tabernacle, prayed that he might come into her. (69)

Coincidentally, this pornographic rendering of the Biblical story seems analogous to the psychoanalytic myth of the primal horde. Before the primordial father was sublimated into the pact enshrined in the Jewish temple, the Imaginary presence of his sexual body can be compared to a “fleshly tabernacle,” with the not yet eliminated “spirit” of sexual tensions brimming inside. Judah’s quasi-incestuous connection with his would-be daughter-in-law also reminds us of the unbounded sexual enjoyment the primordial father denied his sons. The *Boudoir* passage does discover in the Holy Texts those carnal Imaginary elements of Christianity which it had yet to transcend.

The degradation of the Christian doctrines from their Symbolic interpretation down to Imaginary literalness affected more than contemporary “exegesis” of the Bible. The conception of a blissful afterlife as the reward for a righteous and benevolent Christian was distorted when the Guarantor of the Heavenly promise disappeared from His own ethical scheme.⁸ This promise should serve as an ultimate reference point of the scheme, which renders all elements involved within ethically meaningful; it is no less a symbolic pact, a pure signifier. In plain terms, the promise of heavenly reward serves as an incentive for the Christian to practice the ethical principle—to sacrifice certain earthly pleasures so that they can be abundantly returned in an indefinite future time. In other words, the fulfillment of the promise should be infinitely delayed as long as the Christian subject still remains within the ethical scheme. This fundamentally precarious condition of the promised reward was much more acutely felt under the anxiety over the “death” of God in the Victorian age. Therefore, many Christians yearned desperately for concrete, sensory (i.e., Imaginary) signs or substitutes on this side of the grave that supposedly prefigure the ultimate enjoyment beyond. Psychoanalytically speaking, the primordial kind of pleasures to be

sacrificed when a subject enters the ethical scheme of his/her world is the incestuous enjoyment of close mother/child connection, which consists of intense psychic tensions that are sexual in nature. An Imaginary conception of the heavenly bliss as a repayment for all the formerly waived pleasures would reasonably (though a bit unexpectedly) take on strong sensual or erotic flavor. Although this sexual conception of afterlife underlies many aspects of nineteenth-century British culture that involve Christian doctrines (as later discussions will prove), contemporary pornography flaunts this eroticisation of Heaven in very glaring, obscene manners, especially in a traditional sub-genre of Western erotica—anti-clerical sexual slander.⁹ In one episode of “Lady Pokingham,” a young girl is to take a veil and join one “secret sisterhood of St. Bridget”; during the initiation ceremony, her vow—“You must surrender your virginity to the Church”—is no longer understood symbolically as a life-long commitment to monastic celibacy, but is distorted Imaginarily as her immediate submission to the presiding Father’s vaginal penetration. This obscene transformation of the religious ceremony derives from the “doctrine” of the sisterhood, which “will permit [the initiate] to enjoy every possible sensual pleasure here on earth, and insure [her] heavenly reward as well” (*The Pearl* 142, 131). This double promise is possible not only because of an Imaginary equation of the two sorts of pleasures but also due to an overall short-circuiting between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In a famous case of Victorian anti-clerical erotica, *The Autobiography of a Flea*, while the Abbot is seducing the still virginal Bella into his sexual service, he also suggests an earthly fulfillment of the heavenly promise: “You feel the bliss of heaven in advance while obeying our slightest wish.” Later, Bella tries to persuade another girl to accept the priest’s sexual advances by assuring her “how [she] will awake to the delicious joys of immortals” (56, 145). As the difference between sinful pleasure and divine enjoyment collapses in such a pornographic “Heaven on Earth,” it is of course “no sin” for a novice “to put [her] body to the holy service of giving relief to [a] worthy priest” (*Lascivious Scenes in the Convent* 67). When it is religiously sanctified, sexual enjoyment, no matter how ethically problematic it is, deserves no punishment whatsoever.

A Foretaste of the Pleasures in Afterlife

Imaginary invocation of symbolic Christian doctrines in a (quasi-)religious discourse does not always belong to the seedy realm of pornography. This sensuous approach to Divinity is also crucial in support of a very important institution in nineteenth-century England, i.e., marriage. Wife and home, concomitant with marriage, were at the center of Victorian “domestic ideology,” which was invested with

quasi-religious sentiments and served as a substitute for the increasingly discredited Christian doctrines when many male bourgeois looked for spiritual support. As Trudgill points out after his brief analysis of Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, the image of pure woman, in particular, became "an alternative to, or confirmation of, God's perfect love for man," and "married love could deliver man from religious doubt, moral corruption and emotional sterility" (76, 77). However, the Victorian domestic ideology was not as thoroughly purged of sexuality as Trudgill often claims when it served its religious function. Though Jeffery Weeks acknowledges the Evangelical revival as one contributing element of the ideology, he nonetheless asserts that "sexual love . . . was integrated into the bourgeois familial ideology of the nineteenth century" (26). For the ideology to fulfill its (quasi-)religious function, matrimonial sex must have been securely inscribed in the new discursive complex of familial and Christian ideals. At first thought, this situation should not have posed a problem, for Christian sexual morality in Protestant England generally veered in a "pro-sensual direction," with "an almost universal distaste for chastity as a deliberate and dedicated condition" (Mason 17). Indeed, married love as a relationship sanctified in Christianity no doubt could play a substitutive role for the missed Divinity and Heaven *as long as* the love was taken more as a symbolic pact. However, when the generally ascetic framework of Christian thinking was pressed to include and legitimize enjoyment of matrimonial sexuality, Imaginary distortions of symbolic religious messages could bring about ludicrous, even sacrilegious, images of "heavenly obscenity."

One most documented case of Victorian marriage practiced as a Christian rite is surely that of Charles Kingsley and Fanny Grenfell, whose married life demonstrated the blending of sexuality and divinity to a marvelous extent. After he survived acute fits of religious doubts, Kingsley's relationship with Grenfell helped him develop an "erotic religion" (Peter Gay's term, 1986: 299) and restore his faith in Divinity—a sensually invested version, of course. The "muscular" or (better) "glandular" Christianity he taught and practiced is actually a "sermon on marriage, and most carnal marriage, in which sexual union is the companion of spiritual sympathy and the emblem of heavenly love" (Gay 1986: 299). As his doctrine of "happy materialism" allowed him to evoke the indefinite idea of Heaven in physical terms, he assured to his beloved in a letter, "[W]e touch Heaven when we lay our hand on a human body! . . ." (qtd. in Gay 1986: 300; original ellipses). Gay speculates that a deleted passage following the statement (which the ellipses imply) probably specifies whose body he wanted to touch and was thus removed by his decorous wife, who edited their correspondence. In one unpublished letter between the couple, Kingsley was quite blunt about his equation between sexual plays and religious rites: "Our toying [with

each other's body] becomes holy, our 'animal' enjoyments religious ceremonies" (qtd. in Maynard 95). Such a bold equation of course required sanction from God's Word. Therefore, Kingsley, as Gay reports, "interpreted the passages, 'male and female created he them,' and 'be fruitful and multiply,' as biblical sanctions for his affirmation of sexuality" (1986: 301). His earnest reading ironically coincides with the burlesqued exegesis of the same passages furnished by the contemporary pornographer mentioned above. However singular Kingsley's erotic Christianity was, he surely could not practice it alone, and Grenfell evolved her own "pious celebration of sensuality" while she was forced to separate from her beloved for one year. In an unpublished disquisition entitled "The Discourse of GOD's Mind on the subject The Marriage Union," which she composed during the period, she practiced exactly an Imaginary invocation of the paradisaical bliss in sexual terms. Calling to her Charles, she exclaims, "[W]hy should I fear to leap into your arms to realize one of Eden's blessings or taste an Enjoyment wh[ich] must be pure if it was *tasted there!*" She also fantasized their marriage on a Saturday so that "like Adam & Eve the first day that dawns upon us in our Married state may be the Sabbath! Let us act out as much as possible that Scene of Eden." The term "scene of Eden" is not just a euphemism for sexual intercourse; it also betrays Grenfell's anxiety to assure the sanctity of the act, no matter how impure it may seem when graphically conceived. This is probably the reason why she adds later that through "God's word," "to the Pure all things are Pure" (qtd. in Gay 1986: 305, 306).

This sign of Grenfell's anxiety is symptomatic of the fundamental incongruity between marriage as a symbolic pact and matrimonial sex as its Imaginary realization, especially when they are forced to coexist at the same cognitive level. The betrothed couple was no hypocritical, self-serving Victorian bourgeois, deliberately stretching Christian teachings for lascivious purposes. Their strong physical attraction for each other did bother them, as it seemed to overwhelm the spiritual significance they wanted it to intimate. Charles, especially, had misgivings about the Imaginary side of his erotic Christianity. He confessed to his intense love for Fanny's body but insisted that he loved it "as the expression & type of [her] spirit." Once he even refused to regard his carnal desire for his beloved as "sensuality," for his was "the enjoyment of holy glorious matter," not "blindness to its spiritual meaning" (qtd. in Gay 1986: 307, 308). With their wedding approaching, the conflict between matter and spirit, so to speak, must have intensified to such an extent that he proposed to Fanny that they postpone the consummation of their marriage for one month. The proposal is actually over-determined, and the professed "test" of "self-denial" in face of carnal temptation (so as to ensure the spirituality of his sexual desire) is just partly the reason. Another possible incentive is Kingsley's fear of impotence on the bridal night (see

Maynard 92). After all, the anticipated sexual enjoyment, when Imaginarily invested with heavy Godly significance, may have turned into a stressful burden. Besides, the enjoyment must have become as highly charged with psychical tensions as the primordial incestuous connection that should be symbolically repressed. No wonder Charles talked to Fanny about his “horrors at seeing [her] undressed” and inability to “bear the blaze of [her] naked beauty” (qtd. in Gay 1984: 291). Referring to the same episode in the couple’s sex life, Mason regards it as a quintessential example of sexual “code that was at one ascetic and hedonistic” (19). The drawn-out sexual foreplay that the couple must have practiced during the month can be a proof of the overwhelming extent of the enjoyment when it was amplified by heavenly significance as well as an instance of the difficulty of its access when it is approached through a religious framework.

Another proof of the moral risks in managing an Imaginary invocation of Christian doctrines in explicit terms comes from Kingsley’s own drawings and novels. These drawings, which one of his Cambridge acquaintances described to be “such as no pure man would have made or could have allowed himself to show or look at” but were later presented to Fanny as wedding gifts (qtd. in Pearsall 417), display a “curious blend of sexual idealism, theological polemic and morbid eroticism” (Trudgill 135). Some of the pictures feature a naked woman bearing a huge cross on the shoulder and climbing up a rocky cliff; a couple in sexual embrace, while being rope-tied to each other and to a cross, floating on a sunny sea; or a winged angel carrying in his arms a woman in death-like swoon up to the sky.¹⁰ The “definite streak of sadism,” as Trudgill notes about these religious paintings, would not be so surprising if one is reminded that the sexual excitation already symbolically repressed would express itself in violent, aggressive manners when the ideological framework that contains it dissolves on the Imaginary plane. In Kingsley’s case, the aggressive sexuality bursts forth in his fascination with the figure of publicly stripped and tortured women, a scenario that recurs in his fictional writings (see Trudgill 9-10).

No matter how peculiarly the Kingsley couple practiced the Christianized code of “heavenly” sexual enjoyment, acceptance of the code itself was not unique to them or a small group. The conception of matrimonial sexuality as divinely sanctified or as prefigurative of bliss in afterlife actually diffused among Victorian bourgeoisie, affecting people of various religious persuasions. The diffused sentiments, Mason believes, were distilled and expressed in the teachings of a Swedish theologian Emanuel Swedenborg, which enjoyed great popularity and circulation in nineteenth-century England.¹¹ In the work *The Delights of Wisdom Concerning Conjugal [sic] Love*, Swedenborg envisions a marriage between two still gendered (and probably fleshy) souls, engaged in a kind of “chaste,” “internal,” and infertile inter-

course. Despite the master's vague description of the soul communion (generally spiritual in nature), English Swedenborgians took the vision right away as a dogma that "reunion with the loved one would be less than heavenly without sex" (Mason 20). One disciple was quite blunt in his Imaginary rendering of the prospect: "The partners in the afterlife are naked and in bed they lie copulated" (qtd. in Mason 20). The followers should not be accused of distorting the master's teachings because he himself regards heavenly marriage as a "literal institution" rather than a "theological symbol"; he thus allows an interpretation of the heavenly marriage as an amplified extension of the earthly one. Swedenborg, after all, asserts that "unless there were ultimate delights, there would be no delights of conjugal love" (qtd. in Mason 20). Due to its heavy erotic slant, Swedenborgianism gradually revealed its tendency to affirm types of sexuality *outside* the matrimonial bounds. There even seemed to develop a hierarchy of acceptability for non-marital intercourse: "the more it approximates to marriage the more it may be condoned," so to speak (Mason 21). One important founder of the religious movement, Robert Hindmarsh, advocated such an idea, and part of his congregation even sought to endorse a certain system of concubinage as a preferable alternative to casual sex with prostitutes. Although Hindmarsh and his coterie were later ostracized from the community, an extramarital approach to the Swedenborgian vision had taken root inside the New Church. One of its leading ministers once complained, "[W]orshipful and judicious members have indulged and *cherished the idea*, yea, delighted themselves with it, that another person [than the spouse], then existing, and with whom they have acquaintance, is their destined conjugal partner" in Heaven (qtd. in Mason 22; original italics). This vision of heavenly adultery (or what Mason jocularly calls "a rather *Wuthering Heights*-like way of picturing illicit relationships" [22]) may be realized in an equally violent manner as the characters in the Brontë novel handle their relationships; it seems that the symbolically repressed sexuality must assert itself aggressively when it aims at concrete realization. Mason reports that in 1818 the London Swedenborgians were "plunged in dismay by a terrible murder" of a New Church female member by her bigamous lover. Although she did not really solicit her own killing, both parties had hoped to be reunited after death; indeed, this wish may have prompted the murderer to take her life (see Mason 22). After the murderer was arrested, he waited for his execution excitedly: "I am anxious to die and be with that dear object of my soul; for I am still persuaded that I shall have that unbounded pleasure of enjoying her company in a far superior way" (qtd. in Mason 22). It is quite unnerving to note how consistent the murderer's vision goes with Swedenborg's, though the master could not have possibly expected the process of its fulfillment to be so violently short-circuited.

The Second Coming of Obscene Messiahs

When Lacan explicates the psychic structure of a mental disorder called psychosis, he describes how a psychotic subject, in order to stabilize the signifying operation of his/her linguistically structured unconscious (which the loss of the Name-of-the-Father disturbs), installs a substitute for the Name to patch up the “hole” at the center of the psychic structure. Unlike the Name, which is the originator of the structure of signifiers into which it is installed, the substitute is not truly able to ensure the symbolic relationship of these signifiers, and the whole structure suffers a so-called “topological regression” into the Imaginary (Lacan 1993: 194). The substitute for the Name is thus “tainted by an imaginary degradation of otherness,” and the subject ends up with an “image [which] the paternal function is reduced to,” no longer a true symbolic pact (Lacan 1993: 101, 204). This image, which Lacan describes as “captivating,” acquires this feature because the signifiers within the psychotic subject’s psychic structure still refer themselves to the image, as if it could serve the “true” (i.e., symbolic) paternal function no less effectively. This Imaginary paternal function, or simply the Imaginary father, would thus constantly haunt the psychotic’s consciousness in the form of certain definite image.¹² Therefore, as in many cases, “if the captivating image is without limits, if the [paternal] character in question manifests himself simply in the order of strength and not in that of the pact, then a relation of rivalry, aggressiveness, fear, etc. appear” (Lacan 1993: 205). In another context, when Lacan is discussing the Freudian myth of the primal horde, he relates this Imaginary father to the primordial father in the horde who monopolized all sexual relationships with its female members. Lacan then calls him, in his characteristically vulgar manner, the “Great Fucker”: “The imaginary father” is, after all, “the father who has fucked the kid up” (1992: 307, 308). Referring to the human subject’s relationship with the paternal function (or the big Other, as Lacanians also call it) in the context of Christianity, a theorist Slavoj Žižek claims that not only can one “never experience the symbolic ‘big Other’ *as such*” but its inaccessibility should be respected; its disparity from the Imaginary counterpart, besides, should not be ignored. Otherwise, “if divine causality were to become directly observable, this would make us slaves of God and change God into a horrifying tyrant”—that is, God would become “the materialized, obscene, superego Other” (1997: 80; original italics).

To a certain extent, however, many Victorian bourgeois would not have minded calling a tyrannical God (or His no less powerful surrogates) down to the world, if He or they would ever come at all. In an age plagued with doubt, ennui, chaos, out of which God seemed to refuse to point a way, some Victorian intellectuals expressed

their desperate yearnings for advent of powerful personages to resolve their spiritual, social, cultural crises. So, “hero worship,” Houghton reports, “in the fifty years after 1830 . . . was a major factor in English culture” (310). For example, Henry Atkinson fervently wished that “some great teacher would come, and make himself heard from the mountain top” (qtd. in Houghton 310). The religious image used here indicates that hero worship had become a substitutive religion for Christianity or simply adopted its doctrinal guise. So, in the sermon “On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History,” Carlyle asks rhetorically, “Heartfelt prostrate admiration, submission . . . for a noblest godlike Form of Man,—is not that the germ of Christianity itself?” (1908: 289) Hero worship, after all, spelled “a need for Messiah” in the confusion-ridden age. His yearned-for Second Coming, therefore, was not expected about him to negotiate patiently among conflicting ideas and interests, but to wipe out the confusion and chaos immediately, once for all. Aggressive display of power on the part of the “messiah” was actually welcomed. Carlyle thus asserts:

I liken common languid Times [like the Victorian age], with their unbelief, distress, perplexity . . . to dry dead fuel, waiting for the lightening out of Heaven that shall kindle all. The great man . . . is the lightning. (1908: 250)

Carlyle’s invocation of a destructive principle incarnated was not a singular outburst, but was correlated to a “worship of force” also prevailing among some intellectuals at the time, who ironically came to believe that force, not word, was the true way out of those seemingly pointless debates over almost all issues in the arena of discourse. With his “muscular” Christianity, Kingsley sneers at the effort of “telling people what’s right” and thunders forth: “If you want to get mankind, if not to heaven, at least out of hell, kick them out” (qtd. in Houghton 214). Carlyle would have concurred with him and actually declared his wish to exterminate follies of his times, with an almost ferocious enjoyment:

Where thou findest Ignorance, Stupidity, Brute-mindedness . . . , attack it, I say; smite it wisely, unweariedly, and rest not while thou livest and it lives; but smite, smite, in the name of God! The Highest God, as I understand it, does audibly so command thee. (1912: 194)

The “Highest God” in whose “name” the preacher grows obscenely pleased with violence is, as Houghton notes, the “jealous God of the Old Testament” (215). The Imaginary father, with his aggressive relationship with the followers, was about to be restituted in the ethical vision of some Victorian Christians, who may have uncon-

sciously yearned for His living presence that was more audible and visible than mere thunder and lightening. If it seems theologically bold to crave for such a presence of Father-God, then it is totally legitimate to imagine the incarnation of Son-God—the “noblest god-like Form of Man,” as Carlyle conceives it. As is noted above, the dual nature of Son God—across Heaven and Earth—ensures tangible connections between the Imaginary and Symbolic phases of Christianity, which its Victorian believers tried desperately to secure. Probably inspired by this collective call for the “Second Coming” of “Messiah,” in nineteenth-century England sprang up several small Christian sects and communities which were dominated by forceful religious leaders who claimed to be heralds for, or even the very incarnations of, Holy Ghost. What truly shocked most people of the age was the aggressively sexual nature of the relationships these leaders imposed on their followers.

Although these religious sects were relatively small in fellowship and constituted only a tiny sector of Victorian religious life, they drew their theological justification from interpretations (exaggerated and twisted ones, of course) of dominant doctrines in the age. Evangelicalism, for example, with its great stress on the role of faith in the scheme of redemption, could tend toward religious fanaticism whereby a disciple would become unduly convinced of his *already*-achieved salvation. Unitarianism, with its insistence on Christ’s humanness, could in reverse encourage a disciple’s bold assumption of the Holy Ghost for himself. One interesting case is the career of a Unitarian preacher Edward Irving, who taught about the “sinfulness” of Christ and his consequent atonement through reception of the Holy Ghost. Irving thus emphasized the individual’s direct access to the Ghost and became probably “the first Christian leader in modern times with ‘pentecostal’ doctrines”; his followers were reported to “speak under tongues” during congregations through the supposed influence of the Holy Ghost (Mason 29). When the preacher, apparently extending this belief in the living presence of the Ghost, taught that “human depravity had been completely atoned for by Christ,” his doctrines ended up with “a Messiah who was not sinless, and a humanity which was not depraved” (Mason 30). Although it seemed that Irving did not push the doctrines further in the direction of sexual permissiveness, the potentials were there to be explored. Irving’s career is admittedly singular, but apparently an antinomian belief (that one can shake off constraints from all forms of law and morality without the risk of damnation if s/he is assured of God’s grace) was more or less compatible with the teachings of several major denominations of the age. So it becomes inevitable that the “pro-sensual revivalism” of an ex-Anglican preacher Henry James Prince, with the “Agapemone” (the Abode of Love) he founded on a large estate in Somerset, should contribute a sensational episode to the sectarian part of Victorian Christian experiences.¹³

The doctrinal basis of Prince's Agapemone was associated, even during his lifetime, with an American sectarian belief called "Perfectionism," which Ronald Knox characterizes as "an exaggeration of the Evangelical standpoint[,] of its conviction that salvation is something to be achieved *here and now*" (qtd. in Mason 37; italics added). Coupled with this doctrine was the sect's Adventist belief that the Last Judgment was imminent with the arrival of the Holy Ghost down to the world; it was also believed that only the disciples at Agapemone would be granted salvation, for "the warnings [had been] disregarded" and "the Holy Ghost [had] pronounced that the door was shut" (The proclamation of the Agapemone at Taunton meeting, qtd. in Mason 34, 35).¹⁴ What deserves attention in the present discussion is a resolution of the flesh-versus-spirit antinomy, which the Agapemone promised in their scheme of eschatological history. According to it, the closing "era of Christ or the Gospel," which afforded only redemption of spirit, would usher in the forthcoming "era of the Holy Ghost or Judgment," in which even the flesh would be redeemed (see Mason 38). This Imaginary, materialistic conception of salvation allowed Prince's followers to believe that "it was sufficient to transfer oneself to the comfortable premises [of the Agapemone] in order to be saved at the judgment" (Mason 41). A contemporary account of the activities within the Agapemone reported that, instead of prayers and privation, the disciples indulged (though moderately) in country-house pleasures like feasting, hockey, and billiard games. This assumed exemption from religious duties apparently derived from Prince's endorsement of "the precious doctrine of justification by faith without the works of the law" (qtd. in Mason 38). Of course another typical Adventist belief was upheld in the Agapemone that "there was no more death for its member" (Mason 39). What truly could guarantee this "miraculous" transubstantiation of "sinful flesh" into the "spiritual" one lies, eventually, in the presence and role of the leader Prince, who apparently believed in "a close link between his own person and the third element in the Trinity, the Holy Ghost" or simply regarded himself as His very incarnation (Mason 37-8). Prince's sexual use of his "spiritual flesh," along with many largely fictitious accounts of the sexual activities in the Agapemone, testifies to the psychoanalytic thesis that an Imaginary materialization of symbolic religious doctrine can lead to (either imagined or actual) outbursts of aggressive sexual enjoyment.

The whole sexual history of the Agapemone indeed consists of a great number of sensational fantasies enveloping an actual case of sexual transgression. However, psychoanalytically speaking, the boundaries between so-called "fact" and "fantasy" are hard to draw and matter very little as far as the psychical truths they convey are equally important. For example, the total absence of children (with only one glaring exception, which will be discussed later) throughout the rather long history of the es-

tablishment gave rise to horrible rumors of “dead babies buried in the garden.” This lurid fantasy (which deserves a place in Marquis de Sade’s novels) is correlated with another pornographic imagination over the Agapemone as a “site of free-love practices,” which its name, the “Abode of Love,” would suggest when it was vulgarly conceived. The press, for example, rarely hesitated to fling such epithets as “free lovers” against its members (Mason 32).¹⁵ In fact, “Prince’s teaching appears strongly anti-sensual, with abstention from sexual intercourse as a cardinal doctrine” (Mason 31). Those living within the Agapemone could not marry, and those who had been were required to live separately from their spouses—except for the “Beloved” (Prince’s title in the Agapemone, which derived from the Song of Solomon, a Biblical text he admired for its “vivid carnality”; see Mason 38, 37). Prince’s own transgressive concubinage with a female disciple, Miss Patterson, in view of his instruction against sexual intercourse to his followers, seems to fit well with the profile of the Imaginary father in the Freudian primal horde who monopolized all sexual enjoyment. Although the disciples were generally devoted to the “Beloved,” several contemporary accounts insisted characterizing him and his relationship with them as the Lacanian “father who fucks the kid up.” In 1858 an anonymous pamphlet not just accused Prince of adultery (as his second wife was alive then) but described Miss Patterson as a “violently” taken prey, thus hinting a rape. Indeed, a widely circulated legend had it that he performed “a ritual copulation or a pre-copulatory ceremony” in the chapel of the Agapemone, in front of all other followers (see Mason 33). Most modern discussions of the Agapemone then tend to represent it as a pornographic scenario similar to the above description: the celibate disciples were only agents of Prince’s lust, acting as odalisques or eunuchs in his religious harem (see Mason 32; for one example of these discussions, see Pearsall 82-84).

However, it would be misleading (though it flatters a modern condescending conception of Victorian religious and sexual life) to regard Prince simply as a charlatan who deliberately distorted the Christian doctrines for his own licentious purposes. After all, back in his days of theological training in the Anglican Church, Prince was austere, even priggish, in his moral stand with his own fellowship, “the Lampeter Brethren” (much of which later joined the Agapemone). The cause and nature of his sexual connection with Patterson still need to be examined through his own Adventist doctrines. When the Agapemone was challenged about the Patterson episode, Prince himself admitted it thus:

[T]he Holy Ghost . . . took flesh—a woman—in their presence, and told them that it was His intention to keep this flesh with Him continually by day and by night, and to make it one with Him, even as a man is one flesh with his wife. (qtd.

in Mason 33)

The uncannily detached tone of this speech, along with his third-person self-address, suggests that Prince took himself as more than himself, believing himself to be either infused with the Holy Ghost or even be His incarnation. Thus, as Mason speculates, Prince must have been convinced that his sexual relationship with Patterson was “spiritual rather than physical” (39); his action must have been taken as identical with (or at least prefigurative of) what would happen in Heaven. Although unsympathetic with the Agapemone, one anonymous critic of the age still grasped the twisted religious message in it: with the Patterson episode “the lust of the flesh and the gratification thereof is publicly made a religious ordinance” (qtd. in Mason 34). In view of this sexual approach to religion, Prince’s theology does not seem very different from the heavenly conception of matrimonial sex developed by the Kingsley couple and Swedenborgians—devoid of the scandalous features of the Agapemone, of course. However, because the Adventists regarded sexual act as the means of continuation of species, which was supposed to become obsolete within the Agapemone, Prince and his disciples were “overthrown by grief and shame” when Patterson got pregnant and bore a baby. Eventually an official explanation was developed that the child was “Satan’s offspring” and the pregnancy was the Devil’s “despairing act against God” (see Mason 40; Pearsall 83). Here one could not help wondering at the irony of the whole situation: Satan, to bewilder God’s followers, does sometimes play the role of Anti-Christ, putting on the disguise of pseudo-Messiah.

Based on his own myth of the primal horde, Freud develops his theory of group psychology and describes the leader of a closely united group as someone

who need[s] only possess the typical qualities of the [group members] in a particularly clearly marked and pure form, and need[s] only give an impression of greater force and of more freedom of libido. (*SE XVIII*: 129)

In the case of the Agapemone, the “clearly marked and pure” quality Prince possessed is his “spiritual flesh,” which was supposed to empower him to exert “more freedom of libido” than his followers. Indeed, the Agapemone, with its “image of a movement and a mentality in which anti-sensualism and pro-sensualism are so curiously intertwined,” can serve as a representative model for understanding many other Messianic sects of the age. One Imaginary Messianic figure, George Turner of the Southcottian Church, surely wanted to demonstrate “more freedom of libido” and live up to the status of “Great Fucker”: he declared that “the apocalypse must be heralded by his ‘marriage’ to some 1,556 female Southcottians” and embarked on the failed

project with many individual and one collective wedding ceremonies (Mason 42). Another leader of the Southcottian Church, John Wroe, with his “Judaic brand of revivalism,” probably fits better than his predecessor with the profile of the Imaginary father, especially in terms of his sexually aggressive relationship with his followers. Like Prince one quarter of century later, Wroe entered a “flagrant concubinage” with one woman “marked out as destined to bring forth a Messiah with Wroe’s help” though he also taught “a message of millennial abstinence.” However, this sexual austerity was blended with a weird form of sexual license—and not just for the “enjoyment” of the leader, either. Like the primal father “who fucks the kid up,” Wroe invented a bizarre ritual called “the Law of Christ,” which was “a form of punishment for male [followers]” and “took the form of a spanking by a naked woman who held the victim’s genitals, perhaps masturbating him” (Mason 136). This scene resembles a typical episode in one peculiar sub-genre of Victorian erotica—the flagellant pornography; wherein a tyrannical female master whips her male servant or pupil hard for some delinquency until he ejaculates.¹⁶ Carlyle would not have expected that the “smiting” he endorsed “in the name of God” may have ended up with this “Law of Christ.” Indeed, Mason’s studies of “popular heterodox Christianity” testify to the erotic potentials of an Imaginary rendering of Christian doctrines when disregard of their symbolic nature causes a resurging of transgressive sexual excitation:

[T]he whole spirit of such episodes [as Messianic sectarianism] was disinhibiting: this was religion based on fervour and newness—on spontaneous, excited, and even transported reaction to charismatic leaders who were breaking bounds. (137)

Conclusion

After this brief survey of how erotic potentials underlying religious doctrines were explored and exploited in Victorian bourgeois culture, modern readers may grow contemptuous over the legendary “moral hypocrisy” or “prudish prurience” of the nineteenth century. However, one should be reminded that Victorian society was facing one of the greatest changes in the human history that was having overwhelming impacts on almost every aspect of the culture. Worse, these changes were brought to the world in the name of “progress,” making the efforts of “adaptation” more demanding for the Victorian bourgeoisie. One attempt to restore the old ideological framework of understanding by taking its cognitive elements more seriously and literally was inevitably a preferred tactic. More importantly, it is infeasible and self-defeating to regard religious discourse as a *purely* symbolic construct, which

would be, properly speaking, *no* religion at all. For each religious discourse to serve its psychical function, some forms of Imaginary “trappings”—redemption myth, imagination about heaven, worship place, ceremony, religious servants, etc.—must exist so that religious sentiments can find “footing” and thus the whole religious system can function. A *fully* symbolized religious promise spells forever postponement of its realization and thus attracts almost no believers; a mere skeleton of religious doctrines would fall apart without any purchase on the real world. The concern of many Victorian Christians over “the death of God” was, after all, not really unfounded. If an Imaginary restitution of religious principles lets certain degree of sensual excitation arise, it may contribute to a believer’s “enjoyment” of his/her religious experiences. The problematic of a believer’s emotional (or even sensual) investment in a religious system is, eventually, not one of existence, or of nature, but one of *economy*. When the exact line between “the excessive” and “the moderate” is almost impossible to draw, can we confidently acknowledge some people’s religious experiences as “respectable” but dismiss others’ as “obscene”?

Notes

1. Here the term “myth” is not understood from the perspective of “ideological critique” as a “false discourse of power.” Instead, following Levi Strauss’s exposition of the concept “mythology,” Jacques Lacan defines it as “a signifying system or scheme” whereby the real world is made sense of (1992: 143).
2. While the Symbolic, as a dynamic network of signifiers that involve ceaseless linking among themselves without their fixed relations with the signified, underlies the purely relational, structural, thus abstract aspect of the human discourse (see Evans 201-03), the Imaginary in the human conception of reality evolves from a nascent subject’s fascinated fixation at and then narcissistic assumption of an image imposed from outside—a process Lacan calls the “mirror stage” (4). There, “[i]dentificatory and sexual fusions . . . are the imaginary’s aim” (Jaanus 324); the relations involved thus retain much of its originally sensory and libidinal nature. Since the Imaginary identification concerns an attempt to assume or incorporate an alien image, aggressiveness and struggle characterize the two parties that enter such relations; at least one of them tries to hold the other down to the subservient, exploited position.
3. For example, Christian faith in the eighteenth-century England was often characterized as “nominal,” when intellectuals from the upper classes tended to regard God’s existence as tangential to the running of human world. The Deistic comparison of God to a watchmaker who had withdrawn from His creation, the world as a smoothly running clock, amounted roughly to the same thing as His absence or “death.” According to the rationalists who upheld the doctrines of the Enlightenment, what was supposed to ensure His all benevolence was such an abstract, symbolic construct as the “Natural Law,” which Alexander Pope expounded in his *Essay on Man*.
4. Many Victorian bourgeois must have agreed with James A. Froude that “an established religion . . . is the sanction of moral obligation” and that “to raise a doubt about a creed established by general acceptance is a direct injury to the general welfare” (qtd. in Houghton 59).
5. While Maynard says nothing about pornographic misinterpretation of the Bible and sexual escapades of the self-proclaimed messiahs in some Adventist cults (which I will discuss), he examines thoroughly Arthur Hugh Clough’s dialectical approach to the conflict between Christian asceticism and basic human need for sexual gratification, as well as Coventry Patmore’s mystic vision of sexual union with God after his conversion to Catholicism.

6. See the two chapters, “Voluntary Restraint” and “Free-Thought Versus Free Love,” in Mason’s book.
7. When the Imaginary conception interferes with the functioning of the Symbolic signifying network, it tries to arrest the incessant linking of the signifiers in the discourse, as mentioned above, and to pin down rigid correspondence between the signifiers and the signified. The theoretically limitless possibility of signification (as a textual element can be interpreted in infinite ways when referred to any other elements) is reduced to very few number of meanings—in many cases, either those that can be most literally (thus least figuratively, symbolically) understood or those that are highly charged with emotions and sensations.
8. For a detailed analysis of the following thesis in an ethical but non-religious context, see my own paper, “The Rise of Victorian pornography: A Theoretical Model Explicated and Exemplified.” *Proceedings of the First Conference on Language Teaching, Linguistics, and Literature*. Tainan: National Cheng Kung University, December 2001: 106-11.
9. Although this sub-genre is not specific to the nineteenth century and in general caters to British hostility to the Roman Catholic Church, its Victorian variation seems to be less concerned with violation of the monastic code its priestly characters commit than the sexual pleasures they are procuring in transgressive sexual acts.
10. All the pictures discussed here are reprinted in Trudgill and Gay 1986.
11. Despite sectarian differences, Swedenborgianism, so to speak, acquired “two main kinds of subsidiary religious affiliation: Anglicanism and Methodism.” After all, with its “erotic matrimonialism,” the doctrines had an “ideological niche within the Church of England,” and many Anglican clergymen were actually “tacit Swedenborgians.” Its official communion, “The New Church,” founded at the turn of the century, “doubled its membership between 1825 and 1850 . . . and went on growing thereafter” (Mason 27, 28, 25).
12. For example, in a clinical context of psychotherapy, a patient who suffers from psychotic delusion may complain that s/he often hears God’s commands in his/her ears or that C.I.A. is monitoring his/her brain waves. In other words, captivating images usually represent a figure or institution of great authority or power.
13. The following discussion about Prince’s career would rely more heavily on the information Mason provides than I can help because he is one of the few sources I can access to that deal with the history of Agapemone in an extended, informed, and objective manner. Most other reviewers tend to dismiss it as the story of a hypocritical charlatan imposing himself on a bunch of gullible fanatics—an instance of Victorian naïve religiosity that deserves sarcastic laughs from the sophisticated moderns. See, for example, Pearsall 82-84 and Wilson 183-88.
14. This theological position of the Agapemone aroused no less indignation among English Christians of the time than the transgressive sexual practices alleged to have happened therein.
15. Indeed, in 1860s the author of a series of mildly lewd novels, *Anonyma*, used the term “Agapemone” in referring to certain meeting places of the demimondes (Mason 32). This is probably the true origin of the modern sense of the word: “a free-love institution.”
16. See, for example, an episode in the story “Miss Coote’s Confession,” serialized in *The Pearl*, 162.

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